

*Historicising Woolf: Context Studies**Michael H. Whitworth*

Why historicise? It has not always seemed natural or inevitable that a critic ought to. In the case of Woolf, the question of whether her works ought to be read in the context of her times has been closely linked to the argument over whether she was politically engaged with the contemporary world. In most respects, that argument appears to have been won – the ‘invalid lady of Bloomsbury’ has been rejected as an ideological myth – but the embrace of ‘historicism’ leaves unresolved several crucial methodological questions: With what materials do we historicise? What kind of agency do we grant to the author, and what are its limits? In whose name do we historicise? What sort of reading do we hope to produce?

Historicisation marks the recognition that something has been lost, that the text needs to be returned to its context in order to become intelligible. Some of the first critics of Woolf felt it necessary to establish the ‘scene’ within which she worked. To speak of a ‘scene’ is to draw, even if unconsciously, on a theatrical metaphor in which the author is an actor and the scene a backdrop. For Frank Swinnerton, writing during Woolf’s lifetime, the relevant unit of analysis was the reign of a monarch (though King George V had not yet died when *The Georgian Literary Scene* was published in 1935); Swinnerton characterised the Georgian scene in relation to a Georgian modernity of technology, almost universal literacy, and democracy.¹ In the changed literary and political atmosphere of the mid-1930s, the Georgian world was already in the past. For R. L. Chambers, in 1947, the decade is the more significant unit: in his chapter on ‘The Contemporary Scene’, Chambers emphasises the significance of the First World War, of the ‘lost generation’ of writers, and of a generational divide. He also summarises the 1920s as an ‘age of irresponsibility’ and the 1930s as one of ‘apprehension’.² Significantly, Chambers’s chapter on the ‘scene’ is offered not as a preface to interpreting Woolf but as a preface to an evaluative judgement. Chambers begins with textual engagement, considering in successive chapters Woolf’s purpose, style, and method; in his

fourth chapter, he turns to her 'contemporary significance', in contrast to her 'permanent significance', which is weighed in the seventh and final chapter. Chambers's remarks about the relation of context and literary art are revealing and represent the dominant approach of his era: 'what all writers of contemporary significance must have, is the power first to enter fully into the common experience of their generation, then to present that experience or certain important aspects of it in a more intensified and coherently patterned form than life itself can show'.³ For Chambers, it follows that the evaluating critic must characterise the 'common experience' of each generation. It is in the name of evaluation that he sketches the 'scene' of the 1920s. Although Chambers does not subscribe to a humanist notion of an eternal human essence (at least, not explicitly), his notion of 'common experience' is questionable, certainly to a critic concerned with the relation of literature to social inequality, and certainly when we consider a writer who is keenly aware of such inequality, especially in relation to gender. Like 'human nature' and 'common sense', the idea of 'common experience' is very often the means by which the perspective of one social class achieves hegemony.

Another origin of historical approaches came in the mid 1950s, with Irma Rantavaara's *Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury* (1953) and J. K. Johnstone's *The Bloomsbury Group* (1954). The meaning of 'Bloomsbury' was either becoming lost or had in fact always been ambiguous: Rantavaara notes that her research was prompted by a British Council Summer School in 1947 at which lecturers were unable to reach a consensus about what Bloomsbury had been.⁴ 'Context' here means not primarily a historical period, although the passing of Bloomsbury implies that as well, but rather a specific social milieu and its intellectual outlook. Rantavaara emphasises the Cambridge philosopher J. M. E. McTaggart and the wide-ranging scholar Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson: in her account, they share a belief in 'life' having an underlying 'pattern'.⁵ Johnstone finds the unity of the group in 'a common respect for the things of the spirit' and 'the inner life'; they shared 'an admiration for the individual and for the virtues of courage, tolerance, and honesty'.⁶ In this, Johnstone, like Rantavaara, identifies key intellectual progenitors: the Cambridge philosopher G. E. Moore, but also Roger Fry, and the 'Cambridge Humanism' of Dickinson, McTaggart, and Leslie Stephen. Rantavaara traces Bloomsbury's belief in pattern in Woolf's 'hankering after large patterns in the universe' as a substitute for religious faith.⁷ Both critics touch upon recurrent problems for the contextual reader. Rantavaara's is only hinted at in her remark that the influence of McTaggart and Dickinson was 'stronger than [Woolf] would

have liked to admit': How far do we allow the writer's self-presentation to influence our sense of relevant contexts?⁸

Johnstone's problem is larger: he recognises that, for a full appreciation of *Mrs Dalloway*, it is necessary to have 'an acquaintance with London', and yet he also wishes to defend the novel as 'a self-contained work of art'.⁹ If the same is true for Cambridge philosophy, the very value of Johnstone's study is called into question. Johnstone and Rantavaara were writing contextual studies in the era of New Criticism. Insofar as 'literary history' meant anything in this era, it meant either the microscopic scholarly work of the identification of literary sources or the macroscopic work of constructing 'the story' of English literature.¹⁰ Those who did not wish to historicise were not always explicit about their motives, but above all, in the New Critical era, writerly craft and literary form took precedence over historical background. In 1945, in *Virginia Woolf: Her Art as a Novelist*, Joan Bennett compared Woolf to the Victorian realist novelists, and, though acknowledging that the 'moral, social, economic and religious problems' which loomed so large in nineteenth-century fiction were important to Woolf, judged that they were important 'only as they colour the world for the people she presents'.¹¹ Bennett does not outlaw contextualisation, but Woolf's focus on consciousness means that for Bennett character is more significant than theme; her subtitle, moreover, foregrounds Woolf's artistry. Jean Guiguet in 1962 praised Woolf's novels on the grounds that her characters were not 'bound to a social or historic context that would have dated them'; as time went on, he predicted, the 'ephemeral trappings' of Woolf's era would wear away, and the characters would reveal their 'integral humanity'; the fact of their belonging to a particular social class would become unimportant.¹² In short, in the 1940s and 1950s, the dominant mode of criticism sought to uncover that which is timeless in humanity, not that which is contingent.

By the late 1960s, a more politicised approach to criticism was gaining legitimacy. Jonathan Dollimore has argued that historicism emerged as a response to radical demands that literature be made more relevant to the present day.¹³ In the 1960s, widening participation in higher education and contemporary political upheavals made established approaches to literature seem outdated and detached from the real world; there arose an expectation that literature should be taught in a way that made it 'relevant' to contemporary concerns. However, when past literature is assimilated to present concerns, differences are inevitably dissolved. If past literature so completely mirrors our own concerns, what is the value in studying it at all? One resolution of this problem might be to dispose of literature as a

unique object of study, to reject the past as a locus of value, and to inaugurate cultural studies. But another is to study the literature of the past in terms of its difference – to place it in cultural contexts so as to recover not so much its precise meaning as those meanings that are nearly incomprehensible within our present frame of reference.

A 1972 article by Margaret Blanchard hints at the connections between the radical demand for relevance and the historicist demand for contextualisation. Blanchard notes Woolf's criticism of the memoirs written by working-class women, namely, that they lacked 'detachment and imaginative breadth'.¹⁴ Blanchard suggests that the process of transmuting experiential details into 'literature' shares something with 'consciousness raising', a political practice that had come to the fore in the late 1960s: 'women in a group gain some detachment from their own problems by reflecting upon them, by viewing them in a larger social context, and by sharing them with other women'.¹⁵ If, similarly, readers can gain detachment from literature by contextualising it, then the possibility of simultaneously making literature relevant and historical is revealed. However, not all critics interested in the continuing relevance of Woolf have followed Blanchard's path of detachment. To some historicists, it has seemed that the act of making Woolf relevant has been an act of self-projection. Reflecting on feminist readings of Woolf from the late 1970s and early 1980s, Alex Zwerdling regretted that the 'ideological assumptions and imperatives of the late twentieth-century (chiefly American) women's movement' had been too often 'superimposed on Woolf's own in order to minimize the distinctions between the two eras and cultures'.¹⁶ Moreover, he argues that such readings have often collapsed distinctions between parts of Woolf's career, especially when her entire career is read 'through the lenses of *Three Guineas*'.¹⁷ Though historicist readings of Woolf can be politicised, and though politicised readings of Woolf can be historicist, the two approaches are not identical, and they can find themselves opposed. In most cases, practitioners of the two approaches agree that literature does not transcend the material conditions of its making, but they disagree on the importance of historical and spatial differences in those material conditions.

Asked to justify historicisation, some critics might answer that they do it in Woolf's name, because she herself was a historicist. In 1979 Brenda Silver argued that 'from the beginning' Woolf's criticism 'was imbued with an awareness of the historical and cultural forces that affect art'.¹⁸ In 1981 Katherine Hill traced Woolf's historical focus to the influence of Leslie Stephen and the reading he prescribed for his daughter in her

teenage years. As Hill notes, early in her career, in 1904–05, Woolf frequently expressed a desire to write a solid historical work.¹⁹

In her mature critical writings, Woolf emerges as sceptical about most existing varieties of literary historicism while remaining consistently engaged with a wide historical span of literatures, primarily those in English. ‘Surroundings’ is a keyword for her. In ‘On Not Knowing Greek’ (1925), a single line from Sophocles summons ‘surroundings’ to the mind: the term encompasses the natural and the built environments, and climate is the ultimate determinant (*E4* 39–40). Woolf was apprehensive, however, that the supposedly historical reconstruction of a writer’s surroundings might lapse into fanciful conjecture; she articulated this most forcefully in 1920 in one of her reviews of *Mary Russell Mitford and Her Surroundings* (*E3* 218–19). Woolf was comfortable with the idea that future historians might draw on novels as sources – in ‘The Novels of E. M. Forster’ (1927) she commends Forster on this basis (*E4* 492) – but was often sceptical about our ability to reconstruct the appropriate context for a literary text.

Moreover, for Woolf, some literary works are beyond recovery. Her remarks on Joseph Addison are instructive in this regard. For Woolf, Addison belongs to the category of the ‘lesser writers’ because his tastes and beliefs were so different from ours; we are overwhelmed by a sense of difference. ‘Dutifully, if at all, we strain our imaginations to conceive the kind of audience to whom these precepts were addressed’ (*E4* 109). Woolf sketches a historical approach, posing questions not dissimilar from those posed by her father in *English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century* (1904): ‘What was the state of England at that particular moment? Why was Addison so anxious to insist upon the necessity of a decent and cheerful religious belief?’ (*E4* 109). She is aware that a historian will explain, but is equally aware that if we require the services of a historian, such literature has become merely ‘collector’s literature’ (*E4* 120). We can imagine the excitement of past audiences and readers, but we cannot share it. We cannot engage in ‘that intercourse of equals’ with the author which, ‘as it makes us contemporary with the author, persuades us that his object is our own’ (*E4* 120). She was to express a similar scepticism about the value of literary history and authorial biography in ‘Robinson Crusoe’ (1926): there she suggests that the business of reading, and the business of thinking about ‘how the novelist orders his world’ (*E4* 332), are prior to details of history and biography; the writer’s ‘vision’ is more important than the writer’s context.

The question of historical difference also loomed large in ‘The Strange Elizabethans’ (1932), though here Woolf was more ambivalent: she

recognises both that the urge to historical identification – ‘becoming an Elizabethan’ – was merely fantasy, and at the same time that something in the ‘freshness and vigour’ of Elizabethan writing impelled the reader to it (*E5* 335). The fantasy of identification is enabled by the absence of factual information about the era. The Elizabethan prose writers cannot ‘solidify’ the world of the poets; we cannot turn to them as we would now to ‘biographers, novelists and journalists’. We cannot find out what the life of ‘an ordinary man or woman in the time of Shakespeare’ might have been like (*E5* 336). What might, from the point of view of a literary historian, appear as a disability seems to Woolf to be advantageous.

By the 1930s, Woolf was aware that her own works were becoming objects of academic critical scrutiny. To a limited extent, she was able to influence how her work was to be read. She tended to discourage critics from pursuing questions of the intellectual context for her writings: ‘I have never read Bergson and have only a very amateurish knowledge of Freud and the psychoanalysts’; ‘I have not read Einstein; I should not understand it’.²⁰ It is notable that Woolf offered no clues as to the thinkers she had read. The recipient of the second remark she described as ‘entirely distracted by Einstein, & his extra mundane influence upon fiction’ (*D5* 146). The question remains, distracted from what? Formalists might say distracted from the texts in themselves. Historicists might respond that the text never exists ‘in itself’, that the words in the text exist in a web of associations that can be clarified only by reference to extra-textual material.

A conversation between Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, recalled in a letter to Clive Bell, encapsulates the problem of choosing an appropriate context: “You’re a bit hoity toity, Virginia.” Well, I was educated in the old Cambridge School. “Ever heard of Moore?” “George Moore the novelist?” “My dear Vita, we start at different ends”.²¹ Sackville-West’s mistaking of G. E. Moore the philosopher for George Moore the novelist offers a prototype for a ‘mistake’ that any contextualiser might accidentally or deliberately commit: the contextualiser might choose not a context that is sympathetic to the text, but one that introduces dissonance, difference, and dialogue. Starting at different ends can be a critically productive practice.

Woolf’s discouragement of the investigators into Bergson and Einstein returns us to the problem of the materials that we work with: What constitutes an appropriate context? It is instructive to turn to Alex Zwerdling’s *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (1986), a critical study which, while not beyond criticism, was pioneering in its historicisation of Woolf’s novels. Zwerdling treats *Mrs Dalloway* as an examination of the British ruling

class at a moment of transition, as the Empire is confronted by demands for independence and the composition of Parliament is altered by the rise of the Labour Party. Zwerdling takes Lady Bruton's reference to 'the news from India' as a cue for very specific contextualisation and asks what someone reading the newspapers would have found in the middle of June 1923. He cites snippets from *The Times* concerning imperial police 'overwhelmed and brutally tortured by the villagers' and headlines such as 'Extremists Fomenting Trouble' and 'Punjab Discontent'.²² While this procedure may seem unexceptionable, it embodies several implicit choices. First, by beginning with Lady Bruton's reference to a newspaper, Zwerdling closely associates contexts with texts. But contexts can be nonverbal: *To the Lighthouse* requires us to deal with allusions to several paintings (real and imaginary) and to several styles of visual art; *Mrs Dalloway* is rich in references to buildings, fountains, and statues. Second, Zwerdling treats the 'June 1923' of the novel as real, but we know that Woolf was writing *Mrs Dalloway* in August 1922, so one might equally well inquire of the news from India in June 1922 or at the date when Woolf first drafted the relevant passage. We can orientate our contexts around either the world of the text or the world of the author, and the two may not coincide.

Third, Zwerdling chooses to look at headlines in *The Times*, perhaps because Lady Bruton later writes a letter to it. But a political conservative like Lady Bruton might equally well have taken her news from a paper such as the *Morning Post*; the paper has an explicit presence in the text, being mentioned as a newspaper which corresponds to Richard Dalloway's outlook.²³ Moreover, one might ask whether it is necessary or desirable to restrict one's choice to the newspapers mentioned in the primary text. Woolf's diary in the period 1920–24 makes reference to many newspapers, including *The Times* and the *Morning Post*, but also the *Daily Express*, *Daily Herald*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily News*, *Labour Monthly*, and *Pall Mall Gazette*. Moreover, she was, through Leonard and her Bloomsbury circle, closely linked to the political weekly *The Nation and Athenaeum*. An account of the news from India in a socialist or liberal source might give a different picture: Indian nationalists presented not as troublemakers but as citizens with a right to self-determination; imperial police presented not as victims but as oppressors. Although a different choice of source would not alter Zwerdling's larger contention – that the traditional ruling class was losing power – it would alter the perspective from which we view it. And more importantly, it would remind us of the heterogeneity of context. 'The news from India' is a contested sign. In this regard, and in many others, *Mrs Dalloway* situates itself amidst a complex intermeshing of conflicting

opinions. Though talk of texts as ‘interventions’ can become a lazy cliché if the critic does not specify the discursive situation in which they intervene, it is a valuable corrective to the idea of texts as representations. Moreover, it allows the writer a degree of agency while accepting that her freedom is always constrained: she can intervene in situations not of her making, in a language not wholly hers.

Parts of Zwerdling’s study appeared as early as 1977, and the rapid growth of literary theories sceptical about representation and reality meant that by 1986 its titular reference to ‘the real world’ appeared somewhat dated. As one critic regretfully noted, Zwerdling assumes that ‘by taking a close and fair look at history, we can gain a true picture’; he assumes that there is a ‘real history’ out there, as there is a ‘real world’, and that it can be accessed ‘by careful fair-minded observers’.²⁴ The appearance in 1981 of translations of several of Mikhail Bakhtin’s key essays as *The Dialogic Imagination* provided a critical vocabulary of ‘contested discourses’ and ‘contested signs’ that was capable of articulating more subtle relations between language, text, and reality than would be possible from either a naïve realist position or a postmodern position in which the linguistic sign is entirely detached from reality. One of the earliest fruits of such an approach is seen in Helen Wussow’s 1989 article on *Night and Day*. However, while the theoretical framework is subtler than Zwerdling’s, a heavy price is paid in specificity of historical reference. Wussow suggests that *Night and Day* engages with the language of war, but historically specific instances of that language are conspicuous by their absence.²⁵ Linden Peach’s *Virginia Woolf* (2000) presents a more thoroughly digested Bakhtinian perspective, though one that emphasises the idea of the chronotope over that of contested discourse.

Though in the 1940s R. L. Chambers saw context as a necessary preliminary to evaluation, for most contemporary critics its primary function is hermeneutic: we return texts to their contexts in order to understand them more precisely. In everyday speech, the accusation that an auditor has taken one’s words ‘out of context’ usually signals that the speaker wishes to reimpose his or her authority on those words.²⁶ When Virginia Woolf spoke of ‘context’, she usually meant it in this limited sense, referring to the immediate verbal context of a phrase. In ‘On Not Knowing Greek’, she claims that the Athenians ‘were far less apt than we are to break off sentences and appreciate them apart from the context’ (E4 47). The act of decontextualisation is a small act of violence, involving breaking and tearing; the act of contextualisation is an act of redress. However, the everyday sense of ‘context’ and the promise of restoring wholeness

should not be taken to imply that contextualisation restores a singular original meaning to the text. We might wish to use context as we often use 'the author', in Michel Foucault's words, as 'a principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning';²⁷ in other words, to restrict ambiguities and to dampen unwanted resonances. Sometimes it performs this service, but a return to the full historical context, invoking texts beyond the primary text, can also unearth associations and implications which complicate meaning; furthermore, it can place the primary text in dialogue with its contemporaries and forebears. Though the factual scholarly apparatus of historical criticism sometimes appears to suggest authority and closure, historicism can reopen texts, and that reopening can place the past in new dialogues with the present.

NOTES

- 1 Frank Swinnerton, *The Georgian Literary Scene* (London: William Heinemann, 1935), pp. 6–8.
- 2 R. L. Chambers, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1947), p. 101.
- 3 Chambers, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, p. 59.
- 4 Irma Rantavaara, *Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Tiedeakatemia, 1953), p. 5.
- 5 Rantavaara, *Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury*, p. 32.
- 6 J. K. Johnstone, *The Bloomsbury Group: A Study of E. M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, and Their Circle* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954), p. 375.
- 7 Rantavaara, *Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury*, p. 107.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Johnstone, *The Bloomsbury Group*, p. 338.
- 10 For testimony to the first point, see F. W. Bateson, 'Literary History: Non-Subject Par Excellence', *NLH* 2 (1970), 115–22.
- 11 Joan Bennett, *Virginia Woolf: Her Art as a Novelist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945), p. 10.
- 12 Jean Guiguet, *Virginia Woolf and Her Works* (London: Hogarth, 1965), p. 463.
- 13 Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. xlviii–l.
- 14 Margaret Blanchard, 'Socialization in *Mrs Dalloway*', *College English* 34 (1972), 295; see Woolf, *Essays*, 5, p. 188.
- 15 Blanchard, 'Socialization in *Mrs Dalloway*', p. 295.
- 16 Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 32.
- 17 Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, p. 33.
- 18 Brenda R. Silver, "'Anon" and "The Reader": Virginia Woolf's Last Essays', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 25 (1979), 360.

- 19 Katherine C. Hill, 'Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen: History and Literary Revolution', *PMLA*, 96 (1981), 354.
- 20 Woolf, letter to Harmon H. Goldstone, 16 August 1932, *L5*, p. 91; letter to Elizabeth E. Nielsen, 28 October 1938, *Modern Fiction Studies* 30 (1984), 198.
- 21 Woolf, letter to Clive Bell, 23 January 1924, *L3*, p. 86.
- 22 Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, p. 121.
- 23 Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 65.
- 24 Richard Pearce, 'Virginia Woolf's Reality', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 21 (1987), 93–96.
- 25 Helen Wussow, 'Conflict of Language in Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 16 (1989), 61–73.
- 26 Patricia Ingham, 'Context as Text', *CCUE News*, 16 (2002), 5–6.
- 27 Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?', *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge (Harlow: Longman, 1988), p. 209.