

## **Art, Heroism, and the Novels of Virginia Woolf**

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The publication of Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* in 1918 represented a break with the Victorian conventions of memorially hagiographic biography. It was, in its clear Oedipal drive, an instance of what Hermione Lee has described as "striking the father dead" through a process of sly debunking (75). It was also, however, an equally clear rejection of the Victorian notion of the heroic individual. General 'Chinese' Gordon of Khartoum fame, for instance, is portrayed not as a prototypical imperial hero, but as a delusional religious maniac; Florence Nightingale not as a semi-divine angel of mercy and genius of compassion but as a power hungry, manipulative harridan. As such *Eminent Victorians* is typical of the intellectual ethos of the Bloomsbury group, and of at least important elements within post-war British society in general, in its persistent and searching questioning, challenging, and ultimate rejection of versions of heroism which no longer seemed tenable in the post-war era.

Virginia Woolf was very much a participant in this anti-heroic programme. As a young woman she participated in the infamous Dreadnought Hoax of 1910, during which she and several other members of the Bloomsbury group dressed up, at the instigation of notorious prankster Horace de Vere Cole, as the Emperor of Abyssinia and his entourage and were given an official reception aboard the one of the navy's newest and most deadly warships, the H.M.S. *Dreadnought* (Wright 47). The ensuing scandal caused much outrage among right-thinking member of society. Woolf's delight with the prank indicates an early disdain for the pomp and mock heroism of the military, while in her writing she frequently ridiculed the heroic roles and trappings associated with Britain's young men and the Empire.

Her 1931 novel *The Waves*, the central character of Percival, around whom the six

narrative voices circle, is a good example of Woolf's mockery of heroic afflatus. From childhood Percival is a natural leader who inspires an almost religious awe in his school fellows:

Look now, how everybody follows Percival. He is heavy. He walks clumsily down the field, through the long grass, to where the great elm trees stand. His magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander. A wake of light seems to lie on the grass behind him. Look at us trooping after him, his faithful servants, to be shot like sheep, for he will certainly attempt some forlorn enterprise and die in battle. (654)

The tone of this passage is carefully balanced between the undoubted sincerity of the narrator - here a young man named Louis - and the irony implicit in the scene: while the love he engenders is real, Percival is not a military commander but a cricket player, and he leads not troops into battle but children into play. This simultaneous appreciation of the allure of the hero and satiric attack on heroic pretension is ultimately realised in Percival's fate. He dies an early death, but not as another narrator, Neville, imagines, riding "alone at the head of troops," denouncing "some monstrous tyranny," not that is to say in the approved heroic manner involving bravery, self-sacrifice, and the quest for the good of the community, but in a horse-riding accident: "His horse stumbled; he was thrown" (709). While it is not difficult to imagine a less heroic death, the offhand mundaneness of this death effectively undercuts Percival's heroic pretensions. His death is, from the heroic perspective, trivial and meaningless. While in *The Waves* "it is Percival who inspires poetry," who is the hero around which the other characters circulate, he is a hero made up of other people's fantasies about heroism, and ultimately his story is at least as much a "farce" as it is a tragedy (709).

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This is an example, then, of one of the ways Woolf participates in Bloomsbury's, and very generally speaking modernism's, questioning and reformulation of the traditional figure of the hero, which occurred, as one would expect, in a number of different ways. Ford Maddox Ford's ironic treatment of Edward Ashburnham in *The Good Soldier*, for example, gradually and delicately, although quite thoroughly, undermines his moral stature. James Joyce's Leopold Bloom, on the other hand, gains enormously in moral stature as he moves through the novel, but is in many other respects decidedly unheroic, being, for instance, glutinous and excessively uxorious. However, one of the main ways that modernist fiction reexamined the very idea of heroism was through the figure of the artist-as-hero. This is perhaps only to be expected in an artistic movement so thoroughly fascinated by art as a "self-conscious practice" possessed of distinctive traits which differentiated it from other forms of social activity (Levenson 14).

The most obvious figure here is perhaps James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus whose commitment to "forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" represents a sort of rallying cry for the modernist self-imagination of the artist figure (Joyce 217). This is not to say that Joyce's Dedalus (who also appeared in the posthumously published *Stephen Hero*) is in any way a simple or unmodulated heroic figure, untouched by irony. One has only to think of his hydrophobia to realise that Joyce's artist hero is not without certain obvious flaws; heroes are not normally filthy and malodorous. Similar points could be made with reference to other artist-hero figures of the modernist canon, such as Lewis's Tarr, an unpleasant misogynist and more, after all, of an anti-hero than a hero. However, there remains the general tendency in early twentieth-century fiction to relocate heroic virtues and postures to the artist figure, be that figure a writer, a painter, a musician or an intellectual. In addition, it is possible to identify a set of values embodied in this modernist artist hero. Lee Lemon, for instance, argues in *Portraits of the*

Artist in Contemporary Fiction that pre WWII fiction represented artists as “isolated rebels” showing “Byronic contempt” for the commonplace world around them (Lemon ix, xii). Like Victorian or Edwardian heroes, who so often operated outside the boundaries of the society they sprang from and protected, be it H. Rider Haggard’s African adventurers or Arthur Conan Doyle’s eccentric and drug addicted detective, modernist artist heroes stand outside and above an uncomprehending society and bestow upon it the products of their creative labour.

To a certain extent, Virginia Woolf also participates in this modernist shifting of the locus of heroic value from the barrel of a gun to the barrel of a pen or paintbrush. Many of her novels focus on, or at least contain, an artist figure, and her representations of these artists sometimes employ a rhetoric of heroism. However, it is my contention that Woolf’s vision of the artist as hero balances between a genuine belief in the heroic nature of the artist’s vocation and a lively sense of the absurdity of the heroic posturing also associated with artistic work. The reading of *Percival* offered previously thus acts as a sort of model for my reading of not just Woolf’s response to the heroic figure in general, but to the artist-hero in particular. Heroism is for Woolf at once vitally magnificent and faintly ridiculous.

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While it is of course impossible in a paper of this length to examine all of Woolf’s artist-heroes, it is worth spending a few moments looking at how this role develops in her early fiction before moving on to the more canonical novels of her high-modernist period. In Woolf’s first novel, the role of the artist hero is only slightly developed, and is shared between two characters: the female protagonist, Rachel Vinrace, and her romantic opposite, Terrence Hewet. Rachel is a pianist, whose passionate love of music coexists uneasily with her social and gender role - her aunts, for instance worry that she “will spoil” her “arms if” she insists “upon so much practising”

(15). Yet her music lies at the core of her character, and is valorised by the narrative. Rachel's improvisations at the piano lead the dance which creates a "gigantic circle" amongst the visitors to the hotel in Santa Marina, one of the text's primary representations of the potential for human unity, and her performance of Bach provides her audience with a sensation of meaning and order: "They sat very still as if they saw a building with spaces and columns succeeding each other rising in the empty space. Then they began to see themselves and their lives, and the whole of human life advancing very nobly under the direction of the music. They felt themselves ennobled [ . . .]" (186 - 187 ). Similarly, Terrence Hewet is a writer whose ambition, if not necessarily his product, has heroic implications:

"I want to write a novel about Silence," he said; "the things people don't say. But the difficulty is immense." He sighed. "However, you don't care," he continued. He looked at her almost severely. "Nobody cares. [ . . .] As for the novel itself, the whole conception, the way one's seen the thing, felt about it, made it stand in relation to other things, not one in a million cares for that. And yet I sometimes wonder whether there's anything else in the whole world worth doing. (249)

Thus both of the artist figures in Woolf's first novel contain elements of the figure of the artist hero: isolation from the society around them, a sense of the importance of the act of artistic creation or performance, the role of art as a sacramental or unifying force, and a recognition of the extreme difficulty, even danger, of what might be called the artistic quest.

However, overall, it must be recognized that the emphasis of *The Voyage Out* falls not on the heroic aspects of art, but on the ways in which social and gender roles can interfere with the success of the artistic endeavour. Engaged to be married, Rachel and Hewet recognise the essential likeness of their different mediums - "What I want to do in writing novels is very much

what you want to do when you play the piano, I expect," as Hewet says - but find that there is a conflict between their respective artistic impulses (252). While Rachel, "the best musician in South America" plays "up and up the steep spiral of a very late Beethoven sonata [. . .] like a person ascending a ruined staircase, energetically at first, then more laboriously advancing her feet with effort until she could go no higher [. . .]" Hewet cannot write, and his response reveals the essential incompatibility of a conventionally structured and gendered relationship and genuine artistic endeavour: "I've no objection," Hewet says, "to nice simple tunes - indeed, I find them very helpful to my literary composition, but that kind of thing is merely like an unfortunate old dog going round on its hind legs in the rain" (340). As Ann Ronchetti has argued, "Woolf's earliest novels seem to suggest that heterosexual involvement takes a high toll on aspiring artists of both sexes" (13). To this I would add that homosexual involvement is never clearly presented as an option in Woolf's first novels - although there are certainly critics who would disagree with me here - and that the main conflict or incompatibility lies between the alternate impulses towards an artistic heroism and the need for human relationship.

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The *Voyage Out* was published in 1915, with the bulk of the composition and revision completed by 1913 (DeSalvo 104 - 106). By 1927, when Woolf published *To the Lighthouse*, her vision of the artist hero had shifted considerably. While the incompatibility of artistic and social life remains a theme, and indeed a richly developed one, the novel is also interested in the dual nature of artistic heroism, its daring bravery and its essential futility. Both of these ideas are developed largely through the figure of Lily Briscoe, an amateur painter, but they also rely on a series of contrasts which the narrative gradually develops between Lily the amateur woman painter and Mr Ramsay, the successful male philosopher. By taking Mr Ramsay as an example

here, I am implicitly endorsing a broad and expansive view of 'art' that would include many if not all acts of human intellectual endeavour, but this is a view that seems clearly supported by Woolf's novels, in which non-traditional creative activities such as mathematics or philosophy are placed alongside more usual types of art such as painting and writing.

In many ways Lily makes a peculiar artist hero: as Mrs Ramsay thinks, "one could not take her painting very seriously" (267). Lily herself agrees with this assessment of her work - she realises that "it would be hung in the attics [. . .]; it would be rolled up and flung under a sofa" (372). Like Rachel, Lily embodies a conflict between the artistic life and the social life of marriage and procreation - she remains single in spite of Mrs Ramsay's attempts to marry her off, and dedicates herself to her art, and this in the face of the world's insistence, as voiced by the egregious Charles Tansley, that women "can't paint, can't write" (314). Mr Ramsay is also an odd character to embody the values of artistic heroism: he is petulant, prone to bullying his wife and children, curmudgeonly and eccentric. He "would," for instance, "talk by the hour about his boots," surely not a topic generally associated with heroic discourse (322).

On the other hand, both of these figures are strongly associated throughout *To the Lighthouse* with a wide range of heroic imagery. The scenes in which Lily is actively engaged in painting supply a great deal of the drama of the novel, and her artistic activity is described in terms of adventure and heroism. Her attempt to paint in what is recognisably a post-impressionist, rather than the more socially acceptable and fashionable impressionist idiom, is a struggle "against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: 'But this is what I see; this is what I see,' and so to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck

from her” (269). The act of painting, even as a neglected amateur, is or at least can be heroic, in spite of the fate that awaits the product of this heroism. Heroism is, it seems, the attempt, not the product. For Mr Ramsay, on the other hand, the relationship between heroic artistic production and posterity is considerably more fraught, and this is another place where gender difference seems to come into play.

For Mr Ramsay, the great question concerns the persistence of artistic production - here, as I have indicated, loosely defined to include intellectual endeavour in general: “And [. . .] fame lasts how long?” Mr Ramsay asks. “It is permissible even for a dying hero to think before he dies how men will speak of him hereafter. His fame lasts perhaps two thousand years. And what are two thousand years? [. . .] The very stone one kicks with one's boot will outlast Shakespeare” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 279). This is a primary difference then between Lily Briscoe and Mr Ramsay; the former embraces, or at least accepts without complaint the inevitable prospect of neglect, for she has known little else throughout her life, while for Mr Ramsay the question of how he will be remembered is of vital importance.

This difference is textually framed within a series of images of heroism that both assert the heroic nature of artistic production and ironically counter-point it with the bombastic self-importance of what is here gendered as male self-aggrandisement. Mr Ramsay is shown struggling to think, to surpass his earlier philosophical achievements in a process of thinking, and this is represented as a performance on a keyboard divided into the 26 letters of the alphabet. Mr Ramsay can reach Q, and as “very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q” this is not an achievement to be despised (278). While Mr Ramsay remains stuck at Q, unable to reach R, the effort he makes is characterised in unabashedly heroic terms. He has, for instance “qualities that would have saved a ship's company exposed on a broiling sea with six biscuits and a flask of



water[. . .]” (278). This is only one of a series of comparisons which unite intellectual endeavour to the traditional Victorian notion of the imperial explorer hero. He is also likened to a member of “a desolate expedition across the icy solitudes of the Polar region” and “a leader who, now that the snow has begun to fall and the mountain top is covered in mist, knows that he must lay himself down and die before morning comes” (278 - 279). This is of course on one level utterly absurd and mere self-dramatisation, apiece with much of Mr Ramsay’s behaviour throughout the novel. But the heroic impulse, the drive of the narrative towards a recognition of the heroism of the artistic act is also, I would argue, real if here radically undercut by the narrative’s satiric approach. A brief glance at Lily’s achievement as a painter will make this clearer.

Lily’s work is as we have seen destined to be forgotten, and part of her heroism lies in her quiet acceptance of this fate, a resignation which is strongly contrasted to Mr Ramsay’s futile yearning for an unachievable immortality. Yet Lily is as heroic in the practice of her work as Mr Ramsay is in the self-image he derives from his:

One line placed on the canvas committed her to innumerable risks, to frequent and irrevocable decisions. All that in idea seemed simple became in practice immediately complex; as the waves shape themselves symmetrically from the cliff top, but to the swimmer among them are divided by steep gulfs, and foaming crests. Still the risk must be run; the mark made. (358)

The act itself of painting, and by implication artistic production in general - as she paints Lily murmurs to herself “like a work of art,” as if to make the broader applicability of her heroic artistry apparent - is firstly one of active process rather than finished product, and secondly one of enormous and persistent danger (360). It might also be noted that the essential artistically heroic virtue is one of ordering, or bringing pattern to that which is apparently without form.

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As I have tried to indicate earlier in this paper, this vision of the artist hero is hardly unique to Virginia Woolf. Rather, it is part of the broader modernist movement which relocated the heroic virtues - and Mr Ramsay's list of the heroic qualities might do as well as any other here, including "endurance and justice, foresight, devotion, skill" - from the man of action to the man of creation (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 278). In Woolf, this movement is complicated both by a recognition of the difficulty in reconciling the figure of the hero (be it the man of action or the man of creation) with the figure of the mother, wife, or lover, and by an awareness of the inherent fatuousness of the typically male heroic posture, be it associated with a warrior figure or a creative one.

Yet it is important when reading Woolf not to move too far towards an ironic or satirical reading, for the impulse towards heroism presented in her novels is extremely powerful, and to a large extent resists, and thus achieves an equilibrium with, their equally apparent debunking impulses. I will end my paper with the ending of *To the Lighthouse*, and the ending of Lily Briscoe's artistically heroic endeavour: "With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 391). All of the poignancy of Woolf's balanced vision of the artist hero lies in this famous passage. The intensity of artistic insight into the nature of the world, the pattern that lies behind the seeming randomness of life and death, is the heroic achievement, but it is at once momentary, and, grammatically, a fiction: Lily Briscoe does not see it clear, but is able to act as if she saw it clear - and that clarity of vision is the saving grace of artistic heroism.

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