Virginia Woolf: Teflon goddess of the trivial

She was nasty, crude, racist and often a poor writer – so why is she revered?

by Theodore Dalrymple

There are few sacred cows more sacred than Virginia Woolf. To criticise her adversely in literary circles is a little like animadverting on the character of Mohammed in Mecca – inadvisable. I have known literary types afraid openly to voice their dislike of both her person and her work, which means thereby that unstinting and uncritical praise goes by default.

And yet Woolf was a ferocious snob who expressed racist and antisemitic views, more than enough in anybody else to render her worthy of violent denunciation in these fair, well-spoken days.

If J.K. Rowling can be cancelled, to use the current inelegant term for secular excommunication, merely for stating a truth so obvious that until recently no one would have thought it

worth uttering, surely someone who so denigrated lower-class servants, once described a Ceylonese lawyer as having been a poor little mahogany wretch who had a likeness to a caged monkey, and who wrote so many casual but revealing antisemitic slurs, should have her books left accessible only with the most stringent trigger warnings attached and doled out only to persons of the most reliably sound views?

What accounts for Woolf's Teflon quality, such that her snobbery, racism and anti-Semitism have done nothing to detract from her status as saint, guru and genius? Please do not mistake me: I do not in the least advocate the removal of her works from libraries (though she herself in Three Guineas advocated, without obvious irony, the regular burning down of libraries, including or especially the greatest repositories of all past human endeavour): for if all authors who had ever expressed a foolish or a wicked opinion were expunged from the record, vaporised Stalinistically to non-persons, library shelves would almost certainly be empty.

I merely point to the disparity, the inequity, in the way that she has been treated by comparison with some others. One must remember, however, that a writer can express silly, dangerous or even repellent ideas, and have great moral defects, and yet remain one of brilliance. As Orwell pointed out in his essay on Dickens, we don't hold the bequest of his second-best bed to his wife against Shakespeare.

The question of Woolf's untouchability remains, however, an important one that is culturally intriguing. I would suggest that it is because she made the self-pity of the privileged respectable and gave a patina of significance to banality. By doing so, she impaired proper judgment both moral and aesthetic.

In *Three Guineas*, published in 1938, she had the gall to assert that the position of daughters of educated men was worse than that, say, of the wives of Welsh miners. I know

that the mind, according to Gerard Manley Hopkins, has mountains, but still it would take appalling insensitivity and lack of imagination to suggest such a thing. She also managed in that book to find an analogy between the Church of England and the Nazis.

Her writing was often verbose, loose, and imprecise, straining after a significance and deeper meaning greater than any that she had in mind. Here is a passage from Mrs Dalloway:

> She could see what she lacked, it was not beauty; it was not mind. It was something central which permeated; something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman, or of women together. For *that* she could dimly perceive. She resented it, had a scruple Heaven knows where, or, as she felt, sent by Nature (who is invariably wise) …

This is rank bad writing, language used to insinuate but not to convey profundity. And for sheer banality it would be hard to beat the following, from *The Years*:

> The fine rain, the gentle rain, poured equally over the mitred and the bareheaded with an impartiality which suggested that the god of rain, if there were a god, was thinking Let it not be restricted to the very wise, the very great, but let all breathing kind, the munchers and chewers, the ignorant, the unhappy, those who toil in the furnace making innumerable copies of the same pot, those who bore red hot minds through contorted letters, and also Mrs Jones in the alley, share my bounty.

This is a flatulent, undisciplined and completely unnecessary expansion of Matthew 5:45: “He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.”

It is not surprising that Woolf became the goddess of the trivial when one reads what she says in the essay Modern

Fiction:

> ‘The proper stuff of fiction’ does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss.

Not only is this patently untrue because impossible to put into practice, but it is philistine anti-intellectualism of the highest possible order. It is an open invitation to uncontrolled literary self-indulgence. What Woolf meant, presumably, was that anything can be the stuff of fiction, not that everything is the stuff if fiction, but she was insufficiently scrupulous to express herself clearly.

What she wrote was often plainly and straightforwardly stupid. In *Character in Fiction*, for example, we read the following:

> Why, when October comes round, do the publishers always fail to supply us with a masterpiece? Surely one reason is that the men and women who began writing novels in 1910 or thereabouts had this great difficulty to face – that there was no English novelist living from whom they could learn their business. Mr. Conrad is a Pole; which sets him apart, and makes him, however admirable, not very helpful.

No explanation, other than his Polish origin, is offered by Woolf as to why Conrad – an incomparably greater writer than she – could not serve as a model for other writers.

True enough, he might be difficult to imitate; his depth of experience, in part (but only in part) the consequence of his having been born when and where he was, gave him a near-inexhaustible supply of material on which to draw. But in the strictest sense, his Polishness had nothing whatever to do with whether or not he could serve as a model or inspiration for aspiring novelists.

In Woolf’s throw-away remark, one detects a mean-spirited,

narrow-minded, bigoted, xenophobic provincialism. If Conrad, one of the great masters of English prose, who moreover tackled subjects of profundity, could not serve as a model or inspiration because of his Polishness, what about all those other foreign scribblers who did not even take the trouble to write in English?

Woolf had little sense of humour beyond sarcasm and the elephantine facetiousness displayed at the beginning of *Flush,* her biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's spaniel. She did not admire Dickens, but there is more genuine humanity in a single line of, say, his "Barkis is willin'" – which so beautifully encourages us to enter imaginatively into the world of the inarticulate – than in the totality of her work.

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