

## VIRGINIA WOOLF IN IRELAND: A SHORT VOYAGE OUT

by Kathryn Laing

No, it wouldnt do living in Ireland, in spite of the rocks & the desolate bays. It would lower the pulse of the heart: & all one's mind wd. run out in talk" (*Diary* 4: 216)—so Woolf declared in her diary during her one and only journey around Ireland in May 1934. For her descriptions of the landscape and the people she met (mainly the Anglo-Irish gentry) are as ambivalent as her now infamous reading of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. But Woolf's response to Ireland, and more particularly to Irish writing is only part of the story. As a contemporary, how was Woolf read in Ireland, if she was read at all, and what, if any, impact has she had on Irish writing? For the contemplation of "Virginia Woolf in Ireland," both as a traveler and a reader of Irish culture, politics and literature, and as someone to be read through her various publications, provokes a proliferation of research possibilities about both writer and country. In this essay I wish to sketch out a preliminary map of these possibilities, showing some of the potentially complex and intriguing routes that require further exploration, in relation to Woolf studies, in particular the European Reception of Woolf, and in relation to Ireland and its own literary history. So the paper is divided into three sections: briefly, Virginia Woolf literally in Ireland, reading Virginia Woolf in Ireland from the 1920s on, and three Irish women reading Woolf—Elizabeth Bowen, Mary Lavin and Edna O'Brien.<sup>1</sup>

Woolf's interest in Ireland before and after her visit there is evident from her diaries, letters and fiction. Her concern and knowledge about Irish affairs<sup>2</sup> emerges most forcefully in the novel *The Years*, where, as Jane Marcus points out, "The theme of the search for 'justice and liberty,' first expressed by Delia's dream of sharing a platform with Parnell," is finally undermined by Delia's marriage to "the class enemy of Parnell and all he stands for" (Marcus 55). And she had contacts with many Anglo-Irish writers, in particular G.B. Shaw, Elizabeth Bowen and W.B. Yeats, noting in her diary that she liked Yeats's "extreme directness, simplicity, & equality: liked his praise; liked him: but cant unriddle the universe at tea" (*Diary* 4: 257).

Woolf's actual visit to Ireland, or rather her recording of that visit, reveals something more. The landscape she describes is wild, beautiful and also depressing: "A mixture of Greece, Italy & Cornwall; great loneliness; poverty & dreary villages like squares cut out of West Kensington. [...] great stretches of virgin sea shore; the original land that Cornwall & much of England was in Elizabethan times. And a sense that life is receding" (*Diary* 4: 209). Meeting and mixing mainly with the Anglo-Irish, who with the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922 were feeling most acutely a lost way of life, Woolf finds herself relating in a peculiar way to them. This emerges particularly in her descriptions of Bowen's Court, Elizabeth Bowen's ancestral home, and Dublin itself. Staying at Bowen's Court, Woolf notes that one can see "how ramshackle & half squalid the Irish life is, how empty & poverty stricken... no there was a fine turkey but everywhere desolation & pretention cracked grand pianos, faked old portraits, stained walls" (*Diary* 4: 210). Woolf's response as a tourist to the Irish landscape, which she experiences as at once English and quite unlike England, and to the decaying tradition of the

Big House, is both an aesthetic and inevitably politicized one. This experience of recognition and displacement is intensified in relation to the cityscape, where Dublin is seen simply as a tired copy of London: “The scene is St Stephen’s Green, an Irish attempt at Lincoln’s Inn Fields, just as Merrion Square attempts Bedford sqre & so on . . . At last I gather why, if I were Irish, I should wish to belong to the Empire: no luxury, no creation, no stir, only the dregs of London, rather wishy-washy as if suburbanized” (*Diary*4: 215). Woolf’s satiric portraits of the Anglo-Irish and its imprints on Ireland are tinged not only with snobbery but also with an uneasiness about her own place there. She articulates this quite clearly in her descriptions of Dublin in her diary: “Grafton Street is not on the level of Sloane Street. The quays are much like the Paris quays. . . . Our car too grand—this is what makes it impossible for me to finish Proust” (*Diary*4: 216). Her sense of the city as fragmented, as composed of familiar vistas from other cities but as a whole experienced as entirely unfamiliar, is disturbing to her sense of selfhood. For all her criticisms of Imperialism and its associated nationalism, Woolf’s feeling that much of what she sees in Ireland as inferior copies of the original, forces an uncomfortable recognition of her own national identity and membership of a ruling class. This emerges even more strongly in a letter Woolf writes to Ethyl Smythe where she describes her love of London as her only patriotism, “save one vision, in Warwickshire one spring when we were driving back from Ireland and I saw a stallion being led, under the may and the beeches, along a grass ride; and I thought that is England” (*Letters*6: 460). Here, as Gillian Beer points out, Woolf invokes Ireland “as the necessary other island” (Beer 168) that defines her own sense of Englishness, something to which she does and does not belong (Beer highlights the maleness of the scene Woolf describes and her own sense of exile in this context).<sup>3</sup> Woolf’s response then to Ireland complicates her own insider/outsider definitions she was to employ later in *Three Guineas* and perhaps sheds further light on her ambivalent readings of a writer such as James Joyce.

If reading Proust in Ireland was impossible, and reading Joyce in England fraught with difficulty, what was it like reading Woolf in Ireland at this time? In her discussion of the reception of Woolf in Europe, Nicola Luckhurst describes the various ways in which her writing entered European literary markets – often “as a part of Modernism itself,” sometimes as “part of a project of translation and cultural renewal” (Caws and Luckhurst, eds., forthcoming) and, most powerfully, especially from the 70s onwards, through feminism. The translation and publication of Woolf’s texts depended on a number of factors from its earliest reception onwards, a nation’s politics and cultural priorities most significantly, and censorship, fascism and anti-feminism all played their part in the choice and availability of Woolf’s texts. And Ireland, both part of and strangely isolated from Europe during the 1920s and beyond the 40s, offers a no less complex cultural and political context for the reception of Woolf’s writing.

The publication of her earliest novels and short fiction coincided with tremendous political upheaval and change in Ireland. Following the 1916 Easter Rising and the war of independence from 1919 to 1921, a treaty was signed in 1921 that ultimately resulted in the partition of Ireland. The newly created Irish Free State had its own problems. Declan Kiberd writes that

There was, if anything, less freedom in post-independence Ireland, for the reason that the previous attempt to arraign the enemy without gave way to

a new campaign against the heretic within. The censorship of films (1923) and of publications (1929) was a symptom of a wider censoriousness, of a kind which would be found in many infant states as they sought to outlaw the impure and to keep their culture unadulterated by “corrupt” foreign influences. (Kiberd 263-64)

Numerous authors and selected works were banned, from Aldous Huxley to Marie Stopes, and by “the end of the 1920s many artists and intellectuals had come to the bleak conclusion that Ireland was no longer an interesting place in which to live: now they left” (Kiberd 264).

There were, however, outlets for political and literary dissent by both artists and critics, and for the appraisal of modern and modernist fiction at home and abroad.<sup>4</sup> *The Irish Statesman*, edited by George Russell (AE) from 1923-30 became “a focus for new writing and for the dissenting voices which sought to articulate a critique of Irish social and political life” (Deane 210). *The Dublin Magazine* (1923-58), a specifically literary and scholarly magazine, and later *The Bell* (1940-46) “attempted to resituate Ireland in a wider and less oppressively devotional context” (Deane 210). So despite the apparent antipathy towards modernity and literary experimentation, Woolf and other modernists did have a potential audience. Her newly published works were reviewed and her name became part of the discourse about modern British, Irish and European writers. This was especially the case in George Russell’s *Irish Statesman*, which, during the 1920s, was filled with “international as well as national news and comment, with reviews of most of the major writers writing the English language” (Brown 121). Of course Joyce and Yeats received plenty of coverage as well as other contemporary Irish writers, but there were also reviews of Katherine Mansfield, D.H. Lawrence, Rebecca West and Virginia Woolf. The first and most appreciative review in its brief publishing history is of *Mrs Dalloway*, where Woolf’s method is declared to be that of Joyce’s, “but *Ulysses* was a moral thunderstorm, with a universal world war and the noise of all its engines of destruction shocking through it. Mrs Woolf has not an ounce of the moralist in her.” The novel “leaves one shaken and one’s being echoes long with its sound” (*The Irish Statesman* 4 July 1925: 529). In a more negative review of *To the Lighthouse* Woolf is compared unfavourably with Joyce and Proust. But *Orlando* and, perhaps surprisingly, *A Room of One’s Own* receive praise: “Virginia Woolf, in this essay, demonstrates again her ease of style and mastery of writing. She has that power of insinuating the wisdom of her point of view which is the keenest weapon in the modern feminist armoury” (*The Irish Statesman* 15 February 1930: 478).

The traceable reception among her literary contemporaries is similarly mixed. Yeats anticipates in a letter that he will find *Orlando* “faint of pulse and dislike” (Matthews 101). Sean O’Casey, playwright and critic, described Woolf as “a fine writer, but vague and unacquainted with life; frightened by it, I’m afraid” (Gary O’Connor 34). But she is cited with approval by the Irish journalist Mary Colum, in her autobiography *Life and the Dream*, and Edith Somerville, Anglo-Irish writer of the Big House genre who wrote to Ethel Smyth with enthusiasm about Woolf’s *Three Guineas* in the 1930s: “How admirable *Three Guineas* is!” She had read it “with ecstasy and fury”; but “only those of our persuasion will read it. It cuts too deep for men to endure” (cited in Lee, *Virginia Woolf* 693).

Somerville’s anticipation of a gender-divided reception of this work sheds light on earlier responses too. Woolf’s first audience in Ireland was small, not only due to hostilities shown towards foreign writing at the time, but also because of a male conservatism that

permeated politics as well as literature. Commentators are unanimous about the difficulties Irish feminists faced in the emerging Republic during the twenties and beyond, the Irish political movement remaining “largely a men’s club” (Kiberd 363). And in a literary context, not only was there an “astonishing lack of reference to women writers” (Brown 226), but “in the literature of the emerging nation, woman reverted to being a site of contest rather than an agent of her own desire” (Kiberd 406-07). The problems women writers faced in terms of reception in Ireland at this time are well illustrated by the response of short story writer and critic, Frank O’Connor to Mary Lavin’s short stories, the focus of which is often on female, if not feminine, experience: “So an Irishman, reading the stories of Mary Lavin is actually more at a loss than a foreigner would be. His not-so-distant political revolution, seen through her eyes, practically disappears from view” (O’Connor 203). If Mary Lavin’s writing seemed foreign, how much more incomprehensible Woolf must have seemed to a predominantly male audience.

But the response of three very different women writers, Elizabeth Bowen (1899-1973), Mary Lavin (1912-1996), and Edna O’Brien, born in 1930 and now living in London, offers a different perspective. Anglo-Irish and Irish, Catholic and Protestant, Woolf’s contemporaries and modern-day writers all, these women extend in important ways the range of encounter with Woolf in Ireland, from the mainly resistant male modernist and traditional realist cliques to the not quite reputable genres of the popular. Bowen’s connections with Woolf are the most obvious and fully documented. As Phyllis Lassner points out: “Bowen is a marginalized figure in several ways that are transformed imaginatively into a distinctive style and persona. Neither English nor Irish, she was born Anglo-Irish, an uneasy identity in both cultures” (Lassner 142-3). This double identity was both isolating and enabling for Bowen. As a member of the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland, she had more immediate access to many of the same social and literary contacts as Woolf, who became both an inspiration and mentor for the younger Bowen. Readily admitting this, Bowen declared: “We, in our twenties during the ’20s, were not only the author’s most zealous readers, but, in the matter of reputation, most jealous guardians. Her aesthetic became a faith; we were believers” (Bowen 131). Bowen engaged with Woolf’s writing at every level, in her critical essays, book reviews (see *The Mulberry Tree*) and fiction. In fact Bowen’s very first novel, *The Hotel* (1927), was “modeled after Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*” (Lassner 26).

Bowen’s negotiations of her Anglo-Irish identity and literary heritage with contemporary European modernism (Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen* 11-12) provide the most immediate connection between Woolf and women writers in Ireland. But there were also readers of Woolf who had none of these links, whose fiction has received considerably less critical attention, and whose writing offers a different history of reception. Mary Lavin’s encounter with Woolf began within an academic framework – she had chosen to write a PhD thesis on her. The thesis was cut short, according to Lavin, by an unexpected conversation with an elderly woman in the bank about the subject of her thesis:

The woman was struck by the coincidence. Just the other day, she said, she had had tea with Virginia. Mary couldn’t believe it. Virginia Woolf was alive? She had always assumed that all great writers were dead. Back at the college, she looked at the pages of her thesis and thought about her subject. Would Virginia Woolf be wasting her time this way? She very much doubted it. She

turned over a page and began writing a story. (Levenson 47-8)

Such an anecdote, of course, sends the avid Woolf scholar dashing to search this first story, superimposed on the thesis as it were, for Woolfian resonances. "Miss Holland," published in *The Dublin Magazine* in 1939, begins in a promising fashion: "The cat decided Miss Holland. The minute she saw it, she decided to take the room" (Lavin, *Tales from Bective Bridge* 143)—which seems to echo the cadence of a better known opening: "Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. For Lucy had her work cut out for her" (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 5). But Lavin's semi-comic story of a self-conscious middle-aged spinster who tries and fails to fit in with the other lodgers in a boarding house marks the start of a collection of short fiction that focuses on a very different society from that depicted by Woolf. Motherhood and widowhood preoccupied Lavin and small town and village community life obsessed her (Briggs 185). In an interview, Lavin stated: "My interest is in recording and preserving the real life of living Irishmen and women whom I have known and seen with my own eyes. I want to note the way they acted and the things they believed, whether right or wrong" (Stevens and Stevens 46). She did not see herself as an experimental writer, nor did she consider herself specifically a woman writer (48-49).

Yet Lavin's emphatic focus on female experience, especially "the mundane areas of women's existence" (Weekes 22) and in particular "the life of the female mind" (Scott 278), connect her directly with Woolf's project of exploring the lives of the obscure in *A Room of One's Own*. In interviews, Lavin stated quite clearly her admiration for Woolf's experimentalism: "Virginia Woolf had a great impact on me. *Jacob's Room* was the first thing I read by her. It was like a painting, seen at one glance, tremendously new" (Harmon 289), and Lavin's self-conscious quest for "truth" in her short fiction often bears more likeness to Woolf's "plotless fiction" than to the realist tradition with which she affiliates herself. I would like to consider this point briefly in relation to Lavin's "A Story Without A Pattern," which details the encounter between a young (woman) writer and an older man at a party who tells her that her stories "may appeal to women. But they'll never appeal to men. A man would only read a page or two of your work, and then he'd throw it aside . . . because a man wants something with a bit of substance to it . . . Now your stories . . . are very thin." The young writer defends herself, replying that "Life itself has very little plot . . . Life has a habit of breaking off in the middle" (Lavin, *In a Café* 205). Thus Lavin sets her story in a comic intertextual alliance with both Woolf and Henry James, as she couches the older man's example of the correct kind of fiction, a clumsy but tragic tale set in a small Irish town, within the carefully crafted and apparently plotless tale. In this story, it seems that Lavin both acknowledges her debts to writers such as Woolf and demarcates the territory of her own fiction.

Edna O'Brien's writing inhabits quite a different space on the literary scene. Having left Ireland early on in her writing career and seeing her books banned there in the sixties because she wrote explicitly about female sexuality, her position in the "canon" of Irish woman writers, especially within the Irish academic establishment, remains distinctly uncertain. Nuala O'Faolain makes this quite clear:

Edna O'Brien is arguably the most important writer in modern Ireland by sole virtue of the fact that her books can be found on the revolving bookstand

of any small-town Irish newsagent's shop. She is published, advertised and distributed. Not one other native woman writer is, in those respects, comparable . . . Edna O'Brien was an expression of the post-de Valera, contemporary Ireland when she began to write. Whether she was at the time of her first few books a "woman's" as distinct from a woman writer, is open to question. Certainly she is not a feminist since she is unwilling to analyse, but rather evokes her heroines' romantic masochism. (O'Faolain 132)<sup>5</sup>

Yet O'Brien, like Bowen and Lavin, has acknowledged a close connection with Woolf, declaring that "her novels were a formative influence on me" (letter to author).<sup>6</sup> Her most obvious debt and homage to Woolf is her play *Virginia*, first performed in 1980. Described by Dawn Duncan as a "stream of consciousness play" (Duncan 103), with its abstract set, shots of Bloomsbury, London Streets and the countryside projected on screens on stage (O'Brien, 8) and its insistence that Leslie Stephen and Leonard Woolf are played by the same male actor, this work offers important insights into O'Brien's preoccupations as much as into her own response to Woolf. It begins and ends in a dreamlike mode with the same lines prefacing first Woolf's mother's death and then her own:

I dreamt that I leant over the edge of the boat and fell down. I went under the sea, I have been dead and yet am now alive again—it was awful, awful, and as before waking, the voices of the birds and the sound of wheels chime and chatter in a queer harmony, grow louder and louder and the sleeper feels himself drawing towards the shores of life, the sun growing hotter, cries sounding louder, something tremendous about to happen. (O'Brien 9)

Weaving her play together from a multiplicity of Woolf texts, O'Brien produces a particular version of her, concentrating on her anger as a woman and also on her madness and her attempts to overcome it. The concern with the mother, motherhood and "the memory and force of parental influence" (Duncan 101) in the play is as much O'Brien's as it is Woolf's. The struggles of the woman writer to surface and to find a voice, captured through the reiterative water imagery and the evocation of a variety of social and other pressures in the play, primarily offers a commentary on Woolf's creativity, but they perhaps also reflect O'Brien's anxieties about her own writing, particularly her fiction, and its critical reception. As Maureen Grogan points out: "Edna O'Brien has been criticized for failing to separate herself from her characters and their experiences sufficiently, thereby committing a major breach of modernist etiquette. . . . [S]he has been accused of a damaging and self-defeating subjectivity" (Grogan 9). The impact of Woolf, now considered an icon of both modernism and feminism, has not guaranteed similar literary accolades for O'Brien within or outside Ireland. But the connections between Woolf and this "popular," top-selling Irish writer and indeed between Mary Lavin, considered a significant but minor short story writer, deserve further attention, not only within an Irish context but in relation to the broader issues of women's writing and in relation to literary and market values.

Charting Woolf's short voyage out, her brief visit to Ireland as a tourist, and her more enduring though at times precarious literary presence there, pinpoints a terrain that can only enrich existing Woolf scholarship. The terrain encompasses women's writing, modernism

and Ireland, Woolf and popular writing, both within and beyond an Irish context, as well as the aesthetics and politics of Woolfian landscapes and cityscapes. This is just the beginning.

## NOTES

1. This essay is part of a much larger project in which I examine Irish women poets and fiction writers in relation to Woolf's writing, modernism and Ireland. I owe thanks here to Nicole Luckhurst for comments and advice and to the Irish Research Council in the Humanities and Social Sciences for their financial support.
2. Her most informed contact about Irish affairs was most likely Leonard Woolf who wrote a number of articles about Ireland in *The Nation and Athenaeum*. See Wayne Chapman's essay "Leonard Woolf and the Rowntree Political Monthlies, 1916-1922: With the Irish Rebellion as a Case in Point," which follows below.
3. I am grateful to Julia Briggs for alerting me to both the diary entry and Beer's commentary on it.
4. This dissent becomes particularly apparent in the 1930s. See Patricia Coughlan and Alex Davis, eds., *Modernism and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s* (Cork: Cork UP, 1995) and Brian Fallon, *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930-1960* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1999).
5. Diane Wallace places O'Brien amongst the writers whose "exploration of the specificity and significance of female experience" in the 1960s "anticipates the concept of 'writing the body' in the 1980s *écriture féminine*" (Wallace 245).
6. See Dawn Duncan's "Edna O'Brien and Virginia," in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 22. 2 (December 1996): 101, where she comments on O'Brien's clear and acknowledged connections with Woolf.

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## VIRGIL SUÁREZ

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### POUND FINDS HIS WAY IN THE GARDEN OF ST. ELIZABETH'S ASYLUM

He spent his mornings reciting the Latin names  
of his favorite flowers: gardenias, marigolds, daisies,  
hyacinth on the pond's surface where an iridescence  
of fish scales breaking the surface swathed a language  
of light that moved outward toward reeds and rocks.

He meditated upon the lines of ancient Japanese poets  
he studied and loved, a cacophony of sounds rasped  
deep in his throat, a reed warbler, an oriole, a sparrow  
beckoning his mate to a tree nest. "*Moonlight slanting  
through the bamboo grove; a cuckoo crying*" Bashō's words.

At night Pound closed his eyes to shadows's movement  
across the moon, his bedroom walls—silent passing  
of the sick. On his lips the names of those gone, unforgiven,  
a blue mist befallen upon the singing of a solitary cricket.