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27. Bad Apple (1994)

Joan Scanlon and Julia Swindells

Virago, Britain's most publicly successful women's publishing house, was twenty years old last year—an anniversary it marked with a star-studded celebration, and by publishing the *Virago Keepsake*. On the cover of this book, which they were giving away, was a tableau of women in glittering frocks: one held a large surreal apple (intact) — the Virago logo without the teeth marks.

In the year of Virago's 15th anniversary it had been reported that whatever the beleaguered state of feminism, women's publishing houses, then numbering 11 in Britain and Eire, were alive and growing. Last year, the Women's Research and Resources Centre listed 21 women's publishing houses. An article in the *Times Educational Supplement* commented on the rise of feminist publishing against the backdrop of an industry that was generally in dire straits. But amid all the triumphalism and the glittering birthday parties, what exactly are feminists meant to be celebrating?

It is easy to overlook just how politically radical the feminist presses were in their initial project, and how unpopular they promised to be in the world of mainstream publishing. As Ursula Owen, arguably the most radical of Virago's founding directors, put it: 'one forgets how disturbing and unmarketable feminism was in the early 1970s'.¹ Similarly, The Women's Press, celebrating its tenth birthday, recalled the sniggers which greeted its debut. That political radicalism, that capacity to trouble the mainstream publishers and the public, was captured in the term 'virago' ('a bold, impudent or shrewish woman, an amazon or female warrior') and in the controversial logo of The Women's Press, an iron steaming ahead.

There is no doubt that in the early days the literary establishment were needed. When Virago published Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* in 1989, Anthony Burgess prefaced his unqualified appreciation of the novel with a characteristically vitriolic attack on the publishers:

By no stretch of usage can Virago be made not to signify a shrew, a scold, an ill-tempered woman, unless we go back to the etymology — a man-like maiden (cognate with virile) — and the antique meaning — amazon, female warrior — that is close to it. It is an unlovely and aggressive name, even for a militant

feminist organisation, and it presides awkwardly over the reissue of a great *roman fleuve* which is too important to be associated with chauvinist sows.

But even in 1978, Fay Weldon was saying in the *Times Literary Supplement* that Virago had changed the connotations of the word 'virago', and that it now conjured up the image of 'an industrious and intelligent lady'. Ursula Owen quoted this on Virago's 15th birthday as a testimony to the press's capacity to shift perspectives on women's writing. But it is possible to see it in a less celebratory light. What had been potentially disturbing and provocative — 'an impudent and shrewish woman' — has been accommodated to the idea of 'an industrious and intelligent lady'. What had been undeniably connected to a movement, a group, a group-consciousness of women, is moved to the individual writer, 'industrious and intelligent', and 'a lady' at that.

Marketing and radicalism

Carmen Callil, one of the founders of Virago, told *The Bookseller* in 1986 that

Virago was founded with two main aims. One was ideological, the other a marketing belief. The idea for a feminist house grew out of the feminist movement which was reborn in this country at the end of the '60s. Virago was set up to publish books which were part of that movement, but its marketing aim was quite specific: we aimed to reach a general audience of women and men who had not heard of, or who disliked and even detested, the idea of feminism.

But marketing is itself an ideological process, one whose power we should not underestimate. What happens to feminism as a consequence of being marketed to people who dislike or even detest it? Can we be sure that in that process feminism is not being neutralised, deprived of its ability to issue a challenge or to provoke detestation in some sectors of the community?

This is a far cry from the politics of the press as articulated by Ursula Owen, who left Virago in December 1990. Not only did she insist that the reprint list was an important acknowledgement that feminism existed before 1969, she was also clear that feminist publishing was inextricably linked to the ongoing need for feminism as a political movement:

What I'd like is a world where you don't need women's publishing companies or women's pages, but I don't see it in my lifetime or my daughter's lifetime or

my grandchildren's lifetime. We are playing a small part in what is a very long and difficult process.

The meaning of greatness

In both Virago's publicity material and interviews with its directors, a recurring theme is the need to succeed in the battle for inclusion in school and university curricula—which implies a commitment to the literary values which determine what is worthy of being studied as 'great literature'. In fact, the press has always had that commitment. But nowhere is it apparent what it means by 'great literature'. Is gauging this a matter of editorial intuition and sound literary taste, as the critical establishment would have us believe? Or is 'great literature' also subject to the scrutiny which feminism has focused on other forms of cultural production?

The impression one gets from the collective voice of Virago's directors is that the literary establishment's aesthetic criteria remain the touchstone for editorial judgements, but precedence is sometimes given to other, political criteria. Yet the following remarks made by Ursula Owen suggest a certain unclarity, or defensiveness, on this point:

We also wanted to show what women have been writing about in novels over a long period, whether they are considered in 'the great tradition' or not. Some of our Virago Modern Classics are great novels: Christina Stead, Willa Cather, and Edith Wharton are great novelists. Some of them are not...

Even as she explains that Virago's interest in women's writing goes beyond 'the great tradition' as taught in British universities, she proceeds, in the same breath, to recycle that tradition's judgements.

Whereas what constitutes 'good writing' seems to be undisputed (and timeless) common ground, what is taken to constitute politically important writing is continually shifting. Another prominent theme in recent statements by Virago's spokeswomen is the idea that the central strand in feminist thinking has shifted away from the socialist feminism which dominated the 1970s towards a preoccupation with race in the present. It seems then that Virago's political judgments are based on different criteria from its literary ones, reflecting in-house perceptions of what is central to feminism at a particular moment, be that historical accounts of suffragists in the mills and factories of northern England, theoretical works on psychoanalysis and postmodernism, or current concerns with the politics of race.

All this may help to explain why Virago has been so strongly identified with its reprint list (though it did not begin as a reprint publisher: the first of its 'Modern Classics', Antonia White's *Frost in May*, did not appear until 1978, five years after the press was launched). At a time when feminism was 'disturbing and unmarketable', the political project of discovering and reprinting neglected works by women meshed seamlessly with a more mainstream commitment to publishing works of 'literary merit'. Even if, like Anthony Burgess, it deplored their appropriation by and for feminism, the literary establishment had to acknowledge Virago's role in publishing works that it could not help but recognise as literature.

Moving into the mainstream

But if the historical project of Virago's Modern Classics managed to satisfy both feminists and the literary establishment, its approach to contemporary women's writing has made its distancing from feminism more apparent. Virago's stress on 'women's lives' and embattled positions had suggested a strong commitment to taking risks with new projects. However, the creation of an identity for the press's original fiction, as distinct from its reprinted titles, was justified by marketing director Lennie Goodings in terms of the need to compete with mainstream publishers: 'we're aiming at the Black Swan, Picador, Faber department. We're saying "trust our editorial judgement"'. Similarly, Virago's non-fiction list has become difficult to distinguish from the women's (or gender) studies lists of mainstream academic publishers like Routledge or Blackwell.

Virago's strategy was, in the words of managing director Harriet Spicer, to be 'specialist and mainstream, and to widen the definition of what is perceived to be mainstream'. They can certainly be said to have succeeded in being mainstream. The question is, though, what do they mean now by 'specialist'? When they speak of 'brand loyalty', whose loyalty do they have in mind?

Virago marked its 15th birthday celebrations with a publication called *Writing Lives*, consisting of recorded conversations between women writers. Its initial manifesto had highlighted a concern with 'women's lives': the move from 'women's lives' to 'writing lives' is indicative of a more general (and disturbingly self-referential) move into writing about writing and about writers. The publicity for *Writing Lives* asks what Maya Angelou, Molly Keane, Rosamond Lehmann, Rebecca West, Eudora Welty, Paule Marshall, Mary Lavin, Rosa Guy and Grace Paley have in common, and answers 'writing lives' — not feminism, not a relationship to the women's movement, not politics, but writing. Those interested in the lives of women writers, in writing, in 'the literary', may have been pleased. But some of us were not.

What's a feminist book?

The presses have, from time to time, been called upon to address the question of what a 'feminist' book is. Carole Spedding, who organised the first Feminist Book Fortnight in 1984, proposed that 'it's a book on any subject written by a woman which is informed by a critical analysis of her position in society as a woman', and this seems a fairly uncontentious place from which to start defining the remit for feminist publishing. We are rightly under pressure to continue producing such definitions, to clarify the purpose of the feminist presses and their role in the struggle for women's liberation. The phrase 'informed by a critical analysis of her position in society as a woman' highlights the need to place the woman writer in her political context.

Back in 1988, Virago had an opportunity to debate these issues publicly, occasioned by 'the case of the upstart vicar and the feminist publishing house', as Ros Coward dubbed it:

For the literary establishment, the revelation that Rahila Khan's *Down the Road, Worlds Away* was in fact written by the Rev. Toby Forward was a glorious humiliation of political publishing... As far as the popular press was concerned, it was about the punishment of a bunch of intolerant harridans. Even a vicar who supported CND, the Labour Party, and took an active interest in multi-cultural education (usually a prime target to be hounded himself) was to be congratulated for pulling a fast one on the harpies.

Toby came out as a white middle-class vicar three weeks after the book was published, and Virago immediately withdrew it from sale. The simple fact that their policy was 'to publish the stories and thoughts of women who haven't had a voice in literature before', should have been firm enough ground from which to defend this decision. However, Virago was vulnerable on two grounds. First, they had no clear policy of *not* publishing work by men. Prior to publishing the vicar, they had already published (posthumously) H.G. Wells's *Ann Veronica*, George Gissing's *The Odd Women* and George Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways*. Nor has the vicar deterred them from publishing men who are not dead (yet): more recently, Sean French has edited two books on fatherhood, Richard Dalby has edited two books of ghost stories, and John Forrester has co-authored *Freud's Women* with Lisa Appignanesi.

Second, they were too easily drawn into the liberal snakepit of arguments about great art, imaginative experience and 'authentic' writing. They were thus caught in

the trap of having to uphold their literary judgement of the book, consistent with their commitment to publishing quality writing, while at the same time denouncing it in moral terms as a 'cruel hoax'. Traditional judgements of literary merit usually involve a recognition that a writer has succeeded in imaginatively representing experiences different from their own. Because Virago had adopted these aesthetic criteria, they were unable to answer the charge levelled at them by the literary establishment that they were being inconsistent when they disputed the ability or the right of a white male vicar to represent the lives of women in the Asian community.

Ros Coward comments that 'Many of the Asian writers to whom I spoke... felt that in some extremely complex ways the vicar's deception had been effective because of flaws and weaknesses in attitudes prevalent amongst publishers towards writers from ethnic minorities'. Yet Virago's main charge against him seemed to be merely that of 'deception', accompanied by much soul-searching about whether or not they were in part responsible for not detecting the fraud at an earlier stage. Ros Coward devotes some space to the question of whether the writing did contain clues to its author's race and gender. But actually Toby's imposture was a classic example of the ways in which white middle-class men, the guardians of the literary establishment, can exploit others' experiences with impunity. Of course a man who is part of the dominant culture has the political and cultural tools to appropriate the voices of oppressed groups. The case highlighted Virago's failure to preserve a space for 'the real woman' and the particular conditions of powerlessness from which she demands to speak. As women in the Asian community saw, Virago had no means of recognising 'the real thing'.

Virago appears to have gone through the 1980s clinging onto the fallacious belief that radicalism persists independent of context; that the project of representing women's ideas and women's lives remains politicized whatever the surrounding political climate. But writing cannot be separated from its conditions of production and reception. In the 1990s it is necessary for women's presses to reconnect with their political context, and to distinguish what they are doing from everyman's 'women's list'. If they are to remain viable as women's presses, then now more than ever, they need to differentiate their project from that of the mainstream — not in terms of content or quality but in terms of a materialist feminist politics of publishing. Only when they have dealt with the political paradox — women are selling well, but the women's movement has its back to the wall — only then will the women's presses have something to celebrate.

Note

1. Quotations from Virago directors are taken from a range of sources, including interviews, speeches, lectures and reports in the trade press.

References

Coward, Ros (1988), 'Looking for the real thing', *New Statesman*, 1 April.