

tions as they learn of the worlds of Fifth Avenue, *Bazaar*, Liszt, *Anne of Green Gables*, and Ibsen from her. Kathleen is enamoured of herself and the resounding circle of her sisters' praises attests to her perfection heralded and directed by her father's education of his "buddy." Prevented from developing friends outside her home, viewed as a snob by her classmates, and kept physically and emotionally distant from everyone but her family, Kathleen's ability to make friends and become involved in healthy relationships is vastly hindered by her upbringing: she has no friends. A photograph snapped at this time catches the family frankly: the fond high jinks between father and daughter; the mother encased and sequestered behind a window in the kitchen, gesticulating but ignored. Materia, here, of course, is the outsider, the shadow receding behind her girls, but observing, like the reader, the possible joys of a parental-child relationship—without the presence of a man.

The intrusion of war is a blessing for Materia. James enlists in the 94th Victorian Regiment and so, she is freed from his presence and his harsh judgements of her lack of English, of her loose clothes, of her foreign mannerisms: "With James gone, she comes to life." Materia even prays that he'll be killed quickly and painlessly in Flanders. Unfortunately, James escapes all of his harrowing exploits in the war, unscathed. His postcards home are regular, repetitive, shorn of any sentiment towards his wife,

Dear Missus, All is well. Do not worry. Love to the girls.

James.

When almost strangled by a Frenchman near Vimy for his boots, James has an epiphany: "We will win because we have more and better boots, boots determine history." This idea like a precious amulet is the *idée-fixe* that envelops James. He understands that warm, dry feet are the key to making money that will allow Kathleen to study at the conserva-

tory. His obsession with footwear draws the notice of his commanders who interpret his fetish of boot polishing as a sign of "shell shock." He is honourably discharged and sent home from Passchendaele.

James's readmittance to the family again disrupts the natural order of the little girls and their mother in their all-female world, and trouble again brews. Hardened and deadened by his war experiences, James brutally re-establishes his control of his family and his business life, growing rich in his production of boots.

James persists in promoting Kathleen's career, even sending her off to New York in the care of an aged relative, Giles, whom James believes will see to Kathleen's proper deportment. She ventures into a new world, *resolving never to be sensible again*. She gains the respect of her irascible music maestro and makes friends with her moody accompanist. "First she fell in love with New York. Then she fell in love with a New Yorker." Away from her family and her father, Kathleen exults in the promise of a life of her own.

However, after a mysterious letter arrives from New York, hinting at Kathleen's debauchery, James snatches her back home where she wastes away in her room. More births and deaths, as terrified sisters observe uncomprehending the sudden starts and stops in their family. Materia vanishes: all that remains of her is the cedar chest, symbolic of a happier time and life, furtively visited, but never sustained.

As the story continues, Frances' adventures reveal a very troubled, almost demonic girl headed for disaster. Her colourful, frightening lies, her wild nocturnal activities and self-abuse are all intended to strike back at her father as well as punish herself. Gentle, intelligent Mercedes, who once believed she could go away to school, marry, and begin a life of promise, decays into a spinster school teacher, unsmiling, unloved, cold, and resolute. The plan she concocts against Frances is so hurtful that one is surprised that such wickedness could

fester so long behind a martyred countenance. Lily, much younger, is a humanized lame Kathleen who attempts to untangle the threads of her family's tale with the aid of Kathleen's diary. Lily discerns that she must journey far from the Pipers to dislodge the truth and understand the reason for the cloying, dark environment that has engulfed and destroyed her sisters.

Like *Alice in Wonderland*, Lily discovers an upside down world of oversized leering, dismantled, confusing occupants as the story becomes stranger and stranger. And like *Alice*, Lily emerges from her dark and frightening rabbit hole with an answer to her questing. The moral of Ann-Marie MacDonald's twisted tale of a family's perversion seems clear: James Piper, a man, the father, is the cause of the evil. Through nearly 600 pages, the stories of the Pipers have unfolded, surprised, shocked, intrigued, and startled the reader. What begins as a fairy tale transforms into a message where the villain is no longer the aged crone, bent on wicked revenge and curses for the family's redemption, but her deadly counterpart—the male.

## VIRGINIA WOOLF

Hermione Lee. London: Chatto and Windus, 1996.

*by Deborah Heller*

"She would never say of anyone in the world now that they were this or were that," muses Virginia Woolf's fictional heroine, Mrs. Dalloway. In her "biography" of Orlando, Woolf writes of her subject's "great variety of selves." And when Woolf undertook to write an account of her own life, she began by reflecting on the various reasons for the failure of most memoir writers, "it is so difficult to describe any human being. So they say: 'This is

what happened'; but they do not say what the person was like to whom it happened."

Virginia Woolf, novelist, essayist, biographer and memoir writer, prolific letter writer and diarist, gave a lot of thought to the difficulties of capturing in language human "character" and life, whether one's own or another's, real or fictional. Ever sensitive to "the slipperiness of the soul," Woolf is often first thought of for her radically innovative representations of psychological interiority. But she was also intent on the importance of situating the human subject in his/her social, historical context. In "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf writes of the "invisible presences" by which "the subject of this memoir" is tugged this way and that every day of his life"—meaning by these, "the immense forces society brings to play upon each of us, how that society changes from decade to decade; and also from class to class; well, if we cannot analyse these invisible presences ... how futile life-writing becomes."

The demands of fiction, memoir, and biography are alike here. Taking up Woolf's challenge in a vibrant new biography, Hermione Lee deserves our admiration for her rich rendering of both Woolf and her world, of (in Woolf's own imagery) both fish and stream. Not only is Lee adept at presenting Woolf's conflicting, often contradictory "selves" without trying to impose on them a tidying, falsifying unity. (Woolf herself had advised that the biographer "must be prepared to admit contradictory versions of the same face.") Lee is also remarkably successful in bringing to life the complex and varied worlds in which Woolf moved—the constricting, Victorian atmosphere of her childhood home, the much be-written early twentieth-century Bloomsbury circle, and the rapidly changing England of the periods before and after World War I, up through the outbreak of World War II and Woolf's suicide in 1941.

Lee writes in the wake of an ever-increasing interest in Woolf. The

author of a critical study of Woolf's novels, and the on-camera host of a British video documentary on her for the series, *The Modern World: Ten Great Writers*, Lee seems to have absorbed everything written about Woolf—intimate memoirs, biographies, speculative psychoanalytic studies, along with the thousands of pages of Woolf's own writings, on which she frequently draws. The result is a portrait of this great twentieth-century feminist and modernist that is truly worthy of its subject.

The public terms of debate on Woolf's life were set by her nephew and first biographer, Quentin Bell, whose two-volume study, composed with the encouragement and cooperation of Woolf's husband, Leonard, still provides the authoritative foundation on which all subsequent biographies must to some extent build. Yet, as Woolf so well knew, there are different ways to read the same life. In Woolf's case, some old chestnuts have been rehashed many times: her childhood sexual abuse by her half-broth-

ers, her madness, her sexual nature, her relation to Leonard. Lee approaches all these questions in a spirit of open critical inquiry. After reviewing the evidence she remains undecided about the nature and extent of the sexual abuse undergone by Woolf. On her madness, Lee presses beyond the accepted family view of "dotty aunt Virginia," acknowledges recent psychoanalytic studies, but ultimately refuses any conclusive labels, making the interesting observation that, despite Leonard's apparently detailed accounts, it is often impossible to distinguish Woolf's original symptoms from reactions to medications that were given (or withdrawn from) her; nor did Woolf (except in fiction) or anyone close to her ever try to present her madness from the inside. Lee's summation that "Virginia Woolf was a sane woman who had an illness" may not exactly tell us anything new, but it does show something important about the biographer's attitude toward her subject.

On Virginia's marriage to Leonard,



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Lee has much to say, yet refrains from definitive judgments. All agree that Leonard played a caretaking, controlling role toward Virginia, monitoring and limiting her activities, though the question of whether—or to what extent—this was beneficial or harmful remains open. Lee forestalls the reader's impulse to view Leonard too critically by including of the story of T. S. Eliot's unstable wife, Vivien, who sought—in vain—a possible ally in Woolf, “before she disappeared into life-long incarceration—the very fate which Leonard had protected Virginia from in 1913.” On the much mentioned matter of their sex life, Bell's early presentation of Leonard's incontestably “passionate nature” and Virginia's sexual “congenital inhibition” has by now undergone significant challenges—for example, from Claire Tomalin, who writes instead of “Leonard's failure to arouse her sexual nature, followed by his complete denial of it, and his refusal to let her have children,” pointing to Leonard's “personal anxieties and repugnances” toward women as revealed in his letters to Lytton Strachey. Lee also calls attention to the “violent expressions of sexual disgust” in Leonard's early fiction. Yet at the same time, and despite Lee's recognition of “Virginia Woolf's sexual squeamishness,” her intense feelings for other women, and what appears in conventional terms as the non-sexual nature of the Woolf marriage, Lee repeatedly emphasizes her subject's “powerful, intense sensuality ... erotic susceptibility to people and landscape, language and atmosphere ... [her] highly charged physical life;” and Lee argues convincingly for “evidence of an erotic secret life” between Virginia and Leonard, carried on with “pet names ... animal games ... cuddling and nuzzling and kisses.”

The Virginia Woolf who emerges from these pages is complex and contradictory, courageous, timid, sensuous, snobbish, iconoclastic, susceptible to the prejudices of her class and culture, cruel, kind, and humane. Lee has painted a fascinating, vari-

egated canvas, bringing us somewhat closer to the remarkable woman who wrote those wonderful books. And her copious citations from Woolf's own writings will encourage the reader to return to these in the light of new insights and connections.

## ECLATS DE SEL

Sylvie Germain. Paris: Gallimard, 1996.

by *Siobhan McIlvanney*

Sylvie Germain's latest novel, *Eclats de sel*, presents as its main theme the requisite role of the past—whether in its fantastical embodiment of myth and legend, or more personal form of an individual's history—in constructing the present. Indeed, Germain's narrative perceives the past as always present, in that it is both ubiquitous and constitutes part of our present existence: “Chaque instant du passé demeure dans la chair du présent, obscur et fécond sédiment, infime caisson de lumière indéfiniment refondu et luisant en secret tout au fond de l'oubli.” *Eclats de sel* represents the significance of this symbiosis between past and present in the return of the male protagonist, Ludvík M., to his hometown of Prague, after eleven years abroad and a failed love affair. The death of a close friend and mentor during that return leads Ludvík to further ruminations on the relationship between his past and present selves. Germain's novel thus inverts the traditional narrative of the *Bildungsroman* in that the protagonist's development hinges on a return to the historically familiar, to his geographical and psychological origins—“il s'ensuivit un exil à rebours”—and not a voyage of discovery into the unknown. As the narrative progresses, the learning process of the protagonist stems from his recognition that myth and legend, rather than existing in an hermetically sealed magical past, are the stuff of everyday life and con-

tinue to inform and influence us.

This imbrication of myth and reality pervades the work. Numerous “détails concrets” enhance the geographical accuracy of Germain's portrayal of Prague, a city in which she spent seven years, and which provides the backdrop for her two previous novels. Within this realist setting, however, several “unreal” exchanges occur, and are thus “normalized.” Beneath the grey facade of Prague—“l'heure ne suintait que laideur et tristesse et ne portait aucune promesse d'éclaircie”—mythical encounters take place. Ludvík engages in meaningful exchanges with a number of strangers whose most striking feature is their sheer ordinariness: their professions range from bank clerk to cleaning-woman. These strangers are spectres of his past, segments of his conscience, who, by relating experiences and emotions identical to his own, gradually induce a volte-face in Ludvík's attitude towards that past. (The work is divided into three sections: *Preface*, in which Ludvík refuses to face up to his past, *Face à faces*, in which he confronts his previous self, and the resolution of the narrative, *Volte-face*, in which he fully accepts and integrates his past existence into his present). These exchanges also provide the work with its title in that each comprises a reference to the different functions of salt, whether corrosive or purifying. Like salt, these mythical conversations penetrate Ludvík's protective shell and force him to confront reality, signalling, in a manner reminiscent of Breton, the false dichotomization of the two “consciousnesses” of myth and reality: “Il ne tentait pas de dépister la source de ce flux d'irréalité qui se mêlait au cours pourtant si banal de sa vie; d'ailleurs il n'aurait su dire s'il agissait d'une crue d'irréalité, ou bien de surréalité, ou encore de para-réalité ou même d'infraréalité.”

Germain's novel is written in the evocative, lyrical style for which she is famous, yet, in what can be considered a further combination of myth and reality, it also incorporates amusing passages of a more informal na-