

Georgia State University

ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

---

English Theses

Department of English

---

4-17-2009

## A Critic in Her Own Right: Taking Virginia Woolf's Literary Criticism Seriously

Yvonne Nicole Richter

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english\\_theses](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english_theses)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Richter, Yvonne Nicole, "A Critic in Her Own Right: Taking Virginia Woolf's Literary Criticism Seriously." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2009.  
[https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english\\_theses/56](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english_theses/56)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gsu.edu).

A CRITIC IN HER OWN RIGHT:  
TAKING VIRGINIA WOOLF'S LITERARY CRITICISM SERIOUSLY

by

YVONNE NICOLE RICHTER

Under the Direction of Randy Malamud

ABSTRACT

Considered mostly ancillary to her fiction, Virginia Woolf's prolific career in literary criticism has rarely been studied in its entirety and in its own right. This study situates her in the common critical practices of her day and crystallizes basic tenets and a critical theory of sorts from her critical journalism published 1904–1928: the author argues that Woolf does not advocate a policing role for the critic, but rather that critics foster art in collaboration with readers and writers. Finally, this work discusses Woolf's appeal to writers to invest all their energy in improving their skills in character portrayal to adequately depict all classes and genders in order to invent a new kind of psychological fiction.

INDEX WORDS: Virginia Woolf, Essay, Journalism, Literary criticism, Reviewing, Fiction, Women writers

A CRITIC IN HER OWN RIGHT:  
TAKING VIRGINIA WOOLF'S LITERARY CRITICISM SERIOUSLY

by

YVONNE NICOLE RICHTER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2009

Copyright by  
Yvonne Nicole Richter  
2009

A CRITIC IN HER OWN RIGHT:  
TAKING VIRGINIA WOOLF'S LITERARY CRITICISM SERIOUSLY

by

YVONNE NICOLE RICHTER

Committee Chair: Randy Malamud

Committee: Lee Anne Richardson  
Paul Schmidt

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
Georgia State University  
May 2009

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to all those teachers who have pushed me and led me: Jerry Berry, the first who really got me excited about literature; Heiko Hinnarx, who awakened an enthusiasm for history in me that I did not know I had; Christian Brockmeyer, who trained my abstract thinking skills; Konrad Pieper, who showed me the joy of being widely learned; William Brightman, the man who made me want to be a professor; Randy Malamud, a constant and inspiring mentor throughout the last five years; Lee Anne Richardson, who worked my intellectual muscles in all new ways; and Paul Schmidt, who always cheered and challenged.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Randy Malamud's mentorship prepared me for my graduate work when I was an international student with many obstacles and challenges. He led me explore Virginia Woolf so independently, but always willing to share his insight, that I discovered a penchant for research. His encouragement, advice, and his belief in my abilities certainly fostered my own ambitions. His clear and honest guidance on my writing have helped me grow tremendously. Dr. Lee Anne Richardson and Dr. Paul Schmidt have each challenged me: both led me to reexamine my routines and learn to view my own work critically. Through all three I have acquired the skills necessary for focused and purposeful research and writing.

The kindness of Woolf scholars in general has been pleasantly surprising and extraordinarily motivating. To a graduate student entering such a specialized group of scholars, the warm welcome and genuine interest at conferences and in personal communications made overwhelming steps in building a professional career less daunting. Thank you to the International Virginia Woolf Society.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                                                                         |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....                                                                  | v  |
| 1. INTRODUCTION.....                                                                    | 1  |
| 2. OVERVIEW OF WOOLF’S CRITICAL WORK.....                                               | 5  |
| Critical and Textual History.....                                                       | 5  |
| Apprenticeship to Professionalization .....                                             | 8  |
| Basic Tenets and Characteristics.....                                                   | 14 |
| 3. WOOLF’S COMMENTARY ON CONTEMPORARY REVIEWING PRACTICES<br>AND HER OWN PRACTICE ..... | 26 |
| Purpose and Criteria of Criticism .....                                                 | 26 |
| Style—Accusations of Impressionism Addressed .....                                      | 35 |
| Role of the Critic—Foster with Sympathy or Cleanse with Harshness? .....                | 47 |
| 4. WOOLF ON FICTION .....                                                               | 60 |
| Innovation .....                                                                        | 60 |
| Character Portrayal.....                                                                | 65 |
| 5. CONCLUSION .....                                                                     | 78 |
| ENDNOTES .....                                                                          | 80 |
| WORKS CITED .....                                                                       | 84 |



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf's critical writings are witty, entertaining, deliciously sarcastic, and yet written in the spirit of an artistic mentor and a reader who questions herself as much as she questions others. Her essays are as complex and conflicted as her relationship with the business of reviewing. She dreaded each morning spent reviewing, procrastinated, cursed the whole business, and was at the same time deeply concerned about the reception of her critical work, blossomed with praise, and in the end could simply not resist the pull of criticism. Her philosophy could not be summarized on a small exam cheat sheet. Parts seem paradoxical: she demanded verdicts and condemned verdicts. She delighted in unified, consistent, beautiful art and thought at the same time that all these worries over aesthetic and formal aspects must be suspended until the modern novelist dares to travel the perilous psyche of the modern mind. However, in all these paradoxes, she consistently defied the labeling practices she resented.

Studying the body of her critical work, which makes up six volumes combined, is a serious challenge after so many voices have stamped upon it half-baked opinions, careful denigrations, and various labels. Only recently has the study of Woolf's essays become more than a corollary to the study of her novels. At the Eighteenth Annual Virginia Woolf Conference (2008), a number of panels were specifically devoted to Woolf and the periodical press, Woolf and the essay-genre, Woolf and her criticism. Nothing like a survey of her critical work on its own terms exists so far because most scholars who do take Woolf's criticism seriously were until recently busy rescuing it from obscurity. In a Woolfian phrase Leila Brosnan calls critics to her aide to "break the surface of silence" on the other professional side of her career and on the often overlooked non-fictional works" (4). As Brosnan points out, Woolf's essays are mentioned in

criticism mostly “for their comments on the modernist aesthetic of her fiction and/or their contributions to her feminist agenda” (3).

I hope to establish Woolf as a critic in her own right, with a discernible project and cohesive argument for the task of writer and reader respectively. To counter the claims that Woolf merely practiced in her criticism or kept herself above water until her fiction could support her, I will show that Woolf’s journalistic work deserves more respect than these assumptions would suggest. Though journalism may not have been her first choice among occupations, the essays merit serious attention. In her critical work, Woolf hoped to “try to enter into the mind of the writer; to see each work of art by itself, and to judge how far each artist has succeeded in his aim. We do not think that our work is done when we have taken his measure by a standard roughly adapted to fit that particular class” (*Essays* II.123).<sup>1</sup> She intended to evaluate authors by their own designs, rather than by imposing foreign standards and conventions on them. Concluding an essay on George Moore, she writes, “But let us apply Mr Moore’s own test to Mr Moore’s own work” (IV.263). Likewise, I want to apply Mrs. Woolf’s test to Mrs. Woolf’s work and judge by what she meant to do—neither by a pseudo-scientific standard, nor by a feminist standard, nor by a political measure. I am cognizant of the risks of misinterpretation or missing a piece of evidence if I ascribe intentions retrospectively. But I will try to draw a complex picture that allows Woolf to contradict herself and to change her mind, to be a multi-faceted, and therefore interesting, critic with idiosyncrasies all her own.

To keep this project manageable, I have decided to focus mainly on her opinions on criticism and fiction and to bring in commentary on other genres only if it sheds light on my argument about those two. While I will present an overview of Woolf’s critical approach, her criteria, and her style gleaned from these four volumes together, any close analysis will focus on

the reviews and longer essays. The mostly paragraph-long notices of “lesser books” are too short to offer any opportunity for in-depth readings and are not what held her interest in journalism. A critical response to whether Woolf’s fictional vision is “right” or even just realistic, whether she criticized accurately and fairly, or what may have blinded her assessment of specific authors is beyond the scope of this work, though it is unquestionably a needed study. Andrew McNeillie’s edition of Woolf’s essays with its complete, fastidious annotations provides wonderful cross-references to letters and journals that are indispensable to evaluating the honesty of her voice and how her situation influenced her work. I base my work entirely on his volumes (except where I refer to articles published after 1928) also because they include all of Woolf’s essays chronologically—as opposed to the more common theme-based selections—and because the scholarly apparatus is comprehensive. Until just before the end of my research, only the first four volumes spanning those essays published between 1904 and 1928 were available; I have limited my study to that time period.

I will first provide an overview of the critical reception and textual history of Woolf’s essays. Then I will outline the trajectory of Woolf’s career as a reviewer and attempt to trace her motivations and conflicted attitudes toward journalism and reviewing. To close the introductory considerations, I will draw a rough sketch of some of Woolf’s basic tenets and situate her critical theory, as far as such a thing can be gathered from her writings, in regard to contemporary and subsequent critical practices. The following section will focus on Woolf’s direct commentary on criticism, found throughout her reviews of criticism and those essays that discuss her idea of reading, such as “How Should one Read a Book” and “On Rereading Novels.” This section will touch on what she understood to be the purpose of literary criticism; the criteria she considered appropriate for the judgment of fiction; which writing styles she admired. I will also consider

several criticisms brought against her: whether she was overly sympathetic with authors in her criticism and whether her criticism is (too) impressionistic. I further wish to demonstrate the purpose and reasoning behind her suggestive, evocative style. Finally, I will discuss Woolf's ideas on fiction. I will describe the new novel she hoped for and its qualities. As the innovation she anticipated centers around character development, I elaborate on her preference for a modern psychological scrutiny over the more traditional faithfulness to physical detail. I will discuss how matters of style and technique fit into Woolf's paradigms as rather secondary to character portrayal (though she is perfectly capable of assessing these aspects and well aware of the possibilities). Not only do her essays have artistic merit all their own and prove enjoyable even to a casual reader in their witty sarcasm, but they also challenge the academic system, her patriarchal society, and contemporary reviewing practices. They deserve an intensive study all their own.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF WOOLF'S CRITICAL WORK

### *Critical and Textual History*

Virginia Woolf published her early criticism anonymously, as was customary at the time, except for her pieces written for *Cornhill Magazine*'s "The Book on the Table" series, an early review for the *Speaker* on the Browning letters, quite a few articles for the *Athenaeum* (*Nation & Athenaeum*, *N&A*) and the *New Statesman*, and the more miscellaneous pieces, such as for *Vogue* and the American publications. Besides the fifty-two essays she compiled in the two volumes entitled *Common Reader* (first and second series), most of her criticism went unattributed in her lifetime. We know from Leonard Woolf that before her death she was planning to publish another book of collected essays (Editorial Note 7). In the decades following Woolf's death, B. J. Kirkpatrick came forth with four editions of updated bibliographies that have uncovered previously unattributed reviews and essays that had not been included in any collection. Leonard Woolf, who had compiled three selective volumes of essays he considered most publishable (*Death of the Moth*, 1942; *The Moment and Other Essays*, 1948; *Captain's Deathbed*, 1950), reacted to the first of Kirkpatrick's bibliographies and brought out *Granite and Rainbow* (1958). In the 1960s he added four volumes of *Collected Essays*. Mary Lyons compiled *Books and Portraits* (1977). Until recently, no one went beyond collecting her reviews and essays from their original scattered venues and republishing them largely unaltered. Most collections bring together essays selected according to a theme: familial and maternal ties in Woolf, Woolf as a woman writer, Woolf on modernism. The textual scholarship in these editions is limited to very occasional notes about changes Woolf herself made between publications and rare indications of cuts made before publication. Bowlby's collections, *A Woman's Essays* (1992)

and *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life* (1993), were again thematic. From 1986–1994, Andrew McNeillie went to work to republish the entirety of her essays and recover as much authorial intent as he could. He located the reviews in their respective publications and then matched them with reading notes, journal entries, and letters. His extensive footnotes provide the sources for Woolf's quotations, knowledge about major alterations from submission to publication, and sometimes additional commentary on her reading impressions, personal acquaintance with an author, and other interesting tidbits from her private writings. Extensive notes show disparities between the published pieces that served as his copy-text and other textual witnesses, such as the manuscript Reading Notes (McNeillie, 1986, xx). McNeillie's four volumes, soon to be completed with two more edited by Stuart Clarke, represent the most complete and most scholarly edition of Woolf's essays. Silver's *Virginia Woolf's Reading Notebooks* with sources, dates, and descriptions of the sixty-seven volumes of Woolf's reading notes (holograph reading notes and Monks House Papers), and her generous index save researchers some costly and time-intensive research travels.

Early responses to Woolf's criticism, such as Louis Kronenberger's in the 1950s, tended to view her essays as exercises that solidified in her mind what she would later do in fiction. Both Kronenberger and E. M. Forster make her seem, as a critic, too fond of the past and unable to adequately assess her contemporaries. Solomon Fishman criticizes Woolf for an alleged lack of method. This accusation has lost currency since Woolf's reading habits have become more widely known and her reading notes have become accessible through Brenda Silver's work. Among the early studies of Woolf's essays we discern an effort to crystallize her literary theory and categorize her critical approach. Diana Trilling and Mark Schorer characterize her as an impressionist critic for her poetic style of essay writing and her lack of conventional close

readings that are based on abundant textual evidence. One of the first to question these negative attitudes, Jeanne Dubino writes in her dissertation in 1992, “As a critic, Woolf was playful and innovative [...] rather than taking her playfulness and innovation seriously, critics use these qualities as a reason to exclude Woolf from consideration [from the canon]” (11). The effort to describe her theory frequently ends in patronizing accounts bordering on dismissal. The difficulty to categorize her instigates an assumption of failure on Woolf’s part.

Only one article in twelve years of the *Woolf Studies Annual* focuses on non-fiction other than *A Room of One’s Own* or *Three Guineas*. These two works take a more essential place in Woolf criticism for their significance in feminist studies.<sup>2</sup> Casting Woolf as a pioneer of feminism and placing her as one of the first in a specific women’s literature has diverted critical attention so much that few scholars have studied the entire corpus of her criticism all together, and those few studies that do exist predominantly de-historicize her—literary ancestry, teachers, influences, and models have been neglected and almost forgotten.<sup>3</sup> In the early 1980s a number of dissertations focused on her essays, but with the exception of Mark Goldman’s work, their surveys were not comprehensive. Many of these dissertations sought to pin her down with terms, schools, and influences and bring her to the attention of those with a special interest in their labels. Many approached the essays with a label ready in mind. Some read only her reviews of women authors with a feminist agenda to prove, some read to find social criticism. In a collection of essays sufficient to fill six volumes everyone found something they were looking for and made it fit their case.

In the last decade and a half, Woolf’s essays have been read for their own sake more and more. Beth Rigel Daugherty has published and presented variously on Woolf as a teacher and an autodidact, and on her apprenticeship under her father and editors. Jeanne Dubino examined

Woolf's engagement with the essay genre in her dissertation on the subject and has since collaborated with Beth Carole Rosenberg on an essay collection entitled *Virginia Woolf and the Essay*. Beth Carole Rosenberg has independently sought to carve a space for Woolf in literary history in terms of her heritage and influences aside from movements and labels. Anna Snaith has written on Woolf's essays as models for writing instruction. Elena Gualtieri examines Woolf's relations with European culture and essay traditions in her book *Virginia Woolf's Essays*. Leila Brosnan is also concerned with matters of genre in *Reading Virginia Woolf's Essays and Journalism*.

#### *Apprenticeship to Professionalization*

From 1904, a few months after Leslie Stephen's death, until 1928, Virginia Woolf<sup>4</sup> published roughly 300 notices, reviews, and critical essays (this does not include biographical essays) in a wide variety of magazines, newspapers, and journals. Woolf's first review, of William Dean Howells's *The Son of Royal Langbrith*, was published in the women's supplement to the *Guardian*, a clerical weekly, 14 December 1904, under editor Margaret Lyttleton. The *Guardian* would be a steady source of income until 1909. Shortly after this debut she placed a review in *Academy and Literature*, but she would only write four essays for them in her lifetime. In March 1905, she took up reviewing for the *Times Literary Supplement*, at the time under editor Bruce Richmond, which proved to be her most important connection as she established herself. In 1908, Woolf also wrote for *Cornhill Magazine*, edited by Reginald Smith. By 1919, an ideological and geographical diversity of publications courted her as a contributor: The *Athenaeum*—and after its merger in 1921 the *Nation & Athenaeum (N&A)*—became a fairly



regular outlet and would take priority over the *TLS* by 1925. The *New Statesman* commissioned 12 pieces in 1920–23. A variety of English and American journals each published one or two of her pieces. Her more theoretical essays on criticism and fiction appeared, for the most part (except for “Modern Essays,” *TLS*), in journals she did not frequently contribute to, such as T. S. Eliot’s *Criterion* and the *New York Evening Post Literary Review*. In 1925, her involvement with the *TLS* had waned, and, except for a substantial number of contributions to the *N&A*, her published reviews and critical essays were scattered over fifteen different papers and periodicals.<sup>5</sup>

The overall spectrum of publications was colorfully diverse: Her liaison with the *TLS*, *Academy and Literature*, and the (*Nation &*) *Athenaeum* seemed logical—they were publications geared towards educated and literary readers of the upper and upper middle classes. The *Woman’s Leader* and its mission were congruous with Woolf’s support for equality of the sexes. *Cornhill Magazine* had had among its editors Leslie Stephen—his daughter’s contribution presents no surprise. The conservative Anglo-Catholic *Guardian* seemed a highly unlikely venue for her, but the readers of the Women’s Supplement were, as Rosenbaum points out, “active women” (158–59), the kind Woolf aimed to reach and motivate. The relationship with the *Daily Herald* and the *New Statesman* perhaps reflected her teaching engagement at Morley College, a school for working men and women, but hardly her station or any sustained connection with the working class. To write for *Vogue* fashion magazine, on the other end of the spectrum, was a merely monetary consideration (see *L* III.154). In any case, Woolf does not seem to have turned down anyone on principle who would have liked her to write for them—not the Americans, though she did not like their literature, nor the trivial, such as the fashion world (including *Eve*), or the politically opposing, such as Leo Maxse or the (formerly) conservative *Atlantic Monthly*.

Andrew McNeillie neatly summarizes Woolf's relationship with her editors in each introduction to the volumes of essays and most of this information is gleaned from letters and diaries: Margaret Lyttleton rigidly insisted on length requirements, which Woolf originally struggled with (Daugherty, "Virginia Stephen" 6), and sent books for review that Woolf found dull. The company of essays on conservatively respectable occupations for women and pious matters was not at all satisfactory (I.xii). Bruce Richmond became "Virginia's most important journalistic mentor" (I.xiv), though towards the end of her relationship with the *TLS* his preoccupations with trivialities that might make the journal appear in a bad light irritated her. Ultimately, the small remuneration she received for her articles in the *TLS* could not hold her attention when she could make much more with *Vogue*. Reginald Smith appears to have been condescending and tactless in his feedback (I.xiv). She found Middleton Murry, editor of the *Athenaeum*, "accommodating" and eventually he even asked her to review his own book, which made her quite uncomfortable (III.xx–xxi). With the other journals, she did not have enough continuous engagement to build up relationships with the editors.

Whether the first impulse to begin reviewing publically was purely, or mostly, monetary is difficult to establish. Quentin Bell writes that in 1904, after Leslie Stephen's death and after convalescing from the illness that followed this shock, "Virginia felt that she ought to earn some money, if only to recoup some of the expenses of her illness" (I.93). In a letter to Violet Dickinson, dated 11 November 1904, Woolf writes, "it would be a great relief to know that I could make a few pence easily in this way—as our passbooks came last night, and they are greatly overdrawn" (L I.155). Shortly thereafter she submitted her first review to Lyttleton. Bell also informs us that "Sir Leslie's children had not inherited much capital and they were rather vague about their income" (I.95), so much so that they intentionally picked Bloomsbury for their

new home, a neighborhood with much lower rents than Kensington. On occasion, diary entries from 1905 and the following years will equate an expense incurred with the need to write more reviews. In the early years of their marriage, Leonard lost his income from the Colonial Office and needed to seek other sources, and Virginia went through repeated and violent bouts of illness, which were costly in terms of doctors' fees and medicines. The Woolfs had to watch their budget quite closely and were certainly grateful for every paid review they<sup>6</sup> could land (Q. Bell, II.38–42). So some monetary need definitely guided her decision. Jeanne Dubino points out that Woolf also would have been proud to have her literary interests validated by a pay check, to have made herself into a professional writer ("From Book Reviewer" 31).

Her attitude towards reviewing in her journals and letters is not usually enthusiastic; opportunities are often called merely "convenient," the work laborious. On 4 February 1905, she remarks that she worked at her Greek translations, which she thinks "better than screwing articles out of my brain" (*Passionate Apprenticeship* 232). She may have thought criticism incompatible with her personality, possibly because of the dependence on editors' opinions, the writing for money. Only a week later, she writes, "But all this time given up to reviewing rather bothers me" (235). But despite this reluctance, her diaries and letters, full of critical appraisals of books and ideas, make me think that Woolf was simply a critical reader by nature; she always read with an eye to what could be learned from and what could be improved in a text. Her father, of whom Woolf would later say that had he lived longer, she could have never written as she did (*D* 28 Nov. 1928), recognized her literary sensitivities early and chose her out of his children to be his literary heir, as Katherine Hill maintains. A statement about Jane Austen seems to apply to Woolf herself: she declares that Jane Austen at seventeen was actually not "writing to amuse the schoolroom. She is not writing to draw a laugh from sisters and brothers. She is writing for

everybody, for nobody, for our age, for her own; she, in short, is writing” (III.332). This statement suggests an intrinsically compulsory quality of writing: whether she had an audience or an occasion did not matter—she must write; she always felt compelled. Was it so with Woolf? On 25 April 1909, Woolf writes in her diary, “As for me—I write. The instinct wells like sap in a tree” (*Passionate Apprentice* 395). Is that why she was upset by correction? Did she feel herself startled out of the natural course when her editors curtailed her freedoms with length requirements, forbade the use of certain words, or directed her tone? Despite the many different publications to which she submitted her essays, she did not significantly change her tone, or her criteria, or her approach whether she wrote for *Vogue*, for *Nation & Athenaeum* (N&A) or for the *Daily Herald*: “she [was], in short, writing.” Her style and her manner of reviewing remain distinctly and recognizably hers, not dictated by an audience.<sup>7</sup>

Something besides the inconvenience and the troubling censure of mentors and editors must have been profoundly disturbing to Woolf about reviewing: it had been for a long time, and continued to be in many respects, a male domain. Of course, some women had been part of the reviewing profession. The introduction to *Women Critics 1660–1820* (edited by the Folger Collective on Early Women Critics) highlights women’s tremendous involvement in salon culture, which planted the seeds for the institution of criticism. But the tremendous barriers of a patriarchal society these women had to fight necessitated that most of their critical work happened in relative obscurity (xv ff.). Solveig Robinson writes in the introduction to her collection *A Serious Occupation: Literary Criticism by Victorian Women Writers* that since the mostly anonymous contributors to the Victorian periodical press have been identified, “dozens of influential women critics have emerged from obscurity” (xii). From the seventeenth century onward, women’s contribution to literary criticism was by no means small, even in the staunchly

patriarchal Victorian period. But women critics were ill-respected because of their style and sensibility; their taste often diverged from the standards and guidelines, written or understood, that had been established by men (Waters 1). That most of the critics Woolf reviewed were men, with the exception of Alice Meynell, is in light of this hardly surprising, though sad, because we cannot trace her female influences among critics clearly.

It is similarly unsurprising, though no less serious of a neglect, that Woolf's extraordinary output as literary critic and essayist has in the past been considered a step-child even to Woolf enthusiasts. Dubino compares Woolf's and T. S. Eliot's careers as critics:

Like Woolf, Eliot was not an academic, and like Woolf, he is known primarily for his artistic rather than his critical output. Yet, because Eliot is closely associated with a critical school, the New Criticism, the critical assumptions that inform his poetry and that he articulates in his essays are taken more seriously. Indeed, on the map of literary critical history, Eliot's presence eclipses Woolf's. (12)

Likewise, the abundance of women literary critics who have indeed contributed to the profession has been largely ignored until the late 1970s. Only in recent years, anthologies such as *Women Critics 1660–1820* and studies such as Mary Waters's *British Women Writers and the Profession of Literary Criticism, 1789–1832*, Solveig Robinson's *A Serious Occupation: Literary Criticism by Victorian Women Writers* and *Women, Scholarship and Criticism: Gender and Knowledge c. 1790–1900* edited by Joan Bellamy, Anne Laurence, and Gill Perry have tried to do for female critics what Elaine Showalter began to do for female novelists in the 1970s with her groundbreaking book *A Literature of Their Own*. Most of these volumes end their narrative and analysis long before Woolf's time, however, seemingly indicating that the women critics of Woolf's day no longer need to be rescued from obscurity. Woolf certainly has a name in the

literary world, but even *her* critical work is given short shrift. And as I flipped through the pages of the early *TLS*, and identified contributors with the help of the Centenary Archive online, I came upon many unfamiliar names that have not been discussed at all and remain as anonymous as ever—Fanny Johnson, who seems to have reviewed all new German language appearances at least around 1911, is not mentioned in Derwent May’s history of the *TLS*. Violet Florence Martin wrote a humorous and enjoyable lead article on hunting books in the 10 February 1911 edition of the supplement, but she cannot be found in the Centenary Archive under her name—for that article only the (male) authors of the books under discussion are searchable. I stumbled over her name only by accident. On the whole, most female *TLS* reviewers do not appear in the search engine, and once I did find their names inadvertently, their contributions were usually notices, short reviews, notes on foreign books, or brief reviews of ephemera. In 1911, Woolf seems to have been one of very few regular female contributors who was given a chance to review more serious literature. But then, of course, Dubino points out that Woolf, too, was given mostly “notices, or one-paragraph write-ups in which she could do little more than plot summaries” (“From Book Reviewer” 32) when she began.

### *Basic Tenets and Characteristics*

I try to resist the temptation to crystallize something like a list of central tenets from these volumes because I find as I go through that Woolf was indeed, as Andrew McNeillie points out, “a critic deeply suspicious of theories and theory-mongering” (III.xvii). But some categorization is inevitable. So I will briefly attempt to survey her method according to some familiar criteria, not with an intent to stamp her but rather to situate the reader in a more comfortable position to

consider the body of her critical work in more detail. Her concern lies primarily with the reader, then the author, while mimetic and formal concerns are both of tertiary significance to her. The discussion of her concern for the author will require me to digress and briefly outline arguments about her understanding of the common reader and her knowledge of the publishing business beyond writing.

I understand her method as mostly reader-oriented: Woolf courageously lets the reader sit across from her and examine the emotions her face betrays as she reads. She sensitively reveals the pitfalls of criticism that she herself has fallen into and thus alerts readers to their own prejudices and inhibitions. Before she delves, for example, into Jane Austen's early (and obscure) works, she admits that the critic feels, in the face of the vociferous turmoil of opinions on Austen, as if smothered under a very large pile of quilts in a cold season: forming one's own opinion becomes burdensome. So at the end, she cautions, "It may be that we are reading too much into these scraps and scribbles. We are still under the influence of the quilts and counterpanes" (III.334). She confesses her fallibility and makes an inviting gesture to readers: readers may consider her views and compare them with their own, but she never imposes or lectures.

She is interested in the author in as far as she always attempts to discern his/her project and aim. Her essays always urge her readers to open themselves up to a writer's method and set judgment aside for the moment. As readers, we ought to "try to follow the writer in his experiment from the first word to the last, without imposing our design upon him" (IV.390), and for that matter, "approach every writer differently in order to get from him all he can give us" (IV.392). But she does not believe that the author alone creates the meaning of the text. Author and reader are collaborators—we must read as if we were writing with the author and become his

“accomplice” (IV.390). Beth Carole Rosenberg writes, “All writers are readers who are in dialogue with the texts they read, and in the act of writing they respond to their reading” (xxi). Her intertwined interest in the author and reader approaches something like a proto reader-response theory. According to Rosenberg in *Virginia Woolf and Samuel Johnson: Common Readers*, reference to the common reader does not imply that Woolf imagined an uneducated or completely average reader as her audience. She uses the figure as a conceit to allow for a dialogic style: by including a specific audience in her third person plural persona, she can voice multiple opinions without deciding one way or the other. Rosenberg writes, “The Common Reader for Woolf becomes a metaphor for a rhetorical technique that, like dialogue, allows for flux, freedom, and the lack of stable meaning” (*Virginia Woolf and Samuel Johnson* xxi). Woolf can complicate her views, let contradictions stand next to each other, weigh them against each other, and reason them out to herself (see xviii).

Taking a dialogic style all the way to actual dialogue in “Mr Conrad: A Conversation” gives her the opportunity to pose conflicting views and, as we shall later see again, refuse to come to definite conclusions and categorize such a novelist as Conrad. She can at once think that he fails to understand the British, that he is too reserved, and that his books are complete because he has two contradicting souls in his breast that introduce realistic ambivalence into his fiction (III.376–80). She can remain ambivalent between dearly held traditional principles and their opposition and open up to radically new voices. From the mouths of two fictional characters she can introduce complexity instead of a boiled-down verdict to her readers without eliciting an impatient, “Make up your mind already!” Overall, Woolf did not think definitive conclusions a terribly realistic or natural outcome of most intellectual pursuits. As she writes in “Modern Novels,” “if honestly examined life presents question after question which must be left to sound



on and on after the story is over in hopeless interrogation that fills us with a deep, and finally it may be with a resentful, despair” (III.36). And so her persona in the essays is often multiple, making room for a modernist sense of fragmentation and a multiplicity of truths.

At least one piece of evidence suggests that her ideal audience does consist of, or at least contains, true common readers: she habitually guides us through the process of reading a book. Much conventional criticism proffers distilled and well-refined insights but never reveals the thought process. Common readers of such criticism must gain the impression that they lack theoretical knowledge, training, or the necessary intelligence to reach the same conclusions. In her review of Sarah Bernhardt’s memoirs, Woolf writes, “when you have read some way into the book you become aware of a hardness and limitation in her view” (I.168). She admits unpretentiously that she did not pick up on this detail immediately. Betty Kay Seibt writes in her 1994 dissertation, “perhaps the quintessential sentence of a review for this audience can be found in a review of *The Fortunes of Farthings* by A. J. Dawson (McN1), where Woolf ends: ‘But if the reader wants a long, amiable, and pleasantly garrulous novel to take to bed with him *The Fortunes of Farthing* [sic] will serve his purpose’” (39). Woolf was not an advertiser, but as she read and learned from good and bad, she learned that most books had something to convey, something even to teach. Just about any book applied to at least a small set of fitting readers. Uniting books with their most appropriate readerships seems to have been one of her aims.

Seibt also points to Woolf’s knowledge of the publishing industry in this context. She continues after the above quotation, “This shows her understanding of the commercial nature of the review and of the demands of this less-sophisticated audience” (54). Though sometimes Woolf may have resented the journalistic medium and the whole business of reviewing, she knew that books sell by publicity and that reviews beget publicity—writers and publishers need them,

fear them, despise them; there is no way around them. As co-owner of the Hogarth Press with her husband, she had to approve or reject materials for publication, had to type-set, print, bind, and market the books they printed. And with that knowledge, Woolf may have preferred to insert herself in the debate over giving the perilous affair over to forces she did not trust so well.

Woolf worries over mimetic aspects of art, whether the “real world” is faithfully depicted in art. But as a modernist artist she understands any rigid concept of reality to be illusory. She sees contemporary experience as highly individual, as fragmented and fragmenting, as alienating and extremely multiple, and thus her requirement for credibility is a complicated one. An author ought to be grounded enough in reality not to lose touch with what is possible and likely, but the depiction need not be life-like as in realism. Herta Newman writes that Woolf rejects the “dependency of the traditional novel upon a reconstructive process which, as she continually complains, adheres stubbornly ‘to the respectable outside’” (5). The finite shapes and physical structure of objects in the drawing room cannot account for the fragmentation, alienation, and multiplicity characters are feeling. Not even her street scenes in which a bewildering multiplicity of sense impressions storms in upon her characters can do the inner life justice because streets have defined, static courses and fixed destinations. One sound ends, another starts. They each have a physically explicable origin. The character’s life is an entirely different matter. Therefore, Woolf rather advocates faithfulness to mental and psychological processes than an accurate depiction of a novel’s material environment and the exact historical situation.<sup>8</sup> Newman writes, “she sets out to demonstrate, clearly and directly, the essential attributes of character that mere description can only vaguely signify, betraying in the process a characteristic mistrust in the efficacy of genre and of language itself to grasp the concept that it seeks to convey” (7). Though

not so sure that what she promotes is even possible, she hopes for, experiments with, and advocates an ever-deepening study of character.

Character is clearly of primary concern to Woolf and, as we have already established, she was somewhat wary of a narrow focus on technique. Solomon Fishman, however, clearly exaggerates his claim that she “renounces the whole question of technique” (381). She can very well appreciate mastery of technique. Let us consider “On Re-reading Novels” (1922), her response to Percy Lubbock’s recently published *The Craft of Fiction*. She finds his use of the word “form” confusing and sets herself the task of definition: “The novelist’s method is simply his device for expressing his emotions; but if we discover how that effect is produced we shall undoubtedly deepen the impression” (III.342). Since the novel as art form was just beginning to be taken seriously, the common reader’s natural reaction was to cry out that of course the novel as a whole is not form, but emotion. Emotion, however, so concentrated in the novel form, is difficult to examine objectively and so, Woolf allows, the search for a form, for a method is useful. But does Woolf start to do this only after the publication of this essay? In a 1906 paragraph-long notice Woolf uncovers the purpose of Mrs. Hamilton Syngé’s method in *A Supreme Moment*. Set among country cottages, it begins in a simple place, with mere shadows for characters, and details we would expect to find are left out: Syngé’s design is to show only enough to trace a change of attitude and perspective in one character as she comes in contact with the unfamiliar (I.92). Woolf discerns a design behind Forster’s *A Room with a View* (1908) in all the “sheer fun” and the “cleverness,” but that design is precisely what disappoints her—the “view is smaller than we expected” (I.222). Upon the 1912 publication of a new edition of Gissing’s novels, Woolf describes how he shows the terrible importance of money and its effect on the lives of the poor. He weaves a texture of relationships between thinking, indigent individuals and

thereby teaches us about the fundamental equality of men and the degradation of poverty (I.356–59). She consistently distills method from her readings early on and before the publication of Lubbock’s book, whether she has a paragraph or a whole front page to fill, and she points out if an author’s method is untraceable, when fiction is mere plot or accumulation of details as in Eleanor G. Hayden’s *Rose of Lone Farm* (I.49).

She remarks upon technique repeatedly in her criticism, but pleads with the reader: “we must reconcile ourselves to a season of failures and fragments. We must reflect that where so much strength is spent on finding a way of telling the truth the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition” (III.435). As examples she names Joyce’s *Ulysses*, written by a “desperate man who feels that in order to breathe he must break the windows” and T. S. Eliot’s poetry, which, she hints, requires mental acrobatics of the reader who would try to follow his leaps of thought (III.434). For the moment, she thinks, “Any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express” (III.34). And so her judgments on technique, method, and form naturally lack enthusiasm. With all the experimenting necessary to achieve what she hoped for the novel, she knew there would yet be a lot of shape shifting. To prescribe form and method at this point was futile, even harmful. She knew that the English novel had developed many attractive and quite serviceable methods. And yet, they fell short—they could not yet capture Mrs. Brown.

I read her signed reviews as a separate category from the anonymous reviews to see if those articles are different in their manner, in the definition of her verdicts, or in the application of her criteria. After all, one would assume that in a signed review, Woolf would do all she can to bring out exactly that critical persona she would like to project publicly (though one must always account for editorial changes that might blur the purity of that persona). But, as all signed

reviews before 1925 discuss biographical writings which have a curious hybrid-genre quality that situates them between fiction and non-fiction, this reading was not as instructive as I had hoped. These signed reviews are maybe a little more consistent in style and quality than her notices. What did distinctly stand out from this group of essays was that they are, every one, singularly entertaining—many contain delightful sarcasm, even satire. Her sarcasm is typically not cruel and frequently includes herself as a target. Consider this example: With regard to taste, Woolf disagrees with Logan Pearsall Smith, compiler of *A Treasury of English Prose*, but she admires him profoundly. She turns her criticism in this regard into a joke, almost at her own expense. She writes, “I became aware that my taste is far better than Mr Pearsall Smith’s; it is in fact impeccable. But I need scarcely hasten to add [...] in matters of taste each man, woman and child in the British Isles is impeccable; so are the quadrupeds” (III.172). Does she doubt herself? After all, she wrote in her diary one day, “It is painful (a little) to find fault there, where almost solely, one respects” (D 23 June 1920). Or does she use this trick to align herself, again, with the common reader and to temper her voice of authority? In part, this is part of her meta-discourse on reading practices, a humorous and unsanctimonious warning of similar prejudices.

Her signed essays are furthermore decidedly creative and playful—they deliver principles, ideas, and arguments about literature and criticism in such form that the reader may hardly recognize them as such. She takes criticism where it had not gone before. In a review for the *New Statesman* about several memoirs, she sets up a dialogue between two apparently young women, likely gentlemen’s daughters, over their afternoon embroidery. One begins to talk about Milton, but the other stops her in her tracks and says, “But I can’t embroider a parrot and talk about Milton in the same breath.” The other retorts, “Whereas you could embroider a parrot and talk about Lady Georgiana Peel” (III.181). Now she has not only evoked the kind of diversion Lady

Peel's book is able to give and its appropriate readership, but she has also diplomatically commented on the situation to which women wishing to engage in literary conversation were bound: they must keep up their feminine occupations and make all the appearance of ladies while they entertain this argument. They are also each other's only audience. We do not have a well-populated drawing-room here. The two women have no opportunity to test their ideas against their peers' as their brothers in college are undoubtedly able to do. Woolf's more playful essays do not lack in serious implications for the profession, the publishing industry, for her society. But as a writer who resents authoritarian speech-making, she chooses more subtle and less insulting avenues than straightforward lecture to convey her perspective.

The longer critical essays are more obviously the creations of a born writer—they feel on the whole more like pieces written out of this natural compulsion for writing than for money. Those critical essays that begin as reviews of life writings often become celebrations of an admired literary great. In 1919 she uses the publication of two biographies on Jane Austen as an occasion to write such an essay. She confesses her immense curiosity about Austen's life and expresses gratitude for all who have contributed to our stock of knowledge about her. She then paints—as you could perhaps not do with any other author as well as with Austen—a very bright picture of the kind of world into which Austen typically invited us and its characters as if they had all populated one great novel rather than many smaller ones. She poignantly juxtaposes flaws and skills and shows adroitly how often flaw and skill are actually only opposite sides of the same coin. She situates Austen's greatest accomplishment (in Woolf's eyes that was her tremendous grasp of the significance of life in itself) in the great panorama of English literary history in her conclusion.

In her commemorative essays, like her 1916 essay on Charlotte Brontë, she tends to acknowledge not only her own but the popular perception of the author in question. Thus, she effectively joins the common reader in commemoration. She then refines the perception and explains why the writer's memory has survived through the decades or centuries. Woolf also has a singular talent to evocatively describe a novelist's voice. She juxtaposes strengths and weaknesses and states what sets the author apart. Finally, there are reviews of new novels that turn into surveys of an author's overall oeuvre. Discussing only one novel would sometimes sell the new novel short or fail to acknowledge an exciting overall project that encompasses the entire oeuvre; sometimes the new addition does not live up to the standard an author has already set up for him- or herself. She begins "More Dostoevsky" in 1917 explaining why her review must turn into a critical essay as follows, "Each time that Mrs Garnett adds another red volume to her admirable translations of the works of Dostoevsky we feel a little better able to measure what the existence of this great genius who is beginning to permeate our lives so curiously means to us" (II.83).

A cursory sampling of *TLS* reviews written between 1902–1911 gave me a better idea how Woolf's criticism and reviews compares to common practice of her day. Colleagues at *TLS* included Augustine Birrell, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, Arthur Quiller-Couch, Arthur Clutton-Brock, Harold Child, Desmond McCarthy, and Percy Lubbock among the bigger names. A host of less well-known individuals handled the short notices, the foreign language publication announcements, and occasional longer reviews. What distinguishes her from the broader majority of reviewers is perhaps only apparent to the fairly attentive reader, someone who shares her attitudes, anxieties, and opinions. In her typical avoidance of polemic, she weaves in her views through the focus of her stories woven into the essay texture, in her language, and in her

omissions. Woolf is decidedly different in that she is never dismissive of the “unsophisticated readers” as I saw it in several reviews that went so far as to describe them as “savages and children” (Walkley). Though she can by no means be held up as a paragon of tolerance against common prejudices of her day, she never derides readers of any level in her reviews. She chooses to be singularly encouraging of a very broad audience. To be readable to the common reader, Woolf does not frequently use foreign terms or phrases like many of her fellow reviewers do. In another democratizing effort Woolf avoids advertizing slighter novels in the commonly superficial and patronizing manner of her colleagues as “charming,” “attractive,” and “clever.” Woolf usually states what one can or cannot expect from a novel. She outlines each novel’s aim and its success within that range without concealing or emphasizing flaws, but with an accuracy of discernment that indicates genuine and serious attention. She truly brings readers at all levels in contact with books that match their needs and purposes and does not “sell” any book as something it is not.

She advocates a cross-fertilizing relationship between writers and readers, as we have seen. She herself fostered many direct and correspondence friendships with other writers for mutual encouragement and criticism and had thus benefitted from readers’ feedback and given it to her peers. Her conclusions typically lay an emphasis on nuance and complexity—she frequently weighs strengths and weaknesses against each other on a scale that is directly derived from the original vision for the work. The first page lead article by Augustine Birrell in the first issue of the *TLS* on the other hand closes with this fairly simplistic remark: “Mr Wright’s volume, probably the last of FitzGerald’s correspondence, will be added to their libraries by all lovers of good letters and independent thinking” (Birrell).



Extensive commentary on character development is less typical in the broad mass of *TLS* reviews than in Woolf's, and considerations of a character's inner life exceptional. We can hardly imagine that we might have found the following sentence in one of her reviews: "Patricia is idealized, but she is a charming study" (Shand). Woolf did not appreciate types or studies and was definitely not easily charmed by them. They were much more likely to frustrate her or elicit her sarcasm. But Arthur Clutton-Brock argues in a 1911 poetry review of G. K. Chesterton's *The Ballad of the White Horse* that a character should not be used to proclaim one's political opinion ("Mr. Chesterton in Verse"), much as Woolf laid charge against Wells's misuse of characters in that manner. In exchange for the greater focus on character, Woolf comments much less on scenery or setting than her colleagues, only perhaps at times on the skill of its description or its significance for character development. She touches on this, for instance, in some of her reviews on Conrad's novels set at sea.

Another difference between Woolf and other *TLS* reviewers concerns her sensitivity to the position of women in her society. She never characterizes writing as "manly" as I saw in a few other reviews, where it seemed to mean something like outspoken, firm, or determined. She does on the other hand praise the feminine style in Dorothy Richardson and others. She does not hesitate to point out sexist or weak portrayals of women in fiction. The Honorable Mrs. Percy Ewing Matheson (Elizabeth Fox Bruce) on *The Mystic Bride: A Study of the Life-Story of Catherine of Siena* by Aubrey Richardson, on the other hand quotes a statement such as "never was she done urging people—women as well as men—to be manly" without sarcasm. She only appends a "maybe it was so, but..." and veers off into a fairly different subject. It amuses me to think what Woolf might have made of that.

### 3. WOOLF'S COMMENTARY ON CONTEMPORARY REVIEWING PRACTICES AND HER OWN PRACTICE

With this general overview in mind I would now like to more specifically examine her commentary on other critics, her theory of reading and of criticism and their connections, and her own practice.

#### *Purpose and Criteria of Criticism*

To Woolf's mind, the purpose of criticism is not to express a superior mind's isolated insights from reading, as Beth Carole Rosenberg points out (*Virginia Woolf and Samuel Johnson* 68), but, as Bell and Ohmann add, her essays were written in a democratic "effort to take books down from library shelves and put them into the hands of her ideal community, the common readers. And to talk about them outside the walls of lecture rooms. And to talk about them, finally, in such a way that they matter, not in literary history, but in our lives" (402). She offered the opinions and perceptions of one of many readers that might as likely as anybody else's change with another reading and added experience. The critical essay is a genre that, in Woolf's opinion, specifically demands that the essayist him- or herself be at the heart of the work. In "The Decay of Essay-Writing" she posits,

If men and women must write, let them leave the great mysteries of art and literature unassailed; if they told us frankly not of the books that we can all read and the pictures which hang for us all to see, but of that single book to which they alone have the key and of that solitary picture whose face is shrouded to all but one gaze—if they would write of themselves—such writing would have its own permanent value. (I.26)

In this passage a distrust of elaborate theories shows through: critics who propose whole systems for reading or for writing, occupy themselves with the general, with what we all tend to notice. But the magic creation that writer and reader can achieve when they collaborate lies in the particular meaning a certain book unfolds in a certain reader. This is what she wanted to elicit in her criticism.

Woolf would like to dispense with the distance established between readers and writers by enforcing artificial conceits and conventions, by creating categories of high-brow and low-brow, by making access to literature seem restricted to an intellectual elite. She writes in “Character in Fiction” in 1924, “It is this division between reader and writer, this humility on your part, these professional airs and graces on ours, that corrupt and emasculate the books which should be the healthy offspring of a close and equal alliance between us” (III.436). Writer and reader must listen to one another in order to keep the ground fertile for artistic production. The writer of criticism should be aware of his audience just as the novelist. She rebukes Frederic Harrison who “seems to be talking to someone in the next room, or, more mysteriously, addressing a world that has ceased to exist” (III.65). One should also take into consideration the young and the future generations who will in time read the critic’s remarks. Woolf has little tolerance for the critic who is “leaving the views of future generations out of account” (II.144) or snubs younger generations, another point on which Harrison fails her (see III.64). In “Reading” (1919) she writes, “Undoubtedly all writers are immensely influenced by the people who read them.” The reader’s journey through Sir Thomas Browne’s prose when compared to Matthew Arnold’s is like the travel on a donkey versus in an electric train (III.158). Writers adapt their themes, their words, their style to the audience they know will have to welcome their book once it has been released from the author’s hands into the public’s. A modern audience’s relative

comfort disposes them to appreciate Arnold's less cumbersome prose. An artist can enrich his reader's life only if he can reflect the reader in his work in some way. Since Woolf perceives every reader as a (potential) critic, her brand of criticism does not talk down to either author or reader because all three are engaged in the creative process together, if not at some point very nearly identical.

What specifically does Woolf suggest the reader should be able to expect from a review? In her essay "The Method of Henry James" (1918), Woolf admits that she struggles to put her finger on something about James that concerns "not a plot, or a collection of characters, or a view of life, but something more abstract, more difficult to grasp, the weaving together of many themes into one theme, the making out of a design" (II.348). It seems that Woolf goes to critics to be given such encompassing and transcending insights. She writes of William Ernest Henley that he "failed to present Burns as a whole. He has not found the key-word, the mysterious clue which, once discovered, draws out, smoothly and inevitably, all the rest" (III.286). Henley instead gives life facts, and scrutinizes how these facts "have laid hands upon [the writer's] art" (285). Woolf calls his essays "biography, psychology [of the author], and criticism all squeezed together" (286), a criticism that would analyze word for word, phrase by phrase.

How can the critic avoid that in his portrayal "the figure [of the author in question] remains scattered all in little bits within the covers of the book" (286)? Perhaps a few approving commentaries on other critics can shed light on what exactly Woolf would have expected here: John Harris exposes overarching themes and the main lines of thought in Samuel Butler's overall oeuvre—from him Woolf learns to appreciate what Butler was all about (II.35). And when she describes his process as taking Butler seriously as "a man who built up solidly a house with many storeys" (35), she praises him because he saw Butler in light of his own goals, rather than

applying an exterior standard. Joseph Warren Beach sees “a figure in the carpet,” an overall pattern in Henry James’s method that he traces through the whole of the author’s works and leads readers to frame their personal theories to account for him—she therefore gratefully calls Beach’s work “fruitful and cogent” (II.347). The critic must crystallize the unifying theme or method and present his comprehensive understanding rather than fragmenting a composition into phrases and words scrutinized under a magnifying glass.

Woolf herself tried to do this. In her longer pieces that can afford the space to go into such matters, she often includes commentary on an author’s overall life’s work. The *Daily Herald* commissioned Woolf to write a very brief summative piece about George Eliot in 1921. In it, she brings together all the pertinent facts of her life, and as so often sums up her greatest talent in a statement beginning “Her genius shows itself in...” She goes on to point out what literary history owes to her: Eliot, Woolf argues, “was the first of the English novelists to discover that men and women think, as well as feel” and in that she approached the Russians and with them widened the scope of the novel to include psychological insight as well as stories (III.294). Woolf sums up not only Eliot’s chief merits but also her place and contribution to the wider scope of English literature in only a couple of paragraphs. For this, Woolf thought, a reader comes to a critic.

Woolf appreciates Arthur Symons because “he brings all his imagination and all his skill to the understanding of the work before him” (II.70), but she also breathes a sigh of relief that Conrad manages to “bring to light what was already there beforehand, instead of imposing anything from the outside” (II.222).<sup>9</sup> Imaginative criticism requires insider knowledge of the craft, Woolf surmises. What Joseph Conrad offers in his criticism may be “fragmentary,” as she points out, but it makes us think that he “has raised the curtain and gone within.” She ascribes

Conrad's extraordinary insight to his own work as an artist: "It is, of course, the novelist and not the critic who is speaking. It is the man who has done the thing himself, and who will, therefore, see more into the plan within the writer's mind and less, perhaps into the details of achievement" (III.290). Writers must, to stay in the metaphor, show backstage knowledge: how the set is composed, how the curtains open and close, how the lighting affects the scene, or the most effective position for the actor. The metaphor is appropriate since the novelist, similar to the dramatist, needs to conjure up scenes and people on the reader's mental stage and how that is best accomplished, a novelist would know.

T. S. Eliot suggests in "The Function of Criticism" that writers employ their critical abilities vigorously in their creation process: "the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing: this frightful toil is as much critical as creative" (18). The best critics, Woolf agrees with Eliot, are thus the poets (II.67). The artist who is versed in every side of the profession and loves it all is naturally the better critic because he can give us a conception of the creative secrets (see II.129, II.201). A writer naturally rewrites as he reads. His perspective teaches something more than textbook insight into technique, word choice, and some sympathy for the writer into the bargain. The writer's scrutiny is an intimate penetration and stems from close familiarity with and a deep devotion to the object matter: "we have a sense of watching a jeweler handling his diamonds and rubies," she says of Swinburne (II.229). Woolf argues that the common reader can learn to appreciate art to this degree if she engages in this responsive and responsible reading.

A further requirement for a good critic is a foundation of "wide and serious reading" (II.52), which better prepares the critic for compiling a "careful, studious, detailed account" (II.23). With that base, the critic can then judge the book first by its own intent, and then against

the “best of its kind,” which I take to mean, against others with similar ambition or purpose (see IV.389). Rosenberg posits that Woolf wanted to see critics put down on paper dialogues between the many books they had read that create a fabric of literature in their minds (*Virginia Woolf and Samuel Johnson* 67). Such a critic was Coleridge. Anyone who would have watched him do his work would have seen him “brewing in his head the whole of poetry” until he produced the insights of a “mind when hot with the friction of reading” and advanced to “the soul of the book itself” (III.355). As readers and writers are to be in conversation with each other, no book can be judged separately from its predecessors, from contemporary creation, or even potential literary heirs.

Now that we have examined some of the purposes Woolf would ascribe to criticism, let us take a look at how she would recommend that critics go about their task more concretely. In “How It Strikes a Contemporary,” she rejects one approach: “Critics, of course, abound. But the too frequent result of their able and industrious pens is a desiccation of the living tissues of literature into a network of little bones” (III.355). The living tissues seem to be a complex fabric of psychology, sympathy, and intelligent comprehension of complexity. Woolf ascribes to Clayton Hamilton, author of *Materials and Methods of Fiction*, the belief that “every work of art can be taken to pieces, and those pieces can be named and numbered, divided and sub-divided, and given their order of precedence, like the internal organs of a frog. Thus we learn how to put them together again—that is, according to Mr Hamilton, we learn how to write” (III.44–45). What falls by the wayside in this process of vivisection, Woolf perceives, is life: “you may dissect your frog, but you cannot make it hop” (III.45).

Woolf expects a careful treatment of each work of art, which needs time and adequate study. But reviewing in no way resembles an autopsy with its precise cuts and exact methods on

an inanimate body, nor should the result be categorization or a catalog of “body” parts. A literary bone or organ of one work, Woolf suspects, will not equal one of the same shape from another work, especially not in its function. She praises R. Brimley Johnson because she perceives him to be “more apt to suggest than to define, and much disposed to qualify his conclusions” (III.314). As early as 1906—fifteen years before she published this admonition—Woolf herself adhered to this principle: In her review of Percy Lubbock’s *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, Woolf sets out to “condense into set phrases that mist of felt rather than spoken criticism” as pertaining to the poet, Mrs. Browning. Woolf states, that one can be “tolerably certain that such a verdict would amount to something like this: “she was a bad poet, and [...] our fathers were strangely mistaken when they exalted her to the place which she holds.” However, Woolf realizes that “a candid inquirer would have to enlarge and qualify such a verdict considerably” (I.101) and she subsequently applies herself to do just that: she considers Browning’s life and her opportunities to refine her art. In criticizing Joseph Hergesheimer, Woolf finds the weaknesses but closes her essay on a rather positive note without truly pegging the author as talented or not, as weak or strong, as this or that: “Our conclusion, then, must be—but happily we do not feel impelled to come to a conclusion” (III.140). This refusal to file authors, or any human being, for that matter, under neat labels, shows that she valued individuality. Because she disliked polemic trespassing on other people’s minds, her attitude of anti-totalitarianism flows as a gentle undercurrent through much her writings. She resisted categorization, and perhaps, a canon in the making—a process of which many prominent critics of her time would be a part. McNeillie writes, “Of course, to a large extent a reviewer’s reading is determined by fashion and contingency, but Virginia Woolf was always keenly interested in uncanonised authors



(contemporary or otherwise)” (II.xv). She reviewed hundreds of obscure authors and was excited to write an essay titled “The Eccentrics” in 1919.

As she contemplates *Essays* by William Ernest Henley, she finds a “single song or single page expounded and analysed phrase by phrase” (III.286), she notices “how powerless taste and learning and insight are against the tug of personal affection and the prejudice of personal predilection” (III.287). In all review essays, Woolf hardly once accuses an author of violating a convention, of botching form or meter, of failing to adhere to laws or textbook teachings. She declares, “In books as in people, graces and charms are delightful for the moment but become insipid unless they are felt to be part of some general energy or quality of character. To grasp that is to know them well, but to dally with charms and graces, to appraise them more and more exquisitely, is to be always at the first stage of acquaintance, superficial, polite, and ultimately bored” (III.370). I suppose she agreed with her father, Leslie Stephen, to a degree in her distrust of criticism of technique (see I.128).

In their judgments Woolf would like critics to “declare the standard which they had in mind” (III.271), so as to judge fairly, based on convictions about what art ought to be. Her own fiction reviews are most intensely concerned with character development, with originality, and complexity of insight. She comments on descriptive skills, expression, and form, but they are, to Woolf, skills a writer ought to focus on after she can create an independent, personal vision, bring characters to life, and offer profound insights into relationships, the psyche, and human experience. Therefore they ought to be secondary criteria. Some criteria should not play a role in the assessment at all. She dislikes criticism that is overly concerned with the author’s moral character, such as Canon Ainger displays in *Lectures and Essays* (I.83-85). He gives, she claims, “undue prominence to moral excellence in literature” (85). This is a flaw mostly because she

does not think that novels should have “a moral to expound” (I.97) or be in other ways didactic; didacticism “constantly blocks the course of the story, or intrude[s] between us and the characters” (III.58).

She similarly dislikes too great a prejudice for beauty. Of Arthur Symonds she writes, “He has so great a passion for beauty that he is a little hard upon work which has other qualities, perhaps more valuable than beauty” (II.69), even if the beauty maintained is an empty semblance only. What she would consider more valuable than beauty is not mentioned here but needs elucidation. In “Mr Symonds’ Essays” (1916), she contrasts Swinburne as someone always preoccupied with the question of beauty, with Ibsen who, she admires, has “not flinched from the prosaic look of things as they are” (II.69). The difference she sees between them is that Swinburne would have put the most poetic and the most revealing words into a character’s mouth while Ibsen consistently tempered the most revealing with the most likely. Woolf valued Ibsen for his abilities to construct dialogue as a realist dramaturge who would not give props and scenery undue prominence (II.323). To her, he was one of the few recent European writers who “sent waves of fresh thought across the Continent” (I.203). He skillfully chooses the relevant facts and details only and gives us “the effect of ordinary life” and, without complicating and embellishing unnecessarily, illuminates the depths of a moment (IV.496). Swinburne, on the other hand, always runs the risk of tiring out his imagination, constantly strains for the deepest revelation and ends up making fine words only, unable to consistently imbue them with meaning to match (II.69). When Solomon Fishman writes that Woolf’s critical criteria are of an aesthetic nature and fail to consider philosophical aspects in any depth (381), he must have missed this juxtaposition.

*Style—Accusations of Impressionism Addressed*

Finally, then there is the matter of style. Criticism should come, so Woolf writes, “without any of the gradual loosening of the attention which attacks us as prose weakens under the adulteration of unnecessary words, slack cadences, and worn out metaphors” (III.308). Concision, melody and rhythm of the language, and imagery ought to be masterful in prose essays as in other genres. She does not hesitate to denounce rambling (see II.256) and unnecessary repetition (II.255). Woolf praises a critic who is the “master of his own method of expression” (II.144). But the method she has in mind should be a simple one, with the vivacious, concise quality of spoken criticism (see II.128). Oral arguments that arise from a conversation are usually not compiled with such scruple and sophistry in order to prove a point and therefore are often more honest than written criticism (III.116). They do not bend passages and quote them out of context to fit a theory or an argument. While she evidently disapproves of over-exuberance that would cloud critical judgment, Edmund Gosse’s *Some Diversions of a Man of Letters* strikes her as too “sedate.” She calls it “sober, discreet, mellow, judicious, the fruit of love, no doubt, but of love which has been familiar with its objet for so many years that it is now respectful rather than passionate” (III.105). Enthusiasm, she notes, is “the life-blood of criticism” (III.116). And in fact, her *Common Reader* was supposed to be an act of “testifying before I die to the great fun & pleasure my habit of reading has given me” (D 28 July 1923). Though of course reviewing was often a headache and a hindrance for her progress in fiction, Woolf proclaims that reading ought to be pleasurable first and foremost. Her reviews should lead readers to enjoy it more deeply.

She delights in essays that are “shrewd and amusing” (III.301) and “outspoken enough to exercise our wits” (III.301). Archibald Stalker’s 1921 biography of Sir Walter Scott is such a specimen of writing. Bombastic language with “fantastic symbolism which serves merely to throw dust in our eyes” (II.69) meets with her disapproval. She would rather have it simple and meaningful than eloquent and empty. That she conveyed impressions and wrote metaphorically has been frequently and wrongly disparaged. A number of critics have dismissed her as noting down mere emotion. Solomon Fishman in 1943 assumes that, “Impressionism afforded her the freedom which would have been denied by a rigorous analytical method” and called her criticism not only effusive, but also “operated by intuition without the mediation of a method” (380). He interprets her avoidance of listing principles as an inability to think about literature abstractly and systematically and write about it straightforwardly (380–81). Mark Schorer asserts (in the same year), “Woolf approached her reading, in her criticism, as she approached the whole of experience in her novels: with aggressive curiosity, a refined sensibility, but an exaggerated sense of the relevance of impression [...]. What is lacking, finally, is the sense of value” (387). What Schorer sees amiss in her critical work has to do with how she applied a novelist’s questions, questions about the elusive qualities of life, to her critical task while, he thinks, she ought to be concerned with “the hard facts of the literary discipline and technique” (387). Mark Goldman reflects that we can detect the “new-critical bias” in these statements (2).<sup>10</sup>

American critic Irving Babbitt published his essay “Impressionist Versus Judicial Criticism” in 1906. In it, he addresses the “problematic” trend of impressionism in literature and in which way, he believes, it has led literary criticism astray. He describes M. Bourget’s impressionism as a digression into fiction: the critic asks the reader to imagine a certain typecast reader in her perusal of a volume of poetry and laying out her feelings as she reads (692–93).

Woolf uses passages such as these on several occasions. In “A Talk about Memoirs,” the dialogue between two young women, she uses the fictional characters to mirror the subscriber-base of the *New Statesman*. And as they read, one of them encourages the other, “Please go on. The charm is working; [...] I’m in the drawing room at Woburn in the forties” (III.182). The two continue to delve into the atmosphere of the book and imagine themselves to be there. They read as the common readers would and thus she previews for them how they will find themselves, with this particular book at a window in the drawing-room, musing, imagining. The reader who may be intimidated by the academic types dominating criticism can identify with these women, cast their fears of inferiority aside for the moment, and indulge. Woolf has placed their likes in the midst of critical discourse. At the time, relying on impressions of the reader was not at all singular, especially in the *TLS* fiction reviews—perhaps Babbitt attacks the trend so emphatically because he saw it becoming a widespread trend.

Babbitt would not agree with Woolf’s appeal to common readers or her technique. She wanted to urge them to become critics in their own right. He, on the other hand, cautions,

when the man in the street thus sets up to be the measure of all things, the result is often hard to distinguish from vulgar presumption. The humanitarian fallacy would be comparatively harmless if it did not fit in so perfectly with a commercialism which finds its profit in flattering the taste of the average man, and an impressionism that has lost the restraining sense of tradition and encourages us to steep and saturate our minds in the purely contemporaneous. As it is, these elements have combined in a way that is a menace to all high and severe standards of taste. To use words as disagreeable as the things they describe, literature is in danger of being vulgarized and commercialized and journalized.

There are critics who have founded a considerable reputation on the relationship that exists between their own mediocrity and the mediocrity of their readers. (701)

Had Woolf not been so new on the British critical scene, and mostly engaged as an anonymous critic there, I would suspect Babbitt's list of impressionist critics to include Woolf. No matter if he was aware of her, Babbitt would disapprove of Woolf. As Rosenberg states, "Unlike her father, who believes only the critic is capable of making distinctions for the vulgar and ignorant because he has a responsibility to propagate moral behavior, Woolf sees the Common Reader as capable of making those distinctions for him- or herself" (*Virginia Woolf and Samuel Johnson* 54), without any harm to contemporary art; on the contrary—she saw common readers as able to enrich and diversify art.

Woolf would have cried out against a critic who proposed the following: "What we need, [Emerson] says, is a 'coat woven of elastic steel,' a critical canon, in short, that will restore to its rights the masculine judgment but without dogmatic narrowness. With such a canon, criticism might still cultivate the invaluable feminine virtues—it might be comprehensive and sympathetic without at the same time being invertebrate and gelatinous" (Babbitt 704). In fact, it seems to be critics precisely like him that Woolf might react against with her style, her democratic philosophy of the reader-author relationship, and her enthusiasm for the "psychological sentence of the feminine gender" in Dorothy Richardson (III. 367). To Woolf, this femininity was not a corrupting force but rather the beginning of something better because the feminine style "is of a more elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the extreme, of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes" (III.367). Woolf's criteria of critical judgment are by no means limited to aesthetic values but rather show an awareness of the psychological dimension that was quite unusual for her time. She asks that there be a subtle suggestiveness

(II.193) about the critic's style. Mrs. Humphrey Ward (or Mary Augusta Ward, daughter of Thomas Arnold), one of the few female contemporary critics Woolf discusses in her essays, writes suggestively; she "sets us thinking how we too have felt the breath of the moors, and seen the purple sunset, and loved that angular honesty and rated it above wisdom" (II.193). Woolf does not fit the bill of Irving Babbitt's impressionist who will praise only what appeals to her particular sensibility and call it "suggestive" (690).

We cannot suppose Woolf's "impressionism" some kind of default technique she falls back on because she lacks skill in the more academic or "scientific" methods. Seibt suggests, "Her impressionistic criticism carries within it the clear critical opinions of a writer who is consciously and purposefully eschewing the academic formats and formulas" (83). I would argue that Woolf's method, which Fishman would call the lack of a method, is extremely purposeful and that it proves her eagerness to see women, and for that matter, other groups that had been heretofore excluded from the literary world, gain access to education, to academic discourse, and to literature. While women had been told for centuries that their "sensibilities," their feelings, were not valid responses to art and that their opinions had been slighted, forced into anonymity, or even suppressed, Woolf validated any reader's immediate response. Her project was not to democratize reading so much so that the literary world needed to stoop to a lower level of intelligence and insight, but to encourage readers to learn and take on responsibilities. With reading would come the sensitivity to enter the conversation that fertilizes the ground for the production of new art, the modern art she awaited. She was not engaged in the vulgarization of art, but in its diversification and progress in a new, psychological dimension that had been barely explored. Precisely these passages best express one of Woolf's central messages: the old conventions, the old language, the accustomed channels were worn out. New art was necessary to

capture modernism. While she had no language to convey what needed to happen in abstract terms, she masterfully made us feel what literature should make us feel.

That she noted down mere emotion is untrue and as I examine one part of her method—the use of extended metaphors and fictive passages in her supposed non-fiction work—the shape of something far beyond emotion should become visible. Mark Schorer considers her criticism “finger exercises” for her fiction and quotes William Plomer, a good friend of Woolf’s, saying that she was “more of a novelist in her criticism than in her novels” (386). But Woolf’s extended imaginative sections that Babbitt or Plomer would dismiss serve a very distinct function for the audience Woolf had in mind. Bell and Ohmann write, “First of all, we like imagery. In an effort to please us, Woolf uses it liberally as cooks use seasoning. Second, we need imagery. Many of the ideas Woolf puts forth, particularly in her aesthetic essays, are essentially abstruse, and images are the fastest, most concrete, and effective means of explanation—that is, if they are of a certain kind: either simple, or striking, or both” (400). Some things, such as infusing a novel with life, are simply impossible to explain as a procedure. Either one has the skill to do it (or to detect the skill) or one doesn’t. Woolf, herself a novelist, writes as early as 1912, “A good novelist, it seems, goes about the world seeing squares and circles where the ordinary person sees mere storm-drift” (I.361). What sets apart a book written by such a talent, Woolf shows—rather than explains—in this beautiful passage:

The thing that really matters, that makes a writer a true writer and his work permanent, is that he should really see. Then we believe, then there arise those passionate feelings that true books inspire. Is it possible to mistake books that have this life for books without it, hard though it is to explain where the difference lies? Two figures suggest themselves in default of reasons. You clasp a



bird in your hands; it is so frightened that it lies perfectly still; yet somehow it is a living body; there is a heart in it and the breast is warm. You feel a fish on your line; the line hangs straight as before down into the sea, but there is a strain on it; it thrills and quivers. That is something like the feeling which live books give and dead ones cannot give; they strain and quiver. (I.361)

Diana Trilling writes dismissively, “at the very moment when [Woolf] is most eagerly grasping for that elusive quality the life in art, it regularly bounces out of her reach” (394). But Woolf does not attempt to give a definition that does in effect what a pinned down butterfly with a label will do for the student who wants to know how it feeds, how it flies, how its days is occupied. She would rather enact that life artistically—she will not teach her writing students by telling, but by showing. As a writer, she knows that she did not learn how to bring about these intangible differences in her fiction by following a procedure. The creation of fictional life goes beyond the recreation of a certain color with a specific proportionality of the right liquids. No science experiment comes out with live creatures. No procedural writing instruction comes out with live fiction—that is her message.

Beth Daugherty argues that Woolf learned part of her approach to essay writing as she taught at Morley College, as she struggled to make history, literature, and composition accessible to working women (“VW Teaching”). Though her diary and letters show that she doubted her own adequacy to relate to her students, to choose appropriate subject matter, or to relate it engagingly, it must have led her to consider the business of reviewing for a general audience in a different light than T. S. Eliot would have had to, writing for such rarefied audiences all his life. She definitely could not entertain men or women who had spent all day at a regular job with straight lecture about British history. She had to be creative and she attests to a fear of dullness in

several diary entries. Bell and Ohmann assert in relation to the near-fictional portions of Woolf's criticism, "at one level, Woolf is entertaining us, but at another, she is instructing us" (400). She captures the *Zeitgeist*, the prevalent tales and legends of an era, and various developments in the arts—all with narratives that are half-fictional in their particulars but all based in truth and principles and often heavily metaphorically.

Her reviews of life writings—whether autobiographies, collections of letters, diaries, or biographies reconstructed from these materials—usually take excursions among genres: they typically end with literary criticism, but usually begin or digress into biographical essays themselves. And, Woolf wrote, that it is "the test of a good biography is that it leaves us with the impulse to write it all over again" (III.257). In these essays she allows flights of fancy to overtake her, an imaginatively inclined reader: she places herself in the shoes of a character and the book's setting. Conjuring the texture of relationships portrayed she conveys what kind of a bygone or otherwise inaccessible world we can add to our stock of imaginary worlds as we read. With sufficient engagement in the dialogues of artistic creation and sufficient reading, then, good literature will make out of a reader at least a potential writer.

The *TLS* reviewer of the time had an audience of a large, and therefore various, segment (about 20,000 subscribers) of the "upper- and upper-middle class" in mind (Kaufman 137). Woolf conceived of her contemporary essay readers as "busy people catching trains in the morning or [...] tired people coming home in the evening" (IV.223). When she considers in "Professor of Life," a 1926 review of Sir Walter Raleigh's letters, who would need to be taught how to read critically, she includes, "city magnates, politicians, school-mistresses, soldiers, scientists, mothers of families, country clergymen in embryo" (IV.344)—possibly a cross-section of common readers. To guide this audience through a never-before-seen proliferation of reading

materials, one could not rely on technical criticism. One would have to give the reader an idea how a book read, how it felt, if it was appropriate for leisurely diversion after dinner. Of the characters and atmosphere in Warrenne Blake's *Memoirs of a Vanished Generation*, a collection of letters and diaries of the Knox family Woolf reflects,

It seems very probable that such people were alive in the year 1840; it is comfortable to imagine that the world before our time was so cheerful a place. Much of our history has to do with the deeds of such men and women in the mass; and to read their trivial family letters is like standing on the hearthrug in the firelight and listening to evening gossip. (I.241)

The book makes perfect after-dinner reading—cheerful, comfortable like sitting by a warming fire in the hearth, like evening gossip; in fact, we do not have to trouble ourselves much to imaginatively transport ourselves to a different environment. Don't we know, after reading the above passage, when this might be a most satisfactory read and when it might seem too slight, too trivial?

Conveying such emotions was certainly not Woolf's only talent. Much of her critical commentary goes far beyond capturing moods and emotions and assures us that Woolf is more than a common reader herself. In the following passage, clearly the writer and editor in her is speaking: "Mrs. Blake might have given us more of what we value and saved us much labour had she been artist as well as editor. The book might have been half the size; she might have brought out a distinct shape, according to her conception, by skilful quotation and comment" (I.241). She knows editorial skill when she sees it and it is not in evidence here: the material is neither well selected, nor is the commentary useful—it is altogether not quite user-friendly because of its bulk

and raw format. Her experience in selecting works worthy of and ready for publication by the Hogarth press is further evident in this comment:

we cannot pretend that Mrs Blake's solution—of publication—seems to us in this case entirely the right one. If we look for new lights upon distinguished people we are disappointed; if we look for wit and style we are given something that was never meant to be read outside the schoolroom, and if we dismiss all thoughts of art, and ask simply for human nature in the raw, it must be confessed that the Knox family was in no way extraordinary. (I.240)

Woolf is clearly an uncommon reader with insight into all sides of a book's production and reception and weaves all these insights into her review essays. Common and exceptional readers can draw from her reviews what they need to evaluate how a book might benefit them.

In her review of Walter Jerrold's biography of Thomas Hood, Woolf muses,

A student of letters is so much in the habit of striding through the centuries from one pinnacle of accomplishment to the next that he forgets all the hubbub that once surged around the base; how Keats lived in a street and had a neighbour and his neighbour had a family—the rings widen indefinitely; how Oxford Street ran turbulent with men and women while De Quincey walked with Ann. And such considerations are not trivial if only because they had their effect upon things that we are wont to look upon as isolated births, and to judge, therefore, in a spirit that is more than necessarily dry. (I.159)

If we see only pinnacles, we come away with an impression of a world hardly inhabited, only by men and women who are, in our memories and in our legends, larger-than-life. I would argue that it is when she comes upon books that lack this quality of life that Woolf most frequently veers

into what many critics have called impressionism. In the above passage, though it only hints at narrative, we begin to see the style, the detail, the stories Woolf suggests we are missing. She conjures up what we might have received had the account been closer to reality. She does not indulge in impressionistic chatter, the uncontrolled release of emotions and sensory impressions, in order to avoid real criticism and analytic thinking or because she is incapable of it; she creates the mood and atmosphere she would like to advocate. This is one of many times that Woolf shows where the subjects of her critical essays fall short of life, where they remain sterile and aloof from the real thing. Instead of abstractions that would leave other writers faced with a similar task without prompt to do better, she offers readers a starting point—what kind of history do we need? And won't you help us to write it?

The above passage also touches on the fact that history consists first and foremost of people, and people all have different perceptions, varying consciousnesses. Judith Allen argues in her dissertation that Woolf's strategy of fictionalizing in the essay genre draws our eye to the problematic nature of factuality—what is fact, what is truth, and who is to say? The dichotomy between fact and fiction is frequently broken in Woolf's essays and we can hardly tell which parts of her biography reviews come from the (supposedly) factually researched biography upon which it is based, what of that is the imagination of the biographer, and as a third tier: where does Woolf insert her imagination and simply take us on a flight of fancy?

Her talents for fiction enable her reader to step inside the curtain with her. Woolf, being herself a critic, has the insider knowledge of how to populate the reader's mental stage necessary to grant her readers a dress-rehearsal glimpse of what the full performance might be like. Pacey writes, "She has a genius for summing up a writer's essential quality in a brief, vivid, and metaphorical sentence" (392). Her appraisal of Mary Russell Mitford is a case in point. She

describes her as “readable—well-preserved , as we say of some trim, hale old spinster who has been ravaged by passion or lost her figure in child-bearing” (III.214). This metaphor by no means evades abstraction for lack of ability. It is simply richer. She could have written, Mitford was unenviable, no one would could feel jealous of her; her eminently skilled writing lacked that passion that she had never experienced. She was readable, but unexciting, dull, maybe a bit depressing. All this is contained in that short metaphor. But Woolf proffers a quick, expressive way to make us feel what her books would make us feel—in a way that my abstractions could not accomplish as effectively. She sums up and leaves us with a complete and memorable impression that is sure to cross our minds should the name of Mitford on the spine of a volume in our favorite antique shop ever catch our eye. Augustine Birrel, on the other hand, has the opposite effect upon us: the “witty quarto volume produces upon a mind long habituated to decorous wedlock with the portly great” British biographies a “sense of illicit freedom, of unhoped-for adventure” (III.255). And, because she knows her audience—“that dear old governess, the British Public” (IV, 262), as she calls it elsewhere—she confesses that, of course, her analogy to an affair is “in the worst of taste,” but then, it has made its mark. Hasn’t it aroused interest? She playfully draws her readers in with her metaphors and analogies and tempts her readers quite literally to partake in her favorite pleasure: reading.

Last, but not least, many such passages demonstrate that wit that makes her essays so enjoyable to read and betrays some of her personal prejudices that do not make her a greater critic, but without doubt more human. Her commentary on American writers evidences many skilful evocations of images or emotions that makes us smirk though we ourselves may have harbored an admiration for the writer discussed. Such a feeling befalls me when I read her commentary on “the typical American defect of over-ingenuity and an uneasy love for

decoration; as though they had not yet learnt the art of sitting still” (I.297). In Henry James, she spots the “American love of old furniture [...]. His characters are [...] are somehow tainted with the determination not to be vulgar; [...] they have an enormous appetite for afternoon tea; their attitude not only to furniture but to life is more that of the appreciative collector than of the undoubting professor” (II.348). Woolf’s critical writing is superbly evocative and wonderfully suited to teach; the student finds himself so well entertained that learning becomes a joy and a desire.

*Role of the Critic—Foster with Sympathy or Cleanse with Harshness?*

*As for the critic, whose task it is to pass judgments on the books of the moment, let him think of them as the anonymous activities of free craftsmen working under the lash of no master, but obscurely, with ardour, and in the interest of a great writer who is not yet born. Let him therefore be generous of encouragement, but chary of bestowing wreaths which fade and coronets which fall off. Let him see the present in relation to the future. Let him, in short, slam the door upon the cosy company where butter is plentiful and sugar cheap, and emulate rather that gaunt aristocrat, Lady Hester Stanhope, who kept a milk-white horse in her stable in readiness for the Messiah, and was forever scanning the mountain*

*tops, impatiently, but with confidence, for the first signs of His approach.*

*The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 3, 359*

Virginia Woolf's essays as a whole give an impression of a sympathetic, mostly encouraging critic. A writer herself, she intends to "keep the atmosphere in a right state for the production of works of art" (II.129), always mindful not to stifle creativity with fault-finding, snobbery, or with prescriptiveness. The office of a critic does not include a license to demean. Whoever writes criticism with the "arrogance of a judge rather than the more valuable insight of a fellow sinner" (III.65) has missed the mark. Desmond Pacey praises, "She never essays the role of pontiff, nor speaks with academic condescension" (388). Woolf commends a critic who makes her want to read Meredith all over again (II.274) because it is love for reading that a critic should bestow on readers. She corrects herself after a fairly negative appraisal of Frank Swinnerton's *September* and states, "praise ought to have the last word and the weightiest" (III.104). Sympathetic criticism stimulates all involved. She explains, "where there is warmth of feeling, everything else, it seems, easily follows—the nicest discriminations, the most daring conjectures, illuminations and felicities clustering on top of another" (III.116). At the end of reading George Moore's enthusiastic section on Turgenev in *Avowals* she is utterly satisfied: "we feel that we know him better because we have seen him through the eyes of someone who loves him" (III.118).

Woolf's execution of this beneficent attitude is easily seen, because in distilled form, in her short notices that are usually about books deemed unworthy of longer treatment and condemned to fairly short-lived attention. One author with whom Woolf was not exceptionally



impressed is William Edward Norris. And still her publication notices of his works, sometimes several in a year, always contain an acknowledgment of something valuable. Though it becomes clear enough in Woolf's 1905 notice of his *Barham of Beltana* that it lacks probability, innovation, and effort, she closes her statement with a concession: "The present novel will not sadden; it will not excite; but it will provide an hour or two of healthy entertainment; and that, we imagine, is a result with which the author would declare himself content" (I.37). Though the overall notice includes some sarcasm regarding his adherence to passé conventions, this closing appears to be free of malice. It acknowledges the purpose of this particular novel and reaches for a fitting measuring stick. The critic who holds an author to standards he had no intention to reach for is foolish. In her review of Norris's *Lone Marie*, she acknowledges where his talents lie and where they do not: he draws characters well enough to introduce them thoroughly, but then fails to lead them through their lives consistently and patiently enough for us to see them truly developed. His style is pleasant, his technique well under his control. So in the end, she can again show the reader what Norris has accomplished within the realm of his possibilities: "we have every reason to thank Mr Norris for a delightful and delicate piece of work which if it does not reach the highest standard of contemporary fiction it is still further removed from the average level" (I.66). Indeed, in 1919, reviewing *The Obstinate Lady*, she points to the "good results of having proved your skill so often that you know to a hairsbreadth how far it will serve you" (III.43). And still, she does not hesitate to identify "signs of maturity: a few to be frank, of middle age" (III.42) in her witty, sarcastic style. She does not flinch from decrying incongruous concessions to "the spirit of the age." She dislikes the soporific sense of safety we feel in reading *The Triumphs of the Sea* because it "rests upon such false foundations" (III.180) and because the novel cannot quite excite us. Nevertheless, there is value to it. Woolf balances and considers

motivation and circumstance against the end result. It is doubtful whether one universal standard to which all books would have to live up could satisfy every kind of reader. Melba Cuddy-Keane summarizes Woolf's attitude poignantly: "while there may be bad books, there are no books that are bad to read" (172). There is something to be learned from just about every writer.

In all this sympathy, she dislikes critics who hem and haw and stall to pronounce a judgment as to whether the book under scrutiny is any good; she is impatient to hear a "definite verdict" (I.15). She commends Alice Meynell who "knows what her standards are, and applies them as she reads" (II.176). She specifically likes Joseph Conrad's criticism for his unwavering conviction as he assigns both praise and blame (III.290). She has little patience for W. L. George who "rambles" about literature inconclusively; she accuses him of having "no perspective, no security" (II.257). She dislikes cautious vagueness. She is bothered by the "sonorous general statements [...] which it is difficult to bring into relation with actual books and facts" (II.143). Coventry Patmore habitually, and unpleasantly, pronounces a philosophy based on a few authors whom it fits like a glove and then applies it to others who "can only be made to fit by taking a knife to their edges" (III.311). Generalities, sweeping judgments, and oversimplifications irritate Woolf tremendously. In fact, clear and definite criticism is the only "fruitful criticism because it helps us define our own vaguer conceptions" (III.309). In short, common readers come up with enough unclear ideas about a work of art themselves; they read criticism to sharpen their impressions and find more precise language to express their thoughts. This call for clear judgments sounds like a contradiction to her resistance to labeling. She was likely torn between her impatience with vagueness and her dislike of categorization. But is it not possible to distinguish successes and failures while resisting complete condemnation or unreserved approval? To Woolf, one failure is no reason for dismissal, and one success does not make a

genius. Mediocrity can be instructive and many kinds of books can satisfy a variety of readers and needs.

Woolf thought a critic should be unconcerned with being agreeable. Sympathy should spring from another motivation besides eagerness to please. In fact, the critic who eagerly agrees with all undermines her own purpose. Again and again she calls for sincerity in the profession. Alice Meynell meets her expectations: she is “courageous, authoritative, and individual” (II.176). Stephen Paget receives her approbation for the same reason: “the essayist is wonderfully at his ease, careless of what people may think of him, and convinced that any pretence is waste of time” (II.63). But how unconcerned could Woolf or other reviewers really be about what other people thought about her reviews, especially what the editors of the respective magazines thought? Andrew McNeillie comments on the limits to authorial freedom that reviewers always experienced: “Writing for an editor, writing for payment, under the pressure of deadlines, entailed, even at its freest, compromises and courtesies of a kind not exacted in writing fiction, or diaries, or letters. To the reviewer, suavity, politeness and the sidelong approach were, it seemed, inescapable” (I.xvi). The only way to be published as a critic, besides in book-length collections like the *Common Reader*, published by Hogarth, was through an editor. Most editors exercised some decision-making power over the final state in which a review would go into print. In January 1922, Woolf wrote in her diary, after she received several of Richmond’s revisions to her submissions, “it is odd how stiffly one sets pen to paper when one is uncertain of editorial approval” (D 3 January 1922). Woolf, too, caught herself at times not entirely careless about approval. She was further aware of its impact on her writing and judgments and wished she could escape it. She begins her review of George Moore in *Vogue* magazine (1925) in the following manner: “The only criticism worth having at present is that which is spoken, not written—spoken

over wine glasses and coffee cups late at night, flashed out only on the spur of the moment by people passing who have not time to finish their sentences, let alone consider the dues of editors or the feelings of friends” (IV, 260). She begins her review as with a disclaimer— evidently because she could not escape the need to make herself agreeable at least to editors any more than her colleagues.

Woolf wants sympathetic but honest criticism, neither ingratiation, nor flattery—the sympathetic strain must be genuine. Can one have it both ways? In fact, Woolf expects a critic to be disinterested in either direction. Woolf gets frustrated with J. B. Priestley’s *Figures in Modern Literature* because he is determined to appreciate at all costs. She writes, “Mr Priestley might have grazed a good deal closer to his subjects without doing them violence or losing them readers” (III.441). Very distanced, very polite criticism that merely describes and “appreciates” does not do what a reader should be able to expect. Nor does Woolf think a critic does the author a service with such exaggerated caution. A good book deserves to be measured with other good books (IV.389). Judgment should be qualified, well-thought out, and nuanced. Figures such as Arnold Bennett, A. E. Housman, George Santayana, and others whom Priestley discusses, Woolf asserts, “are worth taking seriously. They have no need to be wrapped in cocoons of cotton-wool. They can hold their own, not merely with their contemporaries, but with the masters in their own lines” (III.441-42). If we skim the surface of their works so as not to happen upon any inconsistencies or flaws, we deny ourselves the richness of their writing. Apparent flaws or jarring newness might be the side effects of innovation that will open doors to psychological complexities yet uncharted.

Even the figures literature students and lovers have revered for centuries ought to be subjected to scrutiny every once in a while. She praises Coleridge for his effort to reexamine

whether the classics still deserve their pedestals (II.221). W. Walter Crotch, on the other hand, writes enthusiastically of Dickens, but is “too much of an admirer to help us to interpret” because he does not compare judiciously. All his reading from Shakespeare to Hawthorne was done “to the glory of Charles Dickens” (III.26). He goes so far as to deny influences on his favorite as if it would demean Dickens’s genius to have learned from others. That the author under scrutiny is still living should not deter an honest appraisal either: W. L. George, though Woolf does not rate his critical abilities very highly overall, receives some credit for “the courage with which he has faced his contemporaries” (II.256). When she herself writes about E. M. Forster, not only a contemporary but also a friend, she is honest. She praises what delights, but also speaks her disappointment in her review of *A Room with a View*: the design does not satisfy her; he belittles the characters (I.222). We find that same honesty in her review of Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl* which was published shortly before James’s death. She is enamored with his “exquisite felicity of words” and his perceptiveness (I.22, 23). She thinks that “there is no living novelist whose standard is higher, or whose achievement is so consistently great” (24). Yet, she calls it as it is: the plot “is of the slightest” (22), and “we suffer from a surfeit of words,” which takes away from the delicate subtleness she so appreciates in a writer’s style (23). The characters do not come to life (23). An average reader might suppose herself at fault for struggling with the verbose prose or for enjoying a “slight” book’s easy flow if the intellectual elitist cliques continue to praise each other without criticism and heap on the criticism for the “lesser” writers. But Woolf brings great literature to a more accessible level—a book can, in fact, be great without succeeding in every imaginable aspect. A book that may not make the canon can still delight, instruct, and even inspire.

A few critics have accused Woolf of being an appreciator rather than a critic. And at first read, Woolf's criticism might seem overly kind. Solomon Fishman maintains that Woolf's criticism was for the most part motivated by professional interests: "Almost exclusively her criticism was an attempt to locate the virtues which differentiate greatness in fiction, and to establish a scale of values" (380). If that were the case, Woolf would never have thought far enough to find fault with any piece of writing. Her private correspondence complicates the impression. In a letter to Madge Vaughn, dated mid-December 1904, Woolf writes, "My real delight in reviewing is to say nasty things; and hitherto I have had to [be] respectful" (*L I*, 166–67). We have established that Woolf wanted essayists to infuse their pieces with their personalities. If we can take it for truth that she preferred to say "nasty things," should not Woolf's essays be a lot less sympathetic? Is this sympathetic persona we see throughout most of her essays a product of guidelines and editorial policies? Which is the pose: gentility or heartlessness? Is the surprising vehemence of the letter to Vaughn a hint of a young and inexperienced writer's immense patience, a writer who feels ready to flex her professional muscles before the end of her apprenticeship? Before sending the very first of her essays to Lyttleton to be considered for publication, Woolf writes to Dickinson, "I dont [sic] in the least want Mrs L's candid criticism; I want her cheque! I know all about my merits and failings better than she can from the sight of one article" (*L I*.154). When the relief of Mrs. Lyttleton's acceptance has tempered her anxiety and flattered her writerly pride a little, she sobers up and writes to Violet to bring Lyttleton's remarks on the essay to her and that "her criticisms however stringent will be well worth attending to" (*L I*.155). Beth Rigel Daugherty ascribes the sympathetic style to professional courtesy that Woolf gradually learned in the course of her career as a reviewer. She points to Woolf's statement that she found herself "distrusting the

critical attitude of mind” (“Virginia Stephen” 10). This indicates that though Woolf’s natural tendency might have gone towards less kindness, the rules of the trade and her own distrust led her to keep her more biting criticism to the reading notes and her diaries and letters and convert it to a lighter-hearted sarcasm in her published reviews. In “Hours in a Library,” Woolf claims that in reading our contemporaries, we discover new kinds of good and bad, new standards, new aims, so that “there can be no secret vanity” in our interest (II.57). I suppose that this secret vanity is what Woolf suspected in her critical attitude.

Andrew McNeillie points out in his introduction to the first volume of his edition of the essays “how important her correspondence is in revealing the sharp (and usually amusing) clashes that could arise between her ‘true’ or private opinions about a book and those she published.” But he amends that “for the most part, she proved a generous reviewer” (xvi). I will briefly review a few clashes. In regards to Elizabeth von Arnim’s *Fräulein Schmidt and Mr Anstruther*, she writes to Violet that she wanted to “scourge that Fine Lady, the Baroness—Kitties friend: it is chatter and trash.” We owe the published version to Bruce Richmond’s editing: he “cut and tamed it” (L I.295). A rereading of Dickens leaves her so unsatisfied that she writes in a letter to Margaret Llewelyn, “I used to think David Copperfield a masterpiece; but having read *Hard Times* lately, I was disgusted and disappointed. It seemed to me mere sentiment and melodrama, and your boasted zest for life, nothing but rant and rage” (L II.166). Her review “David Copperfield,” published not six months later discusses some major flaws: Dickens is too attached to his convictions, lacks charm, and in the incessant action of his novels there is no time to examine feelings. She does not mince words. But she tempers the disgust and disappointment expressed in the letter tremendously—in fact, according to the review, these sentiments are not even her own: “The rumour about Dickens is to the effect that his sentiment is disgusting and his

style commonplace; that in reading him every refinement must be hidden and every sensibility kept under glass” (IV.285). She qualifies her statement as she should in a published essay of criticism. But she does not even own up to her sentiments—possibly because she again distrusts her critical attitude? Or because she knows that Dickens is dearly beloved by her readers and that disgust will be censored by the *Nation and Athenaeum*, or if published, hardly well-received? It would be a mistake to say that Woolf was immune to snobbery or to public opinion.

Truly “nasty things” are rare in Woolf’s criticism but occasionally she expresses a sort of professional embarrassment in response to a grievous flaw and, as a reader, bristles at an insult to her taste. In reference to Walter Lionel George, her sarcasm turns caustic:

Mr George is one of those writers for whom we could wish, in all kindness of heart, some slight accident to the fingers of the right hand, some twinge or ache warning him that it is time to stop, some check making brevity more desirable than expansion. He has ideas and enthusiasms, prejudices and principles in abundance, but in his fluency he repeats himself, bolsters up good arguments with poor illustrations, and altogether uses more paper than the country can well afford. (II.255)

Hardly anywhere in Woolf do we find an impulse to curtail anyone’s freedom of expression.

However, principles and prejudices do push her buttons, as do all hobby-horses. She calls

Vincent Brown’s novel *Mrs Grundy’s Crucifix* a crusade against “Philistines,” the rich and the respectable, and cannot help but speak sarcastically of the “circus of small country town” where the novel is set. She indicates that “the reader may guess what this prologue implies” for the rest of the novel (I.111). In short, all her disappointment shows through before she closes as follows:



“This is all the more to be regretted because Mr Brown is clever,” but she just does not have patience for such polemical fiction. Hobby-horses do not meet with her kindness.

As we will see in the coming section, the revelation of character was for Woolf the purpose of modern fiction. Bad character drawing plainly frustrated her and reminded her that she still had to wait for the discovery of adequate psychologically complex portrayals. Though John Galsworthy would go on to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1932 (McAuley), his characters in *Beyond* exasperate Woolf. He easily had age and experience to be beyond pathetic naïveté. She writes with amusing sarcasm,

In Mr. Galsworthy’s new novel the people fill us with alarm, because they appear all more or less under the influence of the great narcotic and therefore not quite responsible for their actions. They have been hunting all day for so many generations that they are now perpetually in this evening condition of physical well-being and spiritual simplicity. With minds one blur of field and lane, hounds and foxes, they make sudden and tremendous decisions marked by the peculiar lightness and boldness of those who are drugged out of self-consciousness by the open air. Just before they drop off to sleep they decide that they must marry tomorrow, or elope with a housemaid, or challenge someone to fight a duel. This of course is exaggeration, but some theory of the kind must be fabricated to explain this rather queer book, *Beyond*. (II.152)

This is a matter of improbability and credibility. Well-drawn characters must live their lives fairly consistently and as reasonably as the rest of their demeanor would let us suppose. A novelist, of course, has license to create a character who is not sensible, but if characters are not set up to be generally out of their minds, their actions should support that.

Another sin of misproportion is committed by an adamant fan of Charles Dickens: W. Walter Crotch. In his version of literary history, all writers are subsumed under Dickens as the inspiration of the later generations or the necessary culmination of all good literature that all the predecessors were just waiting for. In fact, all authors have taken their ideas from him or foreshadowed him mysteriously. Woolf comments with sharp humor, “If everybody is, in a way, somebody else, would it not be simpler to call them all Charles Dickens and have done with it?” (III.27). Frederic Harrison finds himself on the opposite side of the coin—not on the side of too much admiration, but too much deprecation. He believes that he has a certain monopoly on “Truth” (note the capital “T”), as a survivor of a select group of enlightened individuals. Woolf interjects biting, “With a little more diffidence he might have mitigated some of his sarcasms against the moderns and—who knows?—have read some of their books” (III.64). Trystan Edwards’s argument that nature dislikes duality and this is why the Holy Ghost must exist and why trousers invite “disrespect” is simply laughable to Woolf and she makes no pretense to taking any of his theories seriously (III.312–14). Woolf never uses her sharp tongue unfairly against those who are still just learning, or those who simply disagree with her. Those who invite her ridicule can generally boast an established position in the literary world but have nonetheless not learned their lessons of probability and proportion. So they blow theories out of proportion, insist on a certain argument beyond reason, or illustrate one kind of emotion or character ad nauseam. In some cases, perhaps, she hides her deprecation of a certain author behind humor. Dubino asserts, “Woolf couched her censure or, perhaps, more accurately, criticism, in a cloak of irony—hence the note of jollity does prevail, even if, lurking underneath its surface, is, at times, an exacting critique—or, perhaps, loud laughter” (134). Woolf was by no means eager to approve at all costs, even to the point of compromising principles. She was not afraid to offend. But as a

writer who hoped for the contemporary artistic environment to shape and nurture new and more insightful fiction, she was careful not to poison the soil with acidic commentary. If you have not yet had quite enough of this brand of humor, you will find a sampling or two sprinkled throughout the rest of my discussion.

#### 4. WOOLF ON FICTION

Woolf was a fiction writer, neither a poet, nor a dramatist (she did not even review drama frequently) nor primarily a biographer like her father. Though I do not think that she reviewed only to learn for her own fiction writing, I do think that she was most at home, most energetic, innovative, and expressive when she reviewed fiction. So I will now move from her ideas on criticism to her ideas on fiction.

##### *Innovation*

Woolf wrote, “writers, if they are worth their salt, never take advice. They always run risks” (III.321). And such risk comes with pitfalls and dangers, failures and half-successes that readers must allow before new methods have been refined, a new language has been honed, new subject matters have been defined. René Wellek writes, Woolf “pleads that we should tolerate ‘the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary,’ even ‘the failure’ of a new novel, for she believed that ‘we are trembling on the verge of one of the great ages of English Literature’” (420). Specifically, for one such risk-taker, an “explorer,” as she calls L. P. Jacks, Woolf is prepared to make significant concessions: “we can forgive him some wanderings which seem to lead nowhere and others which end, as far as our eyesight serves us, in a fog” (II.209). But, Woolf and many others always confront innovation with some anxiety. Woolf’s commentary on D. H. Lawrence illuminates how torn she felt about her anticipation of a new type of novel. In her overall disappointed review of *The Lost Girl*, she gives a glimpse of what makes reviewing a contemporary so difficult and how the common reader would have struggled with this new literature: She finds herself “distracted by [...] preconceptions of what Mr Lawrence was to give us” and confesses, “We watched for signs of [the heroine’s] development nervously, for we

always dread originality, yet with the sense that once the shock was received we should rise braced and purified” (III.272). For in such cases of originality, as in the case of Dorothy Richardson, who has chosen an original method, there is no “slipping smoothly down the accustomed channels” for the critic or the common reader (III.10).

However, it was time, she thought, for this new novel.<sup>11</sup> She shares Dorothy Richardson’s “genuine conviction of the discrepancy between what she has to say and the form provided by tradition for her to say it in” that Woolf distinguishes in *The Tunnel* (1919). She continues, “She is one of the rare novelists who believe that the novel is so much alive that it actually grows” (III.10). Woolf requests that modern literature “reflect this re-arrangement of our attitude—these scenes, thoughts, and apparently fortuitous groupings of incongruous things which impinge upon us with so keen a sense of novelty.” She hopes for literature to “give it back into our keeping, whole and comprehended” (III.357). So Richardson chooses a method more adept to capture the experience of modernism. She emphasizes above all the consciousness of her main character, stripped of all trappings and conventions—the mind as “the very oyster within the shell” (III.11). Woolf describes the purpose thus, “the method, if triumphant,” which Woolf does not think it to be entirely, “should make us feel ourselves seated at the centre of another mind, and, according to the artistic gift of the writer, we should perceive in the helter-skelter of flying fragments some unity, significance, or design” (III.11). In the necessary and realistic fragmentation of the modern novel, the unity comes with the psychological penetration that gives it life, that makes the frog hop. To the experienced readers of Woolf’s novels—where syllables from the passers-by, thoughts, and street noises all mix to obscure and make meaning as a typical modern day impresses itself upon the characters—this description must ring some bells of recognition. And we can glean from her essays that, like Richardson, she saw the old conventions as so worn out

that truth could no longer reach us in those vehicles. “If the old methods are obsolete, it is the business of a writer to discover new ones,” she wrote in 1921 (III.321). Woolf adamantly propped novelty and risk, though as we see above, she admitted how uncomfortable this change could feel.

Some unequivocal and bold advocacy for women speaks from her push for change. Woolf must have believed that a change in the depiction of women in fiction would have an influence on the contemporary mindset. In a 1909 critical essay, Woolf writes that Sheridan possessed a “power to see accepted conventions in a fresh light. He tests the current view of honour; he derides the education that was given to women; he was for reforming the conventions of the stage” (I.308). Woolf touches on a few topics controversial into her own era and especially of concern to her personally: they parallel her recurrent conviction of patriarchy’s crimes against women in the name of honor; *Three Guineas*’ argument that women can hardly be expected to know how to prevent war if they have no access to an education; and her passages on Shakespeare’s fictional sister Judith from *A Room of One’s Own* where she traces how the Shakespeare siblings’ respective careers in the theatre world would likely have played out. She applauds Sheridan’s attack on conventions that she thought were particularly injurious to women. So in discussing a biography that barely mentions the illustrious subject’s wife (III.186), she begins “perhaps...” and trails off into a fictive tangent: what may her life have been like? What did she suffer and what brought her joy? Women had to become part of fiction, of the creative and critical processes, and they had to become alive as characters in order for modern fiction to progress.

Woolf is discontented that elderly women are usually depicted with a belittling and overly protective reverence that robs them of their substance and their reality. In “Character in Fiction,”

Woolf creates Mrs. Brown as a simultaneously “frail” and “heroic” elderly woman (III.425). She endows her with enough pride and tenacity to deny her oppressor to patronize her with gentlemanly politeness—carrying her bag for her. The Edwardians, she claims, would hardly see her as an embodiment of human nature, would not “reveal the soul” (426). Instead, Wells would create a Utopia where she could not exist. Galsworthy would see her as yet another piece of incriminating evidence against society (428). Harry Graham, a biographer, she states with satisfaction, “is not among the devout; he will pay his subject the compliment of believing that it has substance enough to stand close examination, and will not vanish even if he sometimes chooses to laugh at it” (I.211). Leonard Merrick’s novel *Peggy Harper* earns Woolf’s praise because he gives his heroines the attributes, good and bad, of a three-dimensional person: “her cheap prettiness, her artistic incompetence, her vanity, her courage, her poverty, her makeshifts and artifices and endurance” with sympathy (II.268). He does not carefully hide the heroine’s flaws, nor does he try to obscure or conceal them; he rather shows a preference for the humanity of real people over the perfection of prototypes. He shows a woman as a whole person with a healthy awareness of her own circumstances but not as someone who would see herself as a symbol of persecution or misfortune. And he portrays her with all that a regular person possesses: talents, flaws, and passions.

The most exasperating failure in fiction regards conventional portrayal of characters of both genders. Alec John Dawson provides us with the all too familiar types and earns Woolf’s sarcasm: “In those days, apparently, the bottle was the inseparable companion of the old English gentleman, and the squire who had any pretension to humanity ended the day beneath the dinner-table. The villain kept sober, but this is but another proof of the coldness of his heart” (I.38). She

mocks Mary Ward, with some *schadenfreude*, it seems, as an especially representative member of the, thankfully bygone, Victorian style:

None of the great Victorian reputations has sunk lower than that of Mrs Humphrey Ward. Her novels, already strangely out of date, hang in the lumber room of letters like the mantles of our aunts, and produce in us the same desire that they do to smash the window and let in the air, to light the fire and pile the rubbish on top. Some books fade into a gentle picturesqueness with age. But there is a quality, perhaps a lack of quality, about the novels of Mrs Ward which makes it improbably that however much they fade, they will ever become picturesque. Their large bunches of jet, their intricate festoons of ribbons, skilfully and firmly fabricated as they are, obstinately resist the endearments of time. (III.381)

The rubbish consists of the maiden aunts' mantles, the novels. From an avid reader, someone highly unlikely to suggest the burning of books, this proposition, as sarcastic as it might be, is quite harsh. What exactly in her novels is so out of date? She speaks metaphorically of "bunches of jet, their intricate festoons, skilfully and firmly fabricated" (381), ornamentations. The conventional elaborate stage-sets, all described down to doilies and oaken grandfather clocks, could give no insight to the modern reader that would prove useful in her bewildering modern world.

She praises M. Sturge Henderson's *After His Kind* for the "originality of her touch" (I.87)—Henderson drops all accepted conventions of plot development and begins her stories right as an emotional crisis breaks in upon a character and ends them right as the crisis is past. And though Woolf finds some of her writing "abrupt," "angular," and even "strange" (I.86), she detects a peculiar talent for discrimination. Woolf concludes, "we hope that Mrs Henderson will



give us more” (I.87). For what would such “crisis-oriented” writing show us? A character under emotional duress, a glimpse of psychology under tension. She directs the spotlight on characters, their behavior in crisis, their emotions, their thoughts. For that sake she sacrifices: she refuses to waste her energy on cranking out the expected form and technique and would rather sustain her vision of inner life that requires new forms.

Rather than duplicating the conventional heroes and villains that play the parts they have always played and automatically take their place in the traditional dance of society, she demands new characters—individuals we have not seen before who go through situations in which we have not yet looked at the human heart. Luring us out of the “accustomed channels” is precisely what modern writers ought to be doing because those channels no longer lead to understanding; they can no longer represent the modern world. And the new waters we are supposed to test will lead us specifically to a new brand of characters, one of Woolf’s greatest topics of concern in regard to fiction.

### *Character Portrayal*

Most existing scholarship takes Woolf’s ideas on character portrayal solely from her more theoretical and best-known essays such as “Modern Fiction,” “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” and, to a lesser degree, from “Character in Fiction.” The first of these appeared in Woolf’s *Common Reader*. The second was a response to Arnold Bennett’s appraisal of Woolf’s characters in *Jacob’s Room* as unable to survive in the reader’s mind and triggered a series of responses in the *N&A*. The third appeared in T. S. Eliot’s *Criterion*—an avant-garde and prestigious venue. It is easy to see why these essays are thus canonized: they stand in more direct conversation with

ongoing literary debates of the establishment than most of Woolf's other essays. Her early critics, for the most part, slighted these essays as impressionistic. Frank Swinnerton responds to "Character in Fiction" by writing that Woolf "is occupied in receiving intuitions" by introspection, not with the creation of character based on observations of real people (131). But few scholars have tried to cull a precise theory of character development by combing through the whole body of her critical and review essays. If we appreciate Woolf's own preference for the critic who is himself a writer, we may realize that her own experience as a writer speaks precisely from this refusal to make character portrayal a science, a process with simplistic directions to follow. Woolf thought that meticulous vivisection of a character and scrupulous analysis of all technical aspects of a book would not help us to create a three-dimensional, live Mrs. Brown. This, Woolf seems to contend throughout her essays, cannot be taught in technical terms, in exact lists of ingredients or in detailed procedures.

The 1910 essay "Modern Novels" (later substantially revised as "Modern Fiction" for her first *Common Reader* volume) begins to articulate the new character portrayal Woolf experiments with in her own novels and advocates in her essays throughout her career. Scene, plot, and faithfulness to exteriors are mere "handrails" our imagination grasps on the perilous descent into what frightens and truly interests the modern novelist: the "dark region of psychology" (34, 35). Joseph Hergesheimer's Millie Stopes (from *Wild Oranges*) proves unsatisfactory because "she is a silhouette posed a trifle melodramatically against the sunset; and, as usual, the sunset is more vivid than the woman. There is something set and sterile about her" (III.140). In its worst form such a depiction neglects humanity in favor of inanimate things and abstract concepts. George Oliver Onions in his utopian novel *The New Moon* falls into this trap: "too much stress seems to be laid on the development of electricity and too little upon the

development of humanity” (II.285). Richard Lupton White writes in his dissertation chapter on Woolf that she “is clearly bored by characters who exist through and are defined by their relationships to things rather than to ideas” (212). And this is what she takes issue with in the books of the “materialists” as she calls Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells, and John Galsworthy. They were under the misconception that characters must be “dressed down to the last button in the fashion of the hour” (III.33). In “Modern Novels,” she launches an attack on Bennett.<sup>12</sup> She claims he was “trying to hypnotise us into the belief, that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there” (III.430). She thought that the materialists elaborately created worlds while their characters remained shells, but without the sound of the ocean in them.

What she wants, then, is psychology. For the moderns, psychology is no longer easy. Modern life assaults their characters with “a myriad of impressions” always surrounding us as if with a “semi-transparent envelope, or luminous halo” through which we each see reality quite differently (33). In “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” she declares that a character “changes the shape, shifts the accent, of every scene in which she plays her part” (III.387). No neutral or all-encompassing perspective is actually accessible to the writer. The perceptions of one mind at a time get nearer the truth than omniscience—a perspective no writer can truthfully claim for him- or herself. Mrs. Brown is elusive because the essence of another person is so hard to know. Woolf frequently holds up the Russians as exemplary in their character portrayals. Though theirs “are characters without any [physical] features at all,” we are led into the “dark, terrible, and uncharted” territory of the human soul (III.386). She comments on Dostoevsky:

we are often bewildered because we find ourselves observing men and women from a different point of view from that to which we are accustomed. We have to get rid of the old tune which runs so persistently in our ears, and to realise how

little of our humanity is expressed in that old tune. Again and again we are thrown off the scent in following Dostoevsky's psychology; we constantly find ourselves wondering whether we recognise the feeling that he shows us, and we realize constantly and with a start of surprise that we have met it before in ourselves, or in some moment of intuition have suspected it in others. But we have never spoken of it, and that is why we are surprised. (II.86)

The surprise at ourselves, the insight that goes beyond superficial self-reflection, is Woolf's elusive holy grail in fiction writing. She commends Ellinor Mordaunt for "feeling and finding expression for an emotion that escaped [the Victorians] entirely" (II.44). The emotion she refers to appears to be a sense of independence of thought and action on the part of the heroine. Woolf wanted to create in fiction a safe space to explore what frightened her contemporaries, to trespass beyond the safety fences everyone had respected for so long. Characters should venture into daring psychological journeys, and their authors follow them into the ugly, the sad, and the frightening that the moderns could no longer escape by denial.

What she wants to see of a character is Mrs. Brown's temperament, her variability in feelings and qualities, and she wants to see her portrayed so three-dimensional that she can survive in our minds independently of the novel from which she originated. Some few earlier writers had discovered this psychological dimension but obviously not succeeded in setting a trend. In "Characters in Fiction," she holds up *War and Peace*, *Vanity Fair*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Madame Bovary*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Mayor of Castorbridge*, and *Villette* as examples of books from which you remember "some character who has seemed to you so real (I do not by that mean so lifelike) that it has the power to make you think not merely of itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes—of religion, of love, of war, of peace, of family life, of balls in country

towns, of sunsets, moonrises, the immortality of the soul” (III.426). She echoes this sentiment in her 1913 *TLS* essay “Jane Austen.” Woolf praises Austen, “Her characters are so rounded and substantial that they have the power to move out of the scenes in which she placed them into other moods and circumstances” (II.14). And isn’t it true that anybody who has read Austen with any care at all could easily impersonate Eleanor Dashwood at any moment in modern life and say exactly what she would very likely have said had she been present? We do know Austen’s characters because they reveal themselves in exquisite dialogue, letters, ruminations, and, beyond that, in the way they go for walks, or furiously play the piano, or withdraw to the study. As we read Lady Ritchie’s fiction, Woolf writes, “we feel that we have been in the same room with the people she describes” (III.18) whereas Bennett’s novels, she claims, do not contain “a man or woman whom we know” (III.387) because we are given tours of their houses but are not admitted into their minds. In light of Bennett’s recent criticism that her characters in *Jacob’s Room* could not survive in the reader’s mind, it would be an interesting study to bring this novel into the comparison.

It is significant, I believe, that Woolf picks Mrs. Brown for her object lesson, a woman, and especially a woman who seems to have undergone some repression at a man’s hand in her presence. She sees reflections of gender stratification and misunderstanding between the sexes in fiction: in general, she observes that women’s male characters are less well-drawn than their women (II.43), that men frequently do not portray good heroines (with exception of the Russians, Flaubert, and a select other few). That writers both male and female learn to draw characters of both genders becomes even more essential because reading was such a universal pastime and the novel had such potential to be democratic: “here simple and learned, man and woman are alike!” (IV.389). But in that sense, every reader should be able to learn from humanity as a whole, not

just from the fragment (sex) the majority of writers happens to represent. In the novel Woolf sees a chance for the underrepresented of her society. It is a potentially anti-authoritarian medium. This attitude speaks from her criticism and the conventions concerning the depiction of women. But the British novel needed reform in other aspects in order to become democratic. She lists among invalid purposes for art a desire to “celebrate the glories of the British Empire” (III.425). She touches on that in a few reviews as well: She denounces patriotism in literature as “an insidious poison” (III.29). Rudyard Kipling’s literary efforts that he appears to have “pursued in the service of Empire,” fatigue and depress her (III.240). Woolf hopes for the novel to remain a more democratic medium so that psychological portrayals can begin to teach us about humanity instead of about the leisured classes only.

But let us return to clarify Woolf’s use of the term “real”: If calling a character “real” does not mean lifelike, then what does it mean to her? McNeillie comments, “she points to quite another kind of verisimilitude from that cultivated by the Edwardians and those she saw to be their mediocre descendants” (III.xiii). And she does: the verisimilitude she requires is one of the inner life, not of the outward reality. She was enamored of the Russians: “Tolstoy seems able to read the minds of different people as certainly as we count the buttons on their coats” (II.78); he gave us “profound psychology” (II.79). Dostoevsky had the ability to “suggest the dim and populous underworld of the mind’s consciousness where desires and impulses are moving blindly beneath the sod” (II.85). She wants an author to acquaint us with the mind and the heart of a character and thereby with our own souls. A writer ought to penetrate all the way into the subconscious, the depths of secret desires, and the conflicts between natural impulses and reason at play far beneath the surface. Richard Lupton White gathers that in Woolf’s opinion “the series of a character’s reflections and reactions to his moment-by-moment existence, rather than a

pattern of events or activities (i.e., plot), should comprise a novel's content and form at the same time" (202). A character thus conceived through her thoughts rather than her trappings, her surroundings, her background draws us in and forces us to live through the moment virtually seated in the character's mind, as we effectively experience in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*: we go through Raskolnikov's agony so vividly that we ourselves find it hard to bear. He becomes so real to us that we feel we have spent time not only with him, but practically in his skin. Such a character has taught us something about life at the end of the novel because we have lived the situation. And what we learn pertains not only to a certain moment in a certain house on a certain street in London or St. Petersburg of 1857. The emotion changes how the reader sees his own world, his own crimes, his own inner conflicts and dark spaces.

In Woolf's new kind of novel, there is no room for types. H. G. Wells has his characters in *Joan and Peter: The Story of an Education* "burdened [...] with the most pernicious or typical views of their decade, humped and loaded with them so that they can hardly waddle across the stage without coming painfully to grief" (II.294). He has heaped his anger for the whole English educational system on his characters and made them abstractions. And thus his massive work comes out to something that bears only "some relation to a work of art" (II.296). It is instead more like a tract or a polemical treatise. When characters are "obedient dolls to be disposed of [who] will fold their limbs and fit into the box when the play is over" (III.274), as she criticizes Joseph Hergesheimer's *Happy End*, or when they are used as allegories as in Henry James's ghost story "The Great Good Place" (III.320), they cannot survive past the last page of the book in our minds. John Davys Bereford's *An Imperfect Mother* makes Woolf think that "conscience can at best play a stepmother's part in the art of fiction. She can keep things neat and orderly, see that no lies are told, and bring up her stepchildren to lead strenuous and self-respecting lives. But

the joys of intimacy are not hers; there is something perfunctory in the relationship” (III.196).

The characters nursed by conscience carry themselves stiffly and unnaturally like children sent to spend a holiday with a stern aunt. They do not speak freely and suppress their thoughts and expressions. As in Bereford’s case, the characters all become “cases,” here for the psychologists, in other novels for confession with the priest. They become types, like the characters from *A Child’s Book of Virtues* or *Aesop’s Fables*, and thus flat, one-dimensional, and uninteresting, and very much unlike real-life people.

Characters ought not to be carbon-copies of the author him- or herself: When Chekhov gives his doctor in “Agafya” the stage, it is “by no means the speech of Tchekhov through a mask: the doctor speaks; he is there, alive, himself, an ordinary man, but he looks at things directly; there is in him too a fibre of individuality which gives out its own sharp vibrations to the touch of life” (II.246). Required for such composition is the ability to empathize with a variety of characters, to understand the blue-collar worker, who is not necessarily part of the writers’ daily circle, as the professor, whose concerns may be much dearer to the author’s own heart. An author as early as George Lillo displayed talent for such character portrayal. Not only did he portray authentic speech, but he was also able to capture feelings as they would have likely been on his characters’ minds. Woolf remarks of his fiction, “his heroes and heroines were not only merchants and clerks, but they felt like merchants and clerks” (II.53). Arnold Bennett, on the other hand, whom she frequently portrays as the poster child of materialist Edwardian fiction, never lets his characters get a word in edge-wise: “We cannot hear the mother’s voice, or Hilda’s voice; we can only hear Mr Bennett’s voice telling us facts about rents and freeholds and copyholds and fines” (III.430).



Character portrayal should be sympathetic, Woolf states repeatedly. Sympathy does not mean indulgence and it does not mean condescension. Authors should not protect characters from scrutiny, from the unflattering light that exposes their foibles because unless we take a look into their passions and their flaws, we will never get to know them. Smoothed and polished characters are “solid rather than interesting” (I.343). Sympathy with characters does not entail that everything has to end well for them. Chekhov earns Woolf’s respect because he showed the poor as poor and the depraved as depraved. He did not romanticize misery—and “in his cruelty, in the harshness of his pictures,” Woolf claims, “especially of the peasants and of their life” is a token “of the only sympathy which is creative” (II.247). This is the only productive kind of sympathy. There is no reward for and no ultimate purpose in sugarcoating the harsh reality. A character who is always rescued at the last minute is not instructive, as readers cannot count on these miraculous rescues in real life; nor does it do justice to the odds that her contemporaries of the working class and the poor of the Victorian age truly had to battle.

The capacity for sympathetic character drawing, Woolf believes, may depend upon a writer’s personal social skills. In Sheridan Woolf sees a “power to get on with ordinary people” (I.308), a humanity that enabled him to study clearly outside his own class. He was able to mingle with a variety of people. That would facilitate close observations of human foibles and passions that remain impossible to the recluse or the aloof. However, there is a balance to be struck: Dostoevsky masterfully portrayed characters because he was “incapable [...] of passing by anything so important and loveable as a man or a woman without stopping to consider their case and explain it” (III.114). His portrayals nevertheless maintain the distance necessary to analyze insightfully. Elizabeth Robins, author of *A Dark Lantern*, on the contrary, possesses the rare gift to live in her characters but not the capacity to take a step back and view them

dispassionately. The result is a relentless intensity, an impression of melodrama, and the reader is unable to take any of these overpowering characters seriously (I.43). The author needs a balance—misanthropy is hardly helpful, but neither is patronizing philanthropy.

In her 1926 review of *A Deputy was King* by Gladys Bronwyn Stern, Woolf begins to describe the difficult process of distilling life into that essence that needs to infuse a novel to make it come alive. The first step of course is to expose oneself to life, and the novelist “can no more cease to receive impressions than a fish in mid-ocean can cease to let the water rush through his gills” (IV.400). But in the process, life deceives the inexperienced novelist:

Stridently, clamorously, life is forever pleading that she is the proper end of fiction and that the more he sees of her and catches of her the better this book will be. She does not add, however, that she is grossly impure; and that the side she flaunts uppermost most is often, for the novelist, of no value whatever.

Appearance and movement are the lures she trails to entice him after her, as if these were her essence, and by catching them he gained his goal. (404)

However, a novel that relies on these appearances fails to make us care what happens to the characters, because nothing can emerge plainly to the reader’s imagination. The stuff that ought to make the final fabric of our story is the “bone and substance upon which our rush of indiscriminating emotion was founded” when we first experienced it and vowed to write it down (401). How this is accomplished, Woolf evidently finds difficult to describe and she calls it a process of “agony” and tumult (401) and of “danger and difficulty” (404). Roughly, “Life is subjected to a thousand disciplines and exercises. It is curbed; it is killed. It is mixed with this, stiffened with that, brought into contrast with something else” (401). It sounds like it has to stand a test of comparison with many other situations, many insights and moments of vision that have

gone before. The stock of life experiences and of distilled wisdom from other books make up the basic fabric onto which the new pattern needs to be stitched.

The passage reminds me of the chemical experiment posed as an analogy in T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent." He explains that "when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide," and only when that piece of platinum is present, the result is "sulphurous acid" that does not contain platinum, nor is the platinum itself affected by the reaction (7). "The mind of the poet," he goes on to suggest, "is the shred of platinum [...]; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material" (8). Thus the mind that has already taken in so many other experiences and digested them, somewhat separate from the immediacy of emotion and impression, can enact the perfect evolution on the material to be infused into fiction, poetry, or any art.

As Woolf is interested in psychology and the dark, uncharted regions of our psyches, she appreciates authors who can portray complexity and resist the temptation of simple solutions. Chekhov resists simplification and makes his readers profoundly uncomfortable, forces them to think and rethink, and this unsettling quality of his work wakes Woolf's enthusiasm. He

produces a queer feeling that the solid ground upon which we expected to make a safe landing has been twitched from under us, and there we hang asking questions in mid air. It is giddy, uncomfortable, inconclusive. But imperceptibly things arrange themselves, and we come to feel that the horizon is much wider from this point of view; we have gained a sense of astonishing freedom. (II.245)

In the end, he raises questions about man's behaviors and feelings instead of answering them, and, Woolf implores, "there may be no answer to these questions, but at the same time let us never manipulate the evidence so as to produce something fitting, decorous, or agreeable to our vanity" (II.245). She embraces the discomfort of a profound novel and the insecurity that might hang around her at the end.

She knows that beauty can equal weakness when it hides difficulty, shame, or covers up despair. Elizabeth Glaskell's stories of the working poor are too refined when they speak about coarse subjects, coarse surroundings, or depict coarse people (I.343). Meredith closes his eyes to ugliness at any cost and as a result lacks heart; his novels show no sympathy for the very real ugliness of an emotional crisis, of the degradation of poverty or depression (II.275). Musing upon the dangers of supernatural elements in stories or digressions into dreams in fiction, Woolf establishes, "But beauty is the most perverse of spirits; it seems as if she must pass through ugliness or lie down with disorder before she can rise in her own person. The ready-made beauty of the dream world produces only an anemic and conventionalized version of the world we know" (III.321). Since we must awake from a dream, its beauty cannot compare with that of a truly happy time after one has passed through pain. Only the whole spectrum of emotions makes life.

Woolf wholeheartedly wants to welcome intellectual rigor in fiction. Of Joseph Conrad she writes, "he does not say the first thing that comes into his head, but the last, which is the result of all that have come before it" (III.289). He resists plucking unripe thoughts and gives them time to mature and grow; he does not make it easy for himself. The next step for intelligent fiction is not to make it too easy on the reader either. L. P. Jacks's method, which derives from philosophy readings and their experimental application to characters, neither produces

masterpieces of character-drawing, nor is conducive to creating complete stories. But Woolf comes away grateful from his book: “But when we rid ourselves of a desire for the dusky draperies of fiction there is no small pleasure in being treated neither as child nor as sultan, but as an equal and reasonable human being. Mr Jacks uniformly achieves this wholesome result by writing with an exactness which gives a sharp idea of his meaning. Nothing is modified out of deference to our laziness” (II.211). She appreciates that Jacks trusts her as a reader enough to offer his thoughts whole and entire in their complexity rather than simplifying into bite-sized nuggets. An oversimplified novel patronizes the reader and denies him the chance to safely examine and learn from the challenging complexity of human emotions rendered in fiction.

## 5. CONCLUSION

It can hardly be said that Woolf was a rebel and wielded immense transformative power on reviewing practices. But after the foregoing study, we can detect a subversive streak in her essays that expresses something of a theory. But rather than a cohesive, smooth, and textbook-ready theory, Woolf's ideas upset and question those kinds of theories. Judith Allen argues that Woolf stands in the tradition of Michel de Montaigne in her essay writing and chooses the essay genre because it lends itself to cultural critique and questioning: "in her essay-writing, Woolf, like her mentor Montaigne, seeks to subvert hierarchies, binary oppositions, closure, the referentiality of language, genre, gender, and the unified self; it is a mode of expression which emphasizes multiple voices, contingency, and process over product" (8). Allen also points out the origin of the word "essay" as coming from *essai*, and French *essayer* (*to try*) and claims that there is a provisional quality to Woolf's essays. She tried out her ideas on fiction, her own and that of others. Her interest in criticism surely derived in part from her work as a novelist but that does not mean, as is frequently implied, that this makes her essays valuable in so far as they shed light on her own fictional works. Woolf's criticism and reviews seek to invite readers to step back and question, to actively engage with their reading, to go beyond consumption and produce a dialogue. In this way she advocated the opposite of an authoritarian system. In her own way and genre she attempted to counteract the remaining authoritarian and patriarchal influences in British society, which had made muted the voices of anyone outside the coterie of upper-class male intellectuals. She also reacted against fascism as it swept over Europe and turned the broad public into "obedient sheep." Therefore she avoids setting doctrines in stone and preaching a system for predecessors. She believed that the multitude of voices, their conflicts and conflict resolutions, the knowledge of the human mind, not just of the scholar's mind, could contribute to

a society where women could play a responsible role, where those labeled “insane” would no longer be neatly separated and silenced.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Since I am using several multi-volume works, I will use the following abbreviated citation style to clarify which I am referring to in parenthetical documentation: hereafter, parenthetical documentation without a title but with Roman numerals designating volume numbers indicate McNeillie's edition of *The Essays*. Quotes from *The Diaries* will be marked by *D* and the date of the entry instead of a volume and page number so that the reader may be able to look up the reference in any edition of the diaries—in this manner: (*D* 28 Nov. 1928). The abbreviation *L* and volume and page number will point to references from *The Letters*.

<sup>2</sup> Many feminists have claimed these essays as foundational texts for their project. The discussions of Woolf as a feminist started in the 1960s and continue on still, despite misgivings about her politics among second-wave feminists. A simple library catalog search with “Virginia Woolf” as a keyword will show that most extant criticism is focused on gendered, or more precisely on feminist, readings. Along with this approach comes an increased acceptance of Woolf's lesbian/bisexual identity and exploration thereof. Elaine Showalter and other feminist critics argue that she failed the feminist project with her call for androgyny and overcoming gender consciousness in fiction writing.

<sup>3</sup> And to be fair, two feminists, Barbara Currier Bell and Carol Ohmann are among the first to post against the dismissals the possibility that some of her idiosyncrasies that make her practice “deviant” could be intentional and indicate an independent program for literary criticism.

<sup>4</sup> She was, of course, Virginia Stephen until 1912, but to avoid confusion, and because she published under the name Woolf for the majority of her career, I will call her Woolf throughout.



<sup>5</sup> Information about individual publications, unless otherwise indicated, is gleaned from McNeillie's volumes 1–4. Publications that published her 1925–28 include *Arts* (New York), *Atlantic Monthly*, *Bermondsey Books* (a quarterly review), *Eve* (fashionable magazine), *Forum* (New York), *Life and Letters*, *New Criterion* (a continuation of Eliot's *Criterion*), *New Republic* (liberal), *New York Herald Tribune*, *Now and Then* (an occasional periodical), *Saturday Review of Literature*, *Time and Tide*, *T. P.'s Weekly*, *Vogue*, *Weekly Dispatch* (a national Sunday paper), and *Yale Review*.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard also wrote reviews during these years and published various other fiction and non-fiction; see May 83–111.

<sup>7</sup> She resented catering to the needs of the readers of the *Guardian* directly: When Mrs. Lyttleton sent back her review on James's *Golden Bowl* to be shortened by a third, she writes in her journal, "So I must cut it down, spoil it, & waste I don't know how many hours work, all because the worthy Patronesses want to read about midwives" (*Passionate Apprentice* 237). She has very little empathy with this particular group—she is simply writing. And maybe she is a little aloof, in a tongue-in-cheek, even sarcastic way—she writes, "the Academy & Literature are so sensible as to wish me to write for them" (*Passionate Apprentice* 239). Daugherty writes that Woolf learned to take audiences and venues into account during her apprenticeship, to write for publication rather than for herself and friends ("Virginia Stephen").

<sup>8</sup> Subsection II "Character Potrayal" in "Virginia Woolf on Fiction" will elaborate on this aspect.

<sup>9</sup> I will return to this idea of bringing imagination to the comprehension of a work later because I think it is a key to a correct interpretation of the passages in Woolf's criticism that have been dismissed as "impressionistic."

<sup>10</sup> This attempt to be scientific and objective by drawing all evidence for the evaluation from the text itself was prevalent in literary studies from the 1940s through the 1960s (Tyson 135–37).

<sup>11</sup> In "How It Strikes a Contemporary," Woolf explains what she thinks has made the break with the past necessary. She mentions the war, "the sudden slip of masses held in position for years"—are these masses the masses of values, the masses of a fabric of ideals and thoughts that she thinks is "shaken [...] from top to bottom" (II.357)? She is by no means alone in this sentiment; the culture of the adolescent and young adult generation in the 1920s was meant as a counter-culture, a complete departure from the previous generation who had told them they would win the war and come forth greater. Instead they had come forth shell-shocked and fragmented, doubting all they had ever believed in, and determined to go a completely different route. Furniture changed, dress fashion changed, music changed, and literature changed as well. After the war and the ensuing changes, "simplicity in language seems insincere, naïve, irreverent to those trapped in the midst of the dizzying modernist vortex, and generally irrelevant to the sense of external complexity that pervades the modern age (Malamud 8)," Randy Malamud writes in the introduction to his book *The Language of Modernism*, which in its entirety examines this phenomenon more deeply than I can accomplish in this work. That Woolf was extremely wary of fascism is well established by the scholars in Merry Pawlowski's collection *Virginia Woolf and Fascism*, Mark Hussey's studies on Woolf and war, and Jane Marcus's work on Woolf's attitude to patriarchy. The rigidity of ideology terrified and appalled her.

<sup>12</sup> Bennett had previously insulted her characters in *Jacob's Room* as unable to survive in the mind. Her attack was probably less than fair and, as McNeillie points on, very damaging to the sales of Bennett's books (III.xvi).

## WORKS CITED

- Allen, Judith. "Virginia Woolf's essayistic practice as cultural critique." Diss. U Delaware 1994.
- Babbitt, Irving. "Impressionist versus Judicial Criticism." *PMLA* 21.3 (1906): 687-705. JSTOR. 2000–2008. Georgia State University Library. Aug. 5, 2008. < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/456769>>
- Bell, Barbara Currier and Carol Ohmann. "Virginia Woolf's Criticism: A Polemical Preface." *Critical Inquiry* 1.2 (December 1974): 361–71. Rpt. in "Virginia Woolf, 1882–1941." *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Vol. 43. Ed. Laurie DiMauro. Detroit : Thomson Gale, 1992. 399–403.
- Bell, Quentin. *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*. 2 vols. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972.
- Birrell, Augustine. Rev. of *More Letters of Edward FitzGerald* by W. A. Wright. *Times Literary Supplement* 17 Jan 1902: 1.
- Brosnan, Leila. *Reading Virginia Woolf's Essays and Journalism: Breaking the Surface of Silence*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh UP, 1997.
- Clutton-Brock, Arthur. Rev. of *The Ballad of the White Horse* by G. K. Chesterton. *Times Literary Supplement* 31 August 1911: 316.
- Daugherty, Beth Rigel. "Virginia Stephen, Book Reviewer: Or, The Apprentice and Her Editors." Eighteenth Annual Virginia Woolf Conference. University of Denver, Denver, Colorado. 20 June, 2008.
- . "Virginia Woolf Teaching/Virginia Woolf Learning: Morley College and the Common Reader." *Essays on Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Helen Wussow. Dallas: Contemporary Research, 1995. 61–77.

- Dubino, Jeanne. "Virginia Woolf: From Book Reviewer to Literary Critic, 1904–1918." *Virginia Woolf and the Essay*. Eds. Beth Carole Rosenberg and Jeanne Dubino. New York: St. Martin's, 1997. 25–40.
- . "A Politics of Exclusion: The Literary Criticism of Virginia Woolf." Diss. U of Massachusetts Amherst 1992.
- Eliot, T. S. "The Function of Criticism." *Selected Essays: 1917–1932*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1932. 12–22.
- . "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *Selected Essays: 1917–1932*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1932. 3–11.
- Folger Collective on Early Women Critics. Introduction. *Women Critics 1660–1820: An Anthology*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1995. XIII–XXV.
- Fishman, Solomon. "Virginia Woolf on the Novel." *Sewanee Review* 51.2 (1943): 321–40. Rpt. in "Virginia Woolf, 1882–1941." *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Vol. 43. Ed. Laurie DiMauro. Detroit : Thomson Gale, 1992. 379–86.
- Forster, E. M. *Virginia Woolf*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942.
- Goldman, Mark. *The Reader's Art: Virginia Woolf as Literary Critic*. The Hague: Mouton, 1976.
- Hill, Katherine C. *Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen: History and Literary Revolution*. *PMLA* 96 (1981): 351–362.
- Hussey, Mark, ed. *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1991.
- Johnson, Fanny. Rev. of *In Allen Sätteln Gerecht; Mit Allen Hunden Gehetzt; In Allen Wassern Gewaschen* by F. Wedekind, *Schauspielkunst: ein Glossarium* by F. Wedekind, *Die Glückskuh* by H. Essig, *Hilfe? Ein Kind ist vom Himmer Gefallen* by W. Schmidtborn,

- and *Der Junge Medardus* by A. Schnitzler. *Times Literary Supplement* 6 Apr 1911: 137.  
 (“Wedekind, Schnitzler & Others”)
- Kaufmann, Michael. “A Modernism of One’s Own: Virginia Woolf’s *TLS* Reviews and Eliotic Modernism.” *Virginia Woolf and the Essay*. Eds. Beth Carole Rosenberg and Jeanne Dubino. New York: St. Martin’s, 1997. 137–55.
- Kronenberger, Louis. “Virginia Woolf as Critic.” *The Republic of Letters: Essays on Various Writers*. New York: Knopf, 1955. 244–49.
- Malamud, Randy. Introduction. *The Language of Modernism*. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1989. 1–21.
- Marcus, Jane. *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1987.
- Mare, Walter de la. Rev. of *Country of the Blind* by H. G. Wells. *Times Literary Supplement* 24 August 1911: 310.
- Rev. of *Truth or Truisms* by William Stebbing. *Times Literary Supplement* 6 July 1911: 252.
- Martin, Violent Florence. Rev. of *The Life of a Foxhound* by John Mills, *Good Sport Seen with Some Famous Packs* by Cuthbert Bradley, and *Notitia Venatica* by Robert T. Vyner. *Times Literary Supplement* 10 Feb 1911: 49-50.
- Matheson, Percy Ewing, Hon. Mrs (Elizabeth Fox Bruce). Rev. of *The Mystic Bride: A Study of the Life-Story of Catherine of Siena* by Aubrey Richardson. *Times Literary Supplement* 27 July 1911: 277.
- May, Derwent. *Critical Times: The History of the Times Literary Supplement*. Hammersmith, London: HarperCollins, 2001.

- McAuley, Jenny. "Galsworthy, John, 1867-1933." *Literature Online Biography*. Literature Online Reference Edition. 2001–2008. Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, GA. July 2, 2008 <[http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res\\_ver=0.2&res\\_id=xri:lion-us&rft\\_id=xri:lore:rec:ref:2690](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion-us&rft_id=xri:lore:rec:ref:2690)>.
- McNeillie, Andrew. Editorial Note. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Vol. I. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986. xix–xxiii.
- . Editorial Note. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Vol. II. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987. xxi.
- . Editorial Note. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Vol. III. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987. xxiii–xxv.
- . Editorial Note. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Vol. IV. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1994. xxv–xxvii.
- . Introduction. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Vol. I. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986. ix–xviii.
- . Introduction. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Vol. II. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987. ix–xx.
- . Introduction. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Vol. III. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987. xi–xxii.
- . Introduction. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Vol. IV. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1994. xi–xxiii.
- Newman, Herta. *Virginia Woolf and Mrs. Brown: Toward a Realism of Uncertainty*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1996.

- Novak, Jane. *The Razor Edge of Balance: A Study of Virginia Woolf*. Coral Gables, FL: U of Miami P, 1975. 169 ff. Rpt. in "Virginia Woolf, 1882–1941." *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Vol. 43. Ed. Laurie DiMauro. Detroit : Thomson Gale, 1992. 403–09.
- Pacey, Desmond. "Virginia Woolf as a Literary Critic." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 18.3 (1948): 234–44. Rpt. in "Virginia Woolf, 1882–1941." *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Vol. 43. Ed. Laurie DiMauro. Detroit : Thomson Gale, 1992. 388–93.
- Pawlowski, Merry, ed. *Virginia Woolf and Fascism: Resisting the Dictator's Seduction*. Houndsmill, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001.
- Robinson, Solveig C, ed. *A Serious Occupation: Literary Criticism by Victorian Women Writers*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2003.
- Rosenbaum, S. P. *Edwardian Bloomsbury: The Early History of the Bloomsbury Group*. Vol. 2. New York: St. Martin's, 1994.
- Rosenberg, Beth Carole. *Virginia Woolf and Samuel Johnson: Common Readers*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.
- . "Virginia Woolf's Postmodern Literary History." *MLN* 115 (2000): 1112–30.
- Seibt, Betty Kay. "A Preliminary Rhetorical Discussion of Virginia Woolf's Essay Canon with an Annotated Bibliography of her Essays." Diss. Texas Women's U, 1994
- Schorer, Mark. "Virginia Woolf." *Yale Review* 32.2 (Winter 1943): 377–81. Rpt. in "Virginia Woolf, 1882–1941." *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Vol. 43. Ed. Laurie DiMauro. Detroit : Thomson Gale, 1992. 386–88.
- Shand, Alexander Innes. Rev. of *Patricia of the Hills* by Charles Kennett Burrow. *Times Literary Supplement* 23 May 1902: 148. ("The Romantic Celt")



- Showalter, Elaine. "Virginia Woolf and the Flight into Androgyny." *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977. 263–97.
- Silver, Brenda R., ed. *Virginia Woolf's Reading Notebooks*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983.
- "Sitwell, Edith, Dame, 1887-1964." *Literature Online Biography*. Literature Online Reference Edition. 2001–2008. Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, GA. July 2, 2008.  
<[http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res\\_ver=0.2&res\\_id=xri:lion-us&rft\\_id=xri:lore:rec:ref:2888](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion-us&rft_id=xri:lore:rec:ref:2888)>.
- Swinnerton, Frank. Rev. of "Character in Fiction" by Virginia Woolf. *Bookman* (October 1924): 193–94. Rpt. in *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*. Eds. Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin. London: Routledge, 1975. 130–32.
- Times Literary Supplement Centenary Archive Online*. Emory Library, Atlanta, GA. Aug. 6, 2008. <<http://www.TLS.psmmedia.com>>
- Tyson, Lois. "New Criticism." *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Routledge, 2006. 135–67.
- Walkley, Arthur Bingham. Rev. of *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist* by Thomas R. Lounsbury. *Times Literary Supplement* 17 Jan 1902: 7. ("The Art of Shakespeare")
- Waters, Mary. *British Women Writers and the Profession of Literary Criticism, 1789–1832*. Houndsmill, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Wellek, René. "The Bloomsbury Group." *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750–1950*. Vol. 5. New Haven: Yale UP, 1986. 55–91. Rpt. in "Virginia Woolf, 1882–1941." *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Vol. 43. Ed. Laurie DiMauro. Detroit : Thomson Gale, 1992. 416–24.

White, Richard Lupton. "The Novelist as Critic: Conrad, Forster, Woolf, and Lawrence." Diss. U of Pennsylvania, 1977.

Woolf, Leonard. Editorial Note. *Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. London: Hogarth, 1942.7–8.

—, comp. *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays*. London: Hogarth, 1950.

—, comp. *Collected Essays*. 4 vols. London: Hogarth, 1966–67.

—, comp. *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. London: Hogarth, 1942.

—, comp. *Granite and Rainbow*. London: Hogarth, 1958.

—, comp. *The Moment and Other Essays*. London: Hogarth, 1947.

Woolf, Virginia. *The Diaries of Virginia Woolf*. Eds. Anne Oliver Bell and Andrew McNeillie.

Vols. I–IV. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977–1982.

—, ed. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Andrew McNeillie. Vols. I–IV. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986–1994.

—, ed. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Nigel Nicolson. Vols. I–V. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975–1979.

—, ed. *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals, 1897–1909*. Ed. Mitchell A. Leaska. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990.