MARIANNA ABRAHAMOWICZ

VIRGINIA WOOLF AS A SHORT-STORY WRITER

SOME ASPECTS

I

I have chosen as subject for examination five of Virginia Woolf's short stories out of the collection *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories*[1]. Perhaps it is not very fair on the writer to select, for a separate subject, just this part of her work which is avowedly not her best. The small volume of her short stories was published posthumously by her husband, Leonard Woolf, in 1943: in his Foreword to it, he calls the reader's attention to the unfinished state in which most of them were left at the writer's death:

"[...] Finally I have included six unpublished stories... It is with some hesitation that I have included them. None of them, except *Moments of Being* and *The Searchlight*, are finally revised by her, and she would certainly have done a great deal of work on them before she published them. At least four of them are only just in the stage beyond that of her first sketch."

Critics seem to have paid but a minor attention to this part of her literary production. I have never come accross a study which would deal explicitly with the short stories. The attention is focused on her critical essays and novels, as it certainly should be. There is *Le Roman Psychologique de Virginia Woolf*, par F. Delattre (1932), *Virginia Woolf: her Art as a Novelist*, by J. Bennett (1945), *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, by R. L. Chambers (1947. It is true that in these works some references are made to the short stories, but the latter are treated, as matters of minor importance.

---

[1] The Hogarth Press, London 1943.

I have been prompted to make the following remarks by just this scarcity of critical material. As tothe opening doubt on the „fairness" on a writer to discuss such part of the work which does not reach the usual standard of her creation, one must comfort oneself with the statement that a work once it is published is open to scrutiny, however indiscreet. I selected *The Mark on the Wall*, *The Lady in the Looking-Glass*, *An Unwritten Novel*, *The Searchlight* and *The Legacy* not at random, but as best adapted to illustrate the few points I shall try to stress.

II

In literary criticism, classifications are liable to multiply. Literary compositions are constantly labelled and re-labelled, segregated, divided, made to flock together in various groups and genres mutually contrasted. A list of long scholarly adjectives accumulates steadily. Thus the rather subjective art of literary criticism finds the vague criteria upon which it is founded invested with solid, reliable qualities, borrowed from other domains of human thougth, a system of denominations is adopted, typical of more precise, scientific branches, "mathematicizing", as it were, literature. Conscious as I am of the danger of over-simplification, I am nevertheless forced to launch another classification adapted to suit my particular purpose alined. We are concerned here with Virginia Woolf's short stories only, as a distinct literary genre. A literary genre — both elusive and stable, following this thoughtful definition:

„Men's pleasure in a literary work is compounded of the sense of novelty and the sense of recognition. In music, the sonate form and the fugue are obvious instances of patterns to be recognized; in the murder mystery, there is the gradual closing in or tightening of the plot — the gradual convergence (as in *Oedipus*) of the lines of evidence. The totally familiar and repetitive pattern is boring; the totally novel form will be unintelligible — is indeed unthinkable. The genre represents, so to speak, a sum of aesthetic devices at hand, available to the writer and already intelligible to the reader. The good writer conforms to the genre as it exists, partly stretches itl." [2]

[2] *Theory of Literature* by René Wellek and Austin Warren, Jonathan Cape, London 1955, p. 245.

Let us establish some traditional characteristics of the short story by juxtapposing it with those of the essay. The distinction between the two is easily made. An essay deals, in a more or less detached way, with problems relating to "intellectual" matters, and so its appeal is to the intellect. Its scope is wide, the author may be as subjective as Elia or as sceptically cool as Bertrand Russell. Imagination and emotion, if they do make an appearance in an essay (which they do rather seldom), are handled carefully, and are tinged with intellect. Wit is a welcome component, but humour is rather not. Didacticism, if tactfully introduced, is not altogether forbidden. Fiction is on the whole excluded and the evidence should rely on facts.

On the other hand, a short story by no means has such a high-brow character. Its first aim is aesthetic, not intellectual. It ought to entertain the reader, to rouse his emotions if it can. Here the intellect ought to play but, a secondary part, within the prescribed proportions.

Abore all, a short story is concerned with plot, with things happening in a swift, definite way. We have been trained to consider a short story as compact by its very nature. According to a long-established tradition, the "classical" short story should include a well-defined climax, presumably at the end. This is almost its *conditio sine qua non*. A short story cannot just end with a mere full stop: it ought to have a sharp-edged point to finish it, to endow it, as it were, with significance, to startle the reader with the unexpected. It does not matter whether the author is concerned with telling us simply an anecdote, i. e. with presenting bare facts without any intended hidden meaning behind them, or with endowing his plot with some conflicting clash of ideas or sentiments. The subject matter is not so important as the way in which it is handled. Crispness before all — a plot designed by a sure hand, almost dramatic in its smartness. We will always expect things to come to a head, to take some definite shape at the end. "A pointless story", it would appear, is bound to leave our expectations always somewhat frustrated.

Let us consider now what will happen to the short story when it is handled by an author whose style and literary personality

we would hardly ever label as "crisp" or "compact", and whom therefore we could scarcely even expect to have recurrence to this particular literary genre. We are faced here almost with a *contradictio in adiecto.* Virginia Woolf tackling a form which requires swiftness and rapidity, which requires a definite plot!

[...] Did the plot matter? She shifted and looked over her right shoulder. The plot was only there to beget emotion. There were only two emotions: love and hate. There was no need to puzzle out the plot... Don't bother about the plot: the plot's nothing."

(V. Woolf: *Between the Acts*, p. 109)

She is one of those readily recognizable writers who are far more concerned with "being" than with "doing" — contemplation, meditation so intense as to obliterate almost the very possibility of action in its ordinary sense, of events just happening. When she is aroused from contemplative moods by trivial reality, she recoils from it almost instinctively, minimalizing its importance, putting the mystery of life before its crude, separate facts. To quote Joan Bennett on her work:

"The events which constitute the plot of a traditional novel, such as a quarrel between lovers, a reconciliation, a marriage or a death are, from *Jacob's Room* onward, submerged beneath the current of life." [3]

And so, with Virginia Woolf, it seems always hard to define the exact place of the climax in her short stories, and often is is hardly possible to detect it at all. It lies scarcely ever at the very end or, if it does, is seems to be of so shadowy a nature that we cannot grasp it somehow. Let us consider this rather significant short story of hers called *The Mark on the Wall.* Nothing would be more preposterous than to risk a résumé of it. Where is the beginning, and where the end? Unwilling to stir from her armchair and looking idly at the wall opposite, at some undefined spot or mark on it, the writer is led by a chain of rather unexpected associations (and yet, as listed by her, they seem naturally interrelated enough) to explore with her thought-matters fantastically removed from each other. Now she dwells on the bitter-sweet taste of a feeling which I would try to define as "self-conscious vanity":

"[...] I wish I could hit upon a pleasant track of thought, a track indirectly reflecting credit upon myself, for those are the pleasantest thoughts, and very

[3] Op. cit., p. 45.

frequent even in the minds of modest mouse-coloured people, who believe genuinely that they dislike to hear their own praises. They are not thoughts directly praising oneself; that is the beauty of them [...]"

(The Mark on the Wall)

Then she shifts suddenly to the imaginary professional worries of some equally imaginary Retired Colonel who has become an antiquary, plunging for a while to explore the doubtful importance of Whitaker's Almanach, and back again to ponder upon the sense of one own's reality one gets from the presence of surrounding inanimate objects etc., etc. The mysterious mark eventually turns out to be a snail. Is this particular fact in any manner significant? If so, I am utterly unable to grasp its significance. Instead of being a snail, it might as well prove to be anything of the things she formerly supposed it to be, a finger-nail "miniature" scrawl, or

"the head of a gigantic old nail, driven in two hundred years ago, which has now, owing to the patient attrition of many generations of housemaids, revealed its head above the coat of paint, and is taking its first view of modern life in the sight of a white-walled fire-lit room",

or simply

"a small rose leaf, left over from the summer, and I, not being a very vigilant housekeeper [...]"

yes, it may be anything as long as it is just indefinite, unknown — just to put the chain of thought into motion. For I would rather compare this particular process, in which contents and style are so closely intervowen as to form an unbreakable whole, to a "ch a "chain" than to a "stream" — breaking the respectable convention adhering to the "streamofconsciousness" denomination — a rather ligth and ever-moving, glistening chain, but the separate links clearly showing. In order to start on this amazing and — more often than not — disturbing chain of associations and parallels Virginia Woolf needs a Manx cat (*A Room of One's Own*), an unidentified spot on the wall, or even the dreamy void of an empty mirror (*The Lady in the Looking-Glass*). In the latter short story, it is not a mark on the wall, but a live person who provides a subject for confronting truth and appearances, or, to be more accurate in our distinction, for confronting outer phenomena with inner life. The protagonist tries to define a person whom she has known well for many years:

"She suggested the fantastic and the tremulous convolvulus rather than the upright aster, the starched zinnia, or her own burning roses alight like lamps on the straight posts of their rose trees. The comparision showed how very little, after all these years, one knew about her; for it is impossible that any woman of flesh and blood of fifty-five or sixty should be really a wreath or a tendril. Such comparisons are worse than idle and superficial — they are cruel even, for they come like the convolvulus itself trembling between one's eyes and the truth. There must be truth; there must be a wall. Yet it was strange that after knowing her all these years one could not say what the truth about Isabella was; one still made up phrases like this about convolvulus and travellers' joy. *As for facts*, it was a fact that she was a spinster; that she was rich; that she had bought this house [...]"

(The Lady in the Looking-Glass; my italics)

Definitely, she recoils from facts: they do not matter. Now, let us try to track her in the act of dealing with more tangible matters. Despite all her sophistication, she is sufficiently human to start thinking under such a seemingly commonplace stimulus as the unhappy expression detected on a strange woman's face in the tube (*An Unwritten Novel*). In this last instance, she builds up an intricate story of seduction, desertion, loneliness and misery — only to learn at the end the would-be victim of *Fate* is quite happily married, and the expression of discomfort on her face is due to her physical condition (pregnancy). But, once more, does this apparent "point" provide a *real* climax, a surprise, a shock? Virginia Woolf doubts it herself:

"And yet the last look of them — he stepping from the kerb and she following him round the edge of the big building brims me with wonder — floods me anew. Mysterious figures! Mother and son. Who are you? Why do you walk down the street? Where to-night will you sleep, and then, to-morrow? Oh, how it whirls and surges — floats me afresh!... If I fall on my knees, if I go through the ritual, the ancient antics, it's you, unknown figures, you I adore; if I open my arms, it's you I embrace, you I draw to me-adorable world!"

(An Unwritten Novel)

Yes, it is the "adorable world" (an expression recurring throughout her work), Life in short that intoxicates her with its bitter, exquisite taste. And Life (it is a truism to emphasize that Life, with Virginia Woolf, is always inner life) has no sharply defined edges, and its climaxes seem to merge and dissolve into milder matters.

And gradually, stealthily, as we plunge deeper into this strange glittering river made of whimsicality, thoughtfulness, ut-

most sincerity and a certain twisted capacity for understatement which constitute her peculiar charm (and what is charm, for a writer, if not style?), we are won over to these queer "pointless" short stories. We may get tired of them and then turn to some brilliant, well-built, compact short story by W. Somerset Maugham or any other "good talker", whose aim is well-defined, who never flinches in his carefully designed plot leading it safely, like a ship to its destined harbour, to the climax. Such writers seem always to do their thinking beforehand and then to have only to follow the pattern they have set themselves. They build a solid frame and then fill it — according to their former conception. Most of Virginia Woolf's thinking seems to take place in the act of creating. Hence the fluidity, the waywardness, the easy flow of thought (and yet always deeply controlled by the author's inner tact and sense of proportion), the unexpected associations, the freedom and freshness (although never naive, never of the ingenue-type freedom and freshness) of her "pointless" short stories. Thus we see that our standards of literary values have been subjected to a sort of reversion: the classical, well-built short stories prove "unreal" in their very realism when compared with Virginia Woolf's writing.

III

We have just seen how Virginia Woolf has broken through the established tradition in the short story genre by dispensing with its most urgent requirements. She has broken the enchanted circle. Let us now to achieve a different success turn to two of her short stories written more in accordance with the usual pattern: *The Searchlight* and *The Legacy*, both coping with the "eternal" themes: love and death, and both leading to some sort of "surprise" at the end. *The Searchlight*, while written with an extreme scantiness of words (the whole story occupying in the book but three pages and a half), leaves us amazed at her skill in creating her peculiar dream-like atmosphere. Everything, or nearly so, in this story seems highly improbable, the lonely boy in the semi-deserted tower spying out his future wife with a glass, getting extremely attracted to her upon seeing her kiss a stranger,

then rushing down the stairs, through fields, "down lanes, out upon the high road, through woods..." and then sharply comes the protagonist's statement, almost ludicrous in its genealogical accuracy: "Oh the girl... She was my great-grandmother", but we lapse soon again into the dream-land, the protagonist identifying herself with this distant ancestor of hers. And suddenly we share the hearers' uneasy curiosity:

"But tell us — what about the other man, the man who came round the corner" they asked. — "That man? Oh, that man? Mrs. Ivimey murmured..." he, I suppose, vanished".

(The Searchlight)

Now, does this uncertainty about the fate of a shadowy stranger shift the point, the interest, the significance of the story to him? We are left without answer, or we may try to provide an answer ourselves. This, I think, is one of the greatest gifts a writer can offer us: to leave things unsaid, to invite the reader to fill in the blank spaces. Such a gate, narrow as the entrance may be, into the author's realm of thought, experience, imagination and (sometimes) emotion, makes the readers participate more actively in the Great Adventure of Seeing and so, it seems to me, one cannot be grateful enough to the writer for not locking the gate.

The Legacy, however, does not leave anything unsaid. Here Virginia Woolf tries to be for a while more conventional in her short-story writing than she had ever been — and fails. Here we have a well-defined plot: A husband, who is a successful and self-complacent politician, learns, to his great amazement, about his wife's unfaithfulness, from her diary left to him as "a legacy" after her death. What is more, the same diary discloses this death, formerly supposed to be an ordinary street accident, to be a wilful suicide "to rejoin her lover" and, to give the final stroke to his discomfiture (any stronger words being out of place in his case, as his sensibility is curiously dim when compared with other Virginia Woolf characters), the disreputable condition and political opinions of the lover. Oddly enough, this short story leaves us (I should perhaps say leaves me) quite unmoved. Written according to conventional pattern, it is intended to contain the element of unexpected shock at the end — but the shock never

comes, somehow. From the very beginning we know that the husband is learning gradually all the past secrets of his late wife: and we simply cannot sympathize with him, her, or the lover. Here Virginia Woolf tries to cope with ordinary matters in an ordinary way — and then these matters fail her, run through her fingers unused to rougher, more "solid" work. She cannot surprise the reader with mere plot (which she usually scorns) — her mental work being too intensely focused on other, more important values. The intended surprise is bound to leak out sooner than she has wanted it to come, for these ordinary devices are not for her. Far from helping her, a definite plot, tangible, concrete situations hinder her, check her in communicating her inner meaning to the reader. She seems to me to be at her best not when her starting point is a well-ordered crisply cut "story", but just a Manx cat, an unidentified spot on the wall, or the dreamy void of an empty mirror.

For it is better to know our limitations and not to try to break by force the circle in which we are on safe ground. It is better to dispense with the iron rules obligatory in a literary genre than to betray our own personality expressed by a writer both in his subject and his style. To thine own self be true.

"[...] To thise own self be true; and it will follow [...]"