
Julia Chandler L'enfant

Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses

Recommended Citation

https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses/2677

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses by an authorized administrator of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.
INFORMATION TO USERS

This material was produced from a microfilm copy of the original document. While the most advanced technological means to photograph and reproduce this document have been used, the quality is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original submitted.

The following explanation of techniques is provided to help you understand markings or patterns which may appear on this reproduction.

1. The sign or "target" for pages apparently lacking from the document photographed is "Missing Page(s)". If it was possible to obtain the missing page(s) or section, they are spliced into the film along with adjacent pages. This may have necessitated cutting thru an image and duplicating adjacent pages to insure you complete continuity.

2. When an image on the film is obliterated with a large round black mark, it is an indication that the photographer suspected that the copy may have moved during exposure and thus cause a blurred image. You will find a good image of the page in the adjacent frame.

3. When a map, drawing or chart, etc., was part of the material being photographed the photographer followed a definite method in "sectioning" the material. It is customary to begin photoing at the upper left hand corner of a large sheet and to continue photoing from left to right in equal sections with a small overlap. If necessary, sectioning is continued again — beginning below the first row and continuing on until complete.

4. The majority of users indicate that the textual content is of greatest value, however, a somewhat higher quality reproduction could be made from "photographs" if essential to the understanding of the dissertation. Silver prints of "photographs" may be ordered at additional charge by writing the Order Department, giving the catalog number, title, author and specific pages you wish reproduced.

5. PLEASE NOTE: Some pages may have indistinct print. Filmed as received.

Xerox University Microfilms
300 North Zaeb Road
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
L'ENFANT, Julia Chandler, 1944-
EDITH WHARTON AND VIRGINIA WOOLF: TRADITION
AND EXPERIMENT IN THE MODERN NOVEL.

The Louisiana State University and Agricultural
and Mechanical College, Ph.D., 1974
Language and Literature, modern

Xerox University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48105

© 1974

JULIA CHANDLER L'ENFANT

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

THIS DISSERTATION HAS BEEN MICROFILMED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
EDITH WHARTON AND VIRGINIA WOOLF:

TRADITION AND EXPERIMENT IN

THE MODERN NOVEL

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

Julia Chandler L'Enfant
B.A., Louisiana State University, 1965
M.A., Louisiana State University in New Orleans, 1968
August, 1974
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Professor Donald E. Stanford for constant help and encouragement on this project, beginning with his fine seminar on Henry James, William Dean Howells, and Edith Wharton, which developed my interest in the theory of the modern novel. I also thank Professors Thomas Watson, John Weaver, Darwin Shrell, and Jack Gilbert, all of whom have been inspiring teachers and stimulating critics.

Grateful acknowledgement is given to Donald Gallup, Curator of the Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, for permission to examine and quote from Edith Wharton's unpublished criticism.

I wish to gratefully acknowledge the award of a Dissertation Year Fellowship by the Graduate School of Louisiana State University.

Finally, I wish to thank above all my husband Howard and daughter Jamie, whose encouragement and support have made this study a pleasure.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. EDITH WHARTON'S THEORY OF THE NOVEL</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. The Theory</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. An Example of the Theory: The Reef</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. VIRGINIA WOOLF'S THEORY OF THE NOVEL</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. The Function of Criticism</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Virginia Woolf's Theory of the Novel</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. The Contemporary Novel: Jacob's Room</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. The Novel of the Future: The Waves</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. A Note on Influences</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. THE CRITICAL THEORIES OF EDITH WHARTON AND VIRGINIA WOOLF: FROM DRAMA TO POETRY</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. The Function of Criticism</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. The Function of the Novel</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. The Contemporary Scene</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Proust</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. The Reef and The Waves</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Point of View: the Inner Plus the Outer</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Time: the Drama and the Poetry</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. A CHANGE IN VIEWPOINT: THE AGE OF INNOCENCE AND BETWEEN THE ACTS</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. The Reef to The Age of Innocence: the Expansion of Drama</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. The Waves to Between the Acts: the Emergence of Fact</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. The Age of Innocence and Between the Acts: the Spirit of the Age</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
To
H. W. L.
ABSTRACT

Virginia Woolf's assertion in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" that "in or about December, 1910, human character changed" is often quoted as evidence of her belief that the modern age is essentially different from what came before and requires a new form in the novel to represent it. Every student of the modern novel must decide whether that is true in order to determine the role of the tradition of the novel in his writing or teaching. This study deals with the issue by comparing two writers who represent two eras in twentieth century fiction, Edith Wharton, who constructed dramatic novels often linked with Henry James, and Virginia Woolf, who envisioned poetic novels often in direct rebellion against the Jamesian conventions, to determine the nature and the viability of the novelistic tradition as they understood it.

Chapter I analyzes Mrs. Wharton's Jamesian critical principles, particularly in The Writing of Fiction (1925), and presents The Reef (1912) with its limited point of view and use of dramatically "crucial moments" as a particularly pure example of the theory in practice.

Chapter II analyzes Mrs. Woolf's far more complicated critical principles, especially as gathered in the Collected Essays (1966), and presents "Modern Fiction" (1919), Jacob's "v

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Room (1922), "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924), "The Narrow Bridge of Art" (1927), and The Waves (1931) as interrelated examples of her evolving theories of poetic impersonality and saturated moments, and their embodiment in practice.

Chapter III makes the comparison explicit. Mrs. Wharton's and Mrs. Woolf's critical theories are collated, especially their ideas on the function of the novel, which both agree is to represent life, and its history, which shows Mrs. Wharton's emphasis on manners, Mrs. Woolf's on poetry. Their divergence remains in their attitudes toward the contemporary scene: the formalization of Henry James, the formlessness of the great Russians, and, more broadly, the revolution in fundamental assumptions about man. The differences, amounting to a definition of Mrs. Woolf's experimentalism, Mrs. Wharton's traditionalism, are summarized by means of their contrasting analyses of Proust's achievement. The Reef and The Waves are then compared, especially in terms of point of view (a combination of the inner and the outer, concentrating on the inner) and the handling of the passage of time ("crucial moments" as opposed to "the moment") to illustrate the differences between their dramatic and poetic novels.

Chapter IV summarizes the career of each writer subsequent to The Reef and The Waves to introduce a discussion of how each, approximately ten years later, produced broader, richer works free from some of the technical limitations imposed by theory. The Age of Innocence (1920) shows an expan-
sion of the strictly limited point of view and the carefully contrived "scene" to present a picture of society itself; *Between the Acts* (1941) abandons private definitions of "drama" and "poetry" to employ those genres in a similar social panorama. These two novels are concerned with the community, not the individual, and their success suggests that novels at their best are "public" rather than "private," both in form and content.

Chapter V summarizes the main points about the theory and practice of each writer by comparing a set of novels dealing with the maturation of the artist, Mrs. Wharton's *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929) with its sequel *The Gods Arrive* (1932), and Mrs. Woolf's *Orlando* (1928). These works conveniently underline the thesis of this study, the importance of tradition in the work of both writers, particularly the "rebellious" Virginia Woolf.
INTRODUCTION

Edith Wharton was born 24 January 1862 in New York; Virginia Woolf was born twenty years and one day later, 25 January 1882 in London. They were within calling distance for thirty years, however, for after 1906 Mrs. Wharton lived in Paris and frequently visited England. But her friends in London were for the most part of an older generation, like Henry James, or of the upper classes, the hostesses who gave those large crushes that made Virginia Woolf feel awkward and ill-dressed, and I do not believe that the two women ever met.

But they knew each other's work. Mrs. Wharton complains in "Permanent Values in Fiction" (1934) that "to a generation nurtured on Mr. Joyce and Mrs. Woolf" the ordinary definition of a novel, "a work of fiction containing a good story about well-drawn characters," is no longer dependable, and one suspects that "our Edith," as Henry James called her, took a quick look at The Waves in 1931 and rushed away to something else. Mrs. Woolf dismisses James, Hergesheimer, and Wharton from her consideration of American literature in "American Fiction" (1925) because they are mere copies of English models, and the English reader wants from American literature "above all something different from what he has at home." Neither writer studied the other very closely,
for Mrs. Wharton was not a wholly derivative writer, and Mrs. Woolf did not turn her back on the "permanent values" of fiction, even as Mrs. Wharton herself defines them. But the point is clear that neither felt any great affinity with the other. And one might ask why they should be studied together.

At first glance it might seem that they have nothing more in common than a reputation for being rather formidable ladies, but I find that, simply on the personal level, they are quite alike.¹ Both were privileged girls of precocious literary talent at odds with their milieu. Edith Wharton was born into an upper-middle class family, part of the social aristocracy of old New York which Blake Nevius compares to Matthew Arnold's Barbarians, and which A Backward Glance confirms as a largely "exterior" culture which, when it recognized literature at all, regarded it as a gentlemanly hobby. Virginia Woolf was born into what her nephew Quentin Bell terms "a lower division of the upper middle class" to a family which might be identified as Arnold's fourth class, the seekers after perfection, "sweetness and light." But that class still held certain Victorian notions about women that impeded Virginia Stephen's career: she resented all her life being excluded from Cambridge, and fought always against the assumption, held even by her enlightened father, that she


ix
should be an "Angel in the House"—and in fact her career did not start until she had, as she phrases it in "Professions for Women," killed it.

Nevertheless both women were well educated, at home. Edith Wharton learned French, German, and Italian on extensive travels during her childhood, and, although denied Greek or Latin as too vigorous after an almost-fatal illness, she learned "the modern languages and good manners," plus "a reverence for the English language as spoken according to the best usage." She also "looked into" every one of the six or seven hundred volumes in her father's "gentleman's library." Her favorite childhood memory was "making up," impassioned fantasizing upon any closely printed page. Virginia Woolf had similar instructions from parents and governesses, but had the added advantage of studying Greek and grammar with Walter Pater's sister Clara and Janet Case. Her voracious reading in her father's extensive library led to the same kind of experimentation with literary creation, notably, intoning stories to her siblings as "Clemente."

Intellectual freedom led naturally to personal freedom. Edith Jones married Edward Wharton at twenty-three, and enjoyed a dozen years of travel and comradeship in a congenial dilettantish set, from whose charming routine she gradually extricated herself (as well as from her marriage) in her attempt to realize her need for a literary life. Virginia Stephen set up housekeeping with her brothers and sister on 

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Gordon Square at about twenty-three, and began the open houses that developed into the "Bloomsbury Group." She married Leonard Woolf (a fitter intellectual companion than Edward Wharton) at thirty-one, and, like Edith Wharton, slowly began to realize her literary ambitions. In time both women enjoyed what amounted to the French ideal of the salon, almost daily association with some of the most interesting men of their times.

Both became successful and admired writers, but remained to some extent "divided" women. Edith Wharton rather grandly masked great personal difficulty, perhaps even mental breakdowns, and certainly marital problems exacerbated by an apparently unsatisfied passion for her literary mentor Walter Berry. She found it necessary to compartmentalize her life into the creative and the incredibly polished social. Virginia Woolf was forever tormented by madness or the threat of it, and found her creative life (which seems coterminous with her personal life) fragmented into creation and criticism, the "fact" and the "vision," two turns of mind that permitted no rest. Neither was really independent as an artist in the way that Henry James, for instance, was: Edith Wharton had an as yet undetermined debt to Walter Berry, and Virginia Woolf was pathetically dependent upon Leonard's approval.

But of course despite these interesting personal resemblances Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf belong to dif-
ferent eras: the first, the well-ordered essentially conserva-

rive old New York of the late nineteenth century, the

second the determinedly rebellious London of the early twen-
tieth century. They were chosen for this study because each

is a good representative of an era in modern fiction. Joseph

Warren Beach selects Edith Wharton as an exemplar of the "well-

made" novel, a dramatic construction owing much to Henry

James, Virginia Woolf as an exemplar of the "expressionistic"

novel, a descendant of the well-made novel which, like off-

spring often will, turns away from the tradition to which it

owes its life in a quest for something new. The isolation

and analysis of just exactly what Edith Wharton was trying to

accomplish in her novels, and then what Virginia Woolf, in

reaction against such well-built works, was trying to accom-

plish beyond that traditional goal, might illuminate one of

the main problems in the criticism, as well as the writing,

of contemporary fiction: whether the experiments of Mrs.

Woolf (or Miss Richardson or Mr. Joyce) obviate the conven-
tional novel. Does the abolition of ordinary character,

plot, and setting in The Waves render a novel like Edith

Wharton's The Reef old-fashioned and obsolete? The answer,

I believe, is no, and will be presented in the following

form: first, an explication of Edith Wharton's theories of

the novel and their illustration by The Reef; secondly, the

explication of Virginia Woolf's far more complicated theories

and their illustration by The Waves; thirdly, a comparison

xii
of the two theories; and, finally, a discussion of two important subsequent novels, *The Age of Innocence* and *Between the Acts*, which abandon certain theoretical aims and, in their wider concern with society itself, illustrate a viable norm for the novel that brings Mrs. Wharton and Mrs. Woolf closer together than they themselves would ever have thought possible.
CHAPTER I

EDITH WHARTON'S THEORY OF THE NOVEL

a. The Theory

Edith Wharton's theory of the novel is to be found in *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), *A Backward Glance* (1933), and about twenty-five articles and reviews.¹ She writes not as a professional critic but as a novelist who has pondered her craft long, and wants to share "the real right" way she has formulated (BG, p. 114). She writes clearly and forcibly, as if expounding obvious truths, and indeed she does deal in familiar, if not commonplace, concepts.² There is no important chronological curve to her ideas, except a certain relaxation of rules in evidence in her memoirs, which will be duly noted; thus I will use *The Writing of Fiction* as principal text, and the various other statements as glosses, for


a brief summary of her ideas on what the novel should be, and do.

The Writing of Fiction opens with the assumption that fiction is "the newest, most fluid and least formulated of the arts," but proceeds to analyze and categorize, and single out the rational novel of manners or character for her praise. Her novel is about people, rational ones. She renounces the inquiry into origins and deals with modern fiction, which began, she says, "when the 'action' of the novel was transferred from the street to the soul," by Madame de La Fayette, "when the protagonists of this new inner drama were transformed from conventionalized puppets . . . into breathing and recognizable human beings" by the Abbe Prévost and Diderot, and, most importantly, when (although she does not phrase it this way) novelists reincorporated the street into their fictional world, when the characters became defined by their surroundings (WF, pp. 3-7). Balzac and Stendhal "are the first to seem continuously aware that the bounds of personality are not reproducible by a sharp black line, but that each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things" (WF, p. 7).

Later in this handbook she reiterates this history, and gives more attention to the English tradition.

For convenience of division it may be said that the novel of psychology was born in France, the novel of manners in England, and that out of their union in

---

3 The Writing of Fiction (New York: Scribner's, 1925), p. 3. Hereafter cited within the text as WF.
the glorious brain of Balzac sprang that strange
chameleon-creature, the modern novel, which changes
its shape and colour with every subject on which it
rests. (WF, p. 61)

The influence of the English novel of manners predominates.
Its true orientation is the rough-and-tumble humour of
Fielding and Smollett rather than "the fine-drawn analysis
of Richardson, the desultory humours of Sterne" (p. 62).
"The great, the distinguishing gift of the English novelist
was a homely simplicity combined with an observation at once
keen and indulgent; good-humour was the atmosphere and irony
the flavour of this great school of observers, from Fielding
to George Eliot" (p. 62). But Jane Austen "flourished on
the very edge of a tidal wave of prudery" (p. 62), which
prevented Scott, Thackeray, Trollope, Dickens, and even
Eliot from being supreme. "The artist of other races," par­
ticularly, she implies, the French, "has always been not
only permitted but enjoined to see life whole," so that Bal­
zac, Stendhal, and Tolstoy learned from the English achieve­
ment and rounded it out (p. 64). Mrs. Wharton's criticism
of the Victorians is insistent. "The Criticism of Fiction"
(1914) had averred that in most Victorian novels (with the
exception of Butler's and Eliot's) "the whole immense ma­
chinery of the passions is put in motion for causes that a
modern schoolgirl would smile at." 4

Her contemporaries, many of them members of the "dirt­
for-dirt's sake" school (WF, p. 65), have hardly redeemed

4 "The Criticism of Fiction," TLS, 14 May 1914,
p. 229. Hereafter cited within the text as "CF."
the tradition. *The Writing of Fiction*, which so emphasizes selection and consequent form, lashes out against naturalistic "slices of life," or "the exact photographic reproduction of a situation or an episode, with all its sounds, smells, aspects realistically rendered, but with its deeper relevance and its suggestions of a larger whole either unconsciously missed or purposely left out" (p. 10) and "stream of consciousness," really much the same thing, she thinks, although it includes, without discrimination, mental as well as visual reactions, as if "their very unsorted abundance constitutes in itself the author's subject" (p. 12). And later articles are virulent. "Tendencies in Modern Fiction" (1934) asserts that the stream-of-consciousness writers (who go unnamed) do not seem to realize that their experiments, "chiefly toward the amorphous and the agglutinative," have been done before, and that in discarding tradition they are merely taking the easy way, substituting superficiality for depth.5 "Permanent Values in Fiction" (1934) complains that readers of Dickens, Thackeray, Balzac, and Stendhal had not to wonder what the novel was: it is "a work of fiction containing a good story about well-drawn characters" (a revealing contrast to that tolerant opening to *The Writing of Fiction*), although "to a generation nurtured on Mr. Joyce and Mrs. Woolf such a definition would seem not only pitifully

simple, but far from comprehensive." Those writers let their characters "follow unhindered the devious ways of experience" (p. 603), while the real core of literature is living characters related to the general laws of the universe. Her bias (as well as some ignorance) is clear: the novel is meant to explore the inner life, but not for itself (like Sterne, Richardson, and the amorphous moderns), but rather for its manifestations in behavior.

In The Writing of Fiction Mrs. Wharton admits, with charming self-deprecation for using such arbitrary classifications, several major types of novels: manners (Vanity Fair), character or psychology (Madame Bovary), and adventure (Rob Roy) (pp. 66-68). The last, by the way, she fully appreciates as the source of more sophisticated types. She especially admires Dumas the elder, Melville, Captain Marryat, and Stevenson. Later she groups novels of manners and character together, and contrasts them with novels of situation. The former, more typical of the English tradition, epitomized by Jane Austen, and "the larger freer form" (p. 125), begins with characters who proceed to work out


7 One wonders whether Edith Wharton referred to Moby Dick when she wrote of these writers that "their gallant yarns might have been sung to the minstrel's harp before Roland and his peers" (WF, p. 68). In any case, contrast her enthusiasm for "what was already a perfect formula, created in the dawn of time by the world-old appeal: 'Tell us another story!'" (WF, p. 68) with E. M. Forster's scorn toward "this low atavistic form" in Aspects of the Novel (1927; rpt. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1955), p. 26.
their own destinies. The latter, exemplified by The Scarlet Letter and Tess of the d'Urbervilles, but more typical of the continent, and closely akin to the drama, begins with a situation which "instead of being imposed from the outside, is the kernel of the tale and its only reason for being" (p. 133). "Situation," let it be clear, is not synonymous with "plot." "Plot" is a clash of events, but an "arbitrarily imposed" framework (p. 131) or "coil of outward happenings" (pp. 131-32). She is particularly critical of the Victorian "double plot." "Situation" is also a clash of events, "predicament," "some sort of climax caused by the contending forces engaged" (p. 143), but it is "soul-drama" (p. 132), "the problem to be worked out in a particular human conscience, or the clash between conflicting wills" (p. 137), and is, therefore, if handled properly, inextricably bound with character, not imposed upon it.

Thus "character" and "situation" are not, of course, opposites, for the best novels, according to Mrs. Wharton, combine them in perfect proportion: War and Peace, Vanity Fair, L'Education Sentimentale (pp. 146-47). Lesser novels emphasize one or the other, however, and there are dangers. "The novelist's permanent problem is that of making his peo-

---

8 WF, pp. 81-83. See also "George Eliot," Bookman, 15 (May 1902), 250.

9 Indeed, as discussed below, she would later say in BG "I doubt if fiction can be usefully divided into novels of situation and character, since a novel, if worth anything at all, is always both, in inextricable combination" (p. 200).
ple at once typical and individual, universal and particu-
lar" (pp. 142-43) and "unless he persists in thinking of his
human beings first, and of their predicament only as the
outcome of what they are" he perpetually risks upsetting
that delicate balance (p. 143). Situation always threatens
to dominate. A test is dialogue: the characters must sound
like themselves, not as the situation requires they should
(pp. 140-41). On the other hand, situation must not be
abandoned for excessive preoccupation with character.

In the inevitable reaction against the arbitrary
"plot" many novelists have gone too far in the other
direction, either swamping themselves in the tedious
"stream of consciousness," or else--another frequent
error--giving an exaggerated importance to trivial
incidents when the tale is concerned with trivial
lives. There is a sense in which nothing which re-
ceives the touch of art is trivial; but to rise to
this height the incident, insignificant in itself,
must illustrate some general law, and turn on some
deep movement of the soul. If the novelist wants to
hang his drama on a button, let it at least be one
of Lear's. (pp. 145-46)

There must be a story. "Visibility in Fiction" (1929) re-
peats her appreciation for a "good yarn." "The recent craze
for the detective novel is the inevitable result of the mod-
er novel's growing tendency to situate the experiences
of his characters more and more in the region of thought and
emotion."10

Thus Mrs. Wharton points to some examples of the
great novel, but she cannot precisely define it: she sees
the criticism of the novel as only nascent. "The Criticism

10 "Visibility in Fiction," Yale Review, NS 18 (March
1929), 481.
of Fiction" (1914) declared that neither England nor America had ever had any serious criticism of the novel, though France had admirable precedents in Sainte-Beuve, Anatole France, Jules Lemaître, and Émile Faguet (p. 229). A Backward Glance (1933) shows little recognition of progress. She has found only Henry James and Paul Bourget, she declares, with whom to discuss pure form (p. 199). Reviewers are preoccupied with the plot or the author's "view of life" as expressed by his characters ("CF," p. 230). Some go so far as to demand certain subjects and techniques. American critics, for instance, want native writers "tethered to the village pump." Mrs. Wharton says little about her own treatment at the hands of reviewers: she claims to ignore it. "A Cycle of Reviewing," however, discusses their inconsistent injunctions throughout her career, and inadvertently reveals some of her bitterness. Mrs. Wharton appeals for a "trained criticism" built


12 See BG, p. 114; but see "A Cycle of Reviewing," Spectator (London), 141 (November 3, 1928), 44-45. See also Eric LaGuardia, "Edith Wharton on Critics and Criticism," MLN, 73 (December 1958), 587-89, for some comments on a letter by Mrs. Wharton to Zona Gale, 1922, expressing thanks for the young writer's rare comprehension of her aims in Glimpses of the Moon, reviewed unfavorably.
on the broad culture and the intelligent criticism of life she finds in the great French critics. It should confine itself to these few questions:

What has the author tried to represent, and how far has he succeeded?—and a third, which is dependent on them: Was the subject chosen worth representing—has it the quality of being what Balzac called "vrai dans l'art"? . . . it is only by viewing the novel as an organic whole, by considering its form and function as one, that the critic can properly estimate its details of style and construction. ("CF," p. 230)

Fourteen years later, in "A Cycle of Reviewing," she recasts these basic considerations into recommendations for the novelist, that

. . . he should write of any class of people who become instantly real to him as he thinks about them; secondly, that his narrative should be clothed in a style so born of the subject that it varies with each subject; and thirdly, that the unfolding of events should grow naturally out of the conflict of character, whether (technically speaking) plotlessness or plotfulness results. (p. 45)

For the function of criticism (as defined in "The Criticism of Fiction" and implemented in The Writing of Fiction) is to improve and shape the novel by defining technique. "The fundamental difference between amateur and artist is the possession of the sense of technique, that is, in its broadest meaning, of the necessity of form. The sense implies an ever-active faculty of self-criticism, and therefore a recognition of the need, and indeed of the inevitability of criticism . . ." ("CF," p. 229). Technique can get out of hand, of course, as in Wharton's opinion Henry James let it, as we

---

shall see, but it is central. Rules are no more than "a lamp in a mine, or a hand-rail down a black stairway" (WF, p. 42) since "the gist of the matter always escapes, since it nests, the elusive bright-winged thing, in that mysterious fourth-dimensional world which is the artist's inmost sanctuary . . . but though that world is inaccessible, the creations emanating from it reveal something of its laws and processes" (WF, p. 119). Thus the theoretical critic's function is to analyze what has been done for its subject and manner, form and function, for the purpose of creating an intellectual climate amenable to the novelist, dependent upon it for his steady and whole vision of life.

Her theory of the novel is within the "classical" tradition, and might be summarized by means of Aristotle's

---

14 An excellent analysis of this concept is Alexander M. Buchan's "Edith Wharton and 'The Elusive Bright-Winged Thing,'" NEQ, 37 (September 1964), 343-62. It is also treated, with particular reference to Hudson River Bracketed (to be treated in Chapter V, below) by Askew, Chapter IV, "The Portrait of an Artist," esp. p. 146, where he charges Mrs. Wharton with not fully analyzing the bridge between the imagination and the "art product"; and James W. Tuttleton, "Edith Wharton: Form and the Epistemology of Artistic Creation," Criticism, 10 (Fall 1964), 334-51, a more complimentary view.

15 See WF, p. 64. This idea is a simplification of Matthew Arnold's idea that "the grand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition, not of analysis and discovery; its gift lies in the faculty of being happily inspired by a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere, by a certain order of ideas, when it finds itself in them," in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time." This essay, and subsequent essays and poems by Arnold cited, is found in Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Stange, eds., Victorian Poetry and Poetics, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968). See p. 523.
mimesis, or imitation, and harmonia, or form. "It has been so often said that all art is re-presentation—the giving back in conscious form of the shapeless raw material of experience—that one would willingly avoid insisting on such a truism" (WF, p. 16), but of course the fact remains that the life to be imitated is central. Subject governs all questions of technique. The Writing of Fiction requires that "each subject must be considered first in itself" (p. 26) and "must contain in itself something that sheds a light on our moral experience" (p. 28). "... in one form or another there must be some sort of rational response to the reader's unconscious but insistent inner question: 'What am I being told this story for? What judgment on life does it contain for me?" (p. 27). There are some subjects that are hopelessly dim, such as "the man with the dinner-pail." "Other things being equal," she says in "The Great American Novel" (1927), "nothing can alter the fact that a 'great argument' will give a greater result than the perpetual chronicling of small beer" (p. 649). But usually she concentrates on the second consideration put forth in The Writing of Fiction.

16 The specific source for these generalizations on classicism is Walter Jackson Bate, ed., Criticism: The Major Texts (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), Introduction to Part I, "The Classical Tradition," pp. 3-12; and Introduction to Part II, "The Development of Modern Criticism: Romanticism and After," pp. 269-79. Good discussions of Wharton's "classicism" are in Askew, esp. pp. 155-63, where he links her (inadequately developed) ideas to Longinus and, more specifically, W. C. Brownell and the New Humanists; Nevius, Ch. 12, "A Question of Limits," pp. 245-51; and Pitlick, Ch. I.

17 "CF," p. 230; WF, p. 86.
the subject "in relation to the novelist's power of extract-
ing from it what it contains" (p. 26), a simplification of
James's idea that "the deepest quality of a work of art will
always be the quality of the mind of the producer."18 "The
Vice of Reading" (1903), echoing Matthew Arnold, had declared
that literature is a criticism of life, and "any serious por-
trayal of life must be judged not by the incidents it pre-
sents but by the author's sense of their significance. The
harmful book is the trivial book: it depends on the writer,
and not on the subject."19 "The Criticism of Fiction" (1914)
says critics should focus not on the incidents themselves,
but the "luminous zone" built by the author's sensibility
(p. 230).20

Thus the treatment of a subject should be moral. The
writer should see life steadily and see it whole, says The
Writing of Fiction in a roundabout fashion by indicting the
Victorian writers, prevented by societal prudishness from
seeing life whole, and the present "dirt-for-dirt's-sake"
school, prevented by their aversion to the Victorians from

18 Henry James, The Art of Fiction; and Other Essays,
See Nevius, pp. 31-33, for corroboration of this point.

19 "The Vice of Reading," North American Review, 177
(October 1903), 519. Arnold's assertion is made in "The
Study of Poetry" (1880), in Houghton-Stange, p. 537, and
"Wordsworth" (1879), p. 553.

20 Cf. her remarks on "Mr. Sturgis's Belchamber,"
Bookman, 21 (May 1905), 309, where she commends "a noble way
of viewing ignoble facts"; and on her own House of Mirth,
where a "frivolous society" acquires "dramatic significance"
through "what its frivolity destroys," Lily Bart (BG,
p. 207).
seeing life steadily (pp. 65-66).\textsuperscript{21} But the novel should not be didactic. An early review of Leslie Stephen's book on George Eliot deplored Eliot's disgrace and isolation from society, and consequent preachiness, for "the novelist of manners needs a clear eye and a normal range of vision to keep his picture in perspective; and the loss of perspective is the central defect of George Eliot's later books."\textsuperscript{22} But the precise difference between the didactic book and the moral book is not made clear in \textit{The Writing of Fiction}, perhaps because it is a rather obvious distinction; but it is explicitly described in a fragmentary typescript entitled "Fiction and Criticism."\textsuperscript{23}

It cannot be too often repeated that every serious picture of life contains a thesis; what differentiates the literary artist from the professed moralist is not a radical contradiction of purpose, but the fact that the one instructs by his observation of character /\textit{sic}/, the other by the general deductions drawn from such observation. It must be remembered that, far as its roots strike back, the novel as it is now known is still a very recent form of art; and innovators are bound to be more or less explicit. It is therefore natural enough, that . . . almost all the earlier novelists felt bound to interfere

\textsuperscript{21} Cf. Arnold's "To a Friend," in Houghton-Stange, p. 409.

\textsuperscript{22} "George Eliot," p. 251. Nevius adds that Mrs. Wharton herself developed a "dowager-like severity" after her divorce (pp. 111-13).

\textsuperscript{23} This undated fragmentary typescript is in the unpublished Edith Wharton papers in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, and is quoted with the director's permission. It is interesting that in this exposition on morality the references to Arnold become explicit: "fiction (to narrow Arnold's apothegm) is 'a criticism of life,'" p. 2; the only immoral writers are those unable to "'see life steadily and see it whole,'" p. 3.
personally in the course of their narrative. As the reader grew more expert, he began to resent these asides and interruptions, and to demand that he should be allowed to draw his own conclusions from the facts presented. (p. 4)

She goes on to describe how Guy de Maupassant formulated this wish in his theory of the impersonality, even the impassivity, of the literary artist, and found his model in Flaubert. But, says Mrs. Wharton, he exposes his position by saying "'if a book teaches a lesson, it must be in spite of its author, by the mere force of the facts he narrates.'" This, she says, is actually "an excellent definition of a good novel" (p. 5). Flaubert himself makes the same point by saying "'there is nothing real but the relations of things, that is to say, the connection in which we perceive them.'" "In this phrase," comments Mrs. Wharton, "which confesses the predominance of the personal equation, he has supplied the touchstone of good fiction" (p. 5). The novelist, then, assembles the facts in the appropriate relation; the reader reads them right. "The Vice of Reading" applauds "plasticity": "the best books are those from which the best readers have been able to extract the greatest amount of thought of the highest quality; but it is generally from these books that the poor reader gets least" (p. 514).

In addition to having moral value, the good subject must be rational. Mrs. Wharton asserts that great artists have always known that

---


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
in the world of normal men life is conducted, at least in its decisive moments, on fairly coherent and selective lines, and that only thus can the great fundamental affairs of bread-getting and home-and-tribe organizing be carried on. Drama, situation, is made out of the conflicts thus produced between social order and individual appetites, and the art of rendering life in fiction can never, in the last analysis, be anything, or need to be anything, but the disengaging of crucial moments from the welter of existence. (WF, pp. 13-14)

Percy Lubbock's *Portrait of Edith Wharton* charges that Walter Berry steered Mrs. Wharton away from new theories of the unconscious, and reinforced her nineteenth-century rationalism. Her "Permanent Values in Fiction," indeed, charges that "the greatest error of the younger novelists, of whatever school, has been to imagine that abnormal or highly specialized characters offer a richer field than the normal and current varieties" (p. 604). She goes on to say that Emily Brontë might have written a better book in due time than *Wuthering Heights* ("a houseful of madmen") about ordinary life around the parsonage. Dostoevsky's *Idiot* is chiefly interesting for the effect of the abnormal people upon the normal (p. 604).

Related to this requirement of rationality of material is objectivity of treatment. The *Writing of Fiction* distinguishes the novel from the short story by means of "the space required to mark the lapse of time or to permit the minute analysis of successive states of feeling" (p. 76). But that is not to say that she condones self-analysis in

---

fiction. The "born novelist" is fundamentally different from the autobiographical writer like Madame de La Fayette or Musette: he is prolific, and he is objective. The Sorrows of Young Werther shows Goethe triumphing over his subjective subject. While the hapless hero is never seen from the outside, the author does look outward, and the descriptions of Charlotte and the joys of bourgeois life reveal almost inadvertently his burgeoning creativity, objectivity, indeed health.  

She shows, then, the classical concern with moral truth in imitation of nature. Thus "originality" is irrelevant. "True originality," she avers in The Writing of Fiction, "consists not in a new manner but in a new vision" (p. 18). A late article, "Tendencies in Modern Fiction" (1934), charges that "the initial mistake of most of the younger novelists, especially in England and America, has been the decision that the old forms were incapable of producing new ones" (p. 433). "Permanent Values in Fiction" (1934) attempts to formulate the basic values of literature for a generation bewildered by Mr. Joyce and Mrs. Woolf:


One, and the principal, is the creating of characters which so possess us with the sense of their reality that we talk of Anna Karenina, Becky Sharp, the Père Goriot, and Tess, as of real people we have known and lived with; and the other is the art of relating these characters to whatever general law of human experience made the novelist choose to tell their tale rather than another. (p. 604)

The characters must "live a life independent of the narrative in which they figure, a life overflowing the bounds of even the vast scene which their creator conceived for them," she writes in "Visibility in Fiction" (1929) (p. 483). Throughout her career she admired characters who were like real human beings. An early review commends Howard Sturgis's Belchamber because "all its characters appear to do, not what the author has planned for them, but what is true for their natures. They are full of human inconsistencies and inconsequences, with the result that they are all alive, that one can walk all around them and see them on every side" (p. 309). The Writing of Fiction offers as the test of a novel that the characters should live, and proceeds to use it to measure Proust's achievement (rather ignoring his technical innovations). But likeness to life does not mean throngs of peculiar and entertaining characters. Only Dickens, an unusual case, got away with that. The Writing of Fiction warns against the overcrowded cast: each character must be relevant, and should be "so typical that

---


29 See "Visibility in Fiction," p. 482.
each connotes a whole section of the social background" (p. 83).

The Writing of Fiction contains such practical advice on how to achieve these individual yet universal characters as Mrs. Wharton felt she could give on "the elusive bright-winged thing" of artistic creation. The basic procedure is selection: the subject must be so brooded upon that every aspect of the work tells. The first page distills it all. What is called in music the "attack" is crucial to the short story, where "the trajectory is so short that flash and sound nearly coincide" (p. 51). It is just as important in the novel, where "no conclusion can be right which is not latent in the first page" (p. 108). In A Backward Glance Mrs. Wharton declares, "My last page is always latent in my first; but the intervening windings of the way become clear only as I write" (p. 208). She claimed to get those "intervening windings" almost like dictation from the very real imaginary figures in her head, complete with names and fates. But elsewhere she stresses the disciplined patience of artistic creation, and one is tempted to believe that the "attack" and the "intervening windings" are the product of conscious craftsmanship. In any case the author, she

30 See esp. pp. 8-14, 50-54, and 81-86.

31 BG, pp. 201-03. Nevius disputes this claim, citing, among other examples, the fact that Ethan and Zeena Frome are the Harts in the original French version of Ethan Frome (see pp. 130-31).

32 Lubbock, Portrait, sneers at her facility, esp. pp. 175-76. But WF, esp. pp. 53-54, stresses the patience.
writes in "Bourget d'Outremer," "should allow his characters to behave as they would in actual life and reveal their personalities by their actions and words."  

The relation between character and setting is intimate. "The impression produced by a landscape, a street or a house should always, to the novelist, be an event in the history of a soul, and the use of the 'descriptive passage,' and its style, should be determined by the fact that it must depict only what the intelligence concerned would have noticed, and always in terms within the register of that intelligence" (WF, p. 85). Point of view, then, is a major technical problem. It is no mere "technicality," of course: it is central in working out the subject since "the same experience never happens to any two people" (pp. 86-87). How the author handles the possibilities, since he is after all omniscient, is governed by the credibility for the reader. "Verisimilitude is the truth of art" (p. 89). Mrs. Wharton offers a program credited to Henry James, a pioneer formulator of hitherto unspoken principles. To maintain a unified impression, she says,

which characterizes genius. Hudson River Bracketed, to be discussed in Ch. V, is a convincing picture of artistic struggle conceivably born of her own experience.

33 Quoted by Askew, p. 74.

34 Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), does not discuss Wharton, but would certainly commend this rhetorical approach.

it is best to shift as seldom as possible, and to let the tale work itself out from not more than two (or at most three) angles of vision, choosing as reflecting consciousnesses persons either in close mental and moral relation to each other, or discerning enough to estimate each other's parts in the drama, so that the latter, even viewed from different angles, always presents itself to the reader as a whole. (pp. 87-88)

Nothing damages verisimilitude more, she charges, than "the slovenly habit of some novelists of tumbling in and out of their characters' minds, and then suddenly drawing back to scrutinize them from the outside as the avowed Showman holding his puppets' strings" (p. 89). She cites several recent solutions to the problem: James's ingenious co-ordinating consciousnesses (overdone in the snooping Assinghams of The Golden Bowl, however); Conrad's "hall of mirrors" technique, a series of consciousnesses accidentally drawn into a situation; and Meredith's happy (but tricky and not to be overused) device of putting shy characters' thoughts into parentheses (pp. 89-95). It is interesting—and a good indication of the limitations of her criticism—that Mrs. Wharton makes no attempt to penetrate the mysteries of point of view, but offers three examples which bear significant resemblance to her own work, finished and yet to be written. She applauds James's efforts that foreshadow The Reef; she likes Conrad's use of the method epitomized in Balzac's "La Grande Bretêche" that she had herself used so well in Ethan Frome; and she notes Meredith's technical trick that she herself would use in a similar scene of repressed passion in Hudson
River Bracketed. She takes no real account of innovations by Proust, Woolf, or Joyce.

The second major technical problem is the passage of time, cited as "the great mystery of the art of fiction" (p. 96). It is accomplished in those carefully wrought passages of narrative leading to "crucial moments" marked by dialogue. "Narrative, with all its suppleness and variety, its range from great orchestral effects to the frail vibration of a single string, should furnish the substance of the novel; dialogue, that precious adjunct, should never be more than an adjunct, and one to be used as skilfully and sparingly as the drop of condiment which flavours the whole dish" (pp. 72-73). To attempt to construct the whole novel out of dialogue, as James did in The Awkward Age, is to shackle the novel with "the special artifices of the theatre" (p. 72). And elsewhere in The Writing of Fiction she observes that "the farther the novel is removed in treatment from theatrical modes of expression, the more nearly it attains its purpose as a freer art, appealing to those more subtle imaginative requirements which the stage can never completely satisfy" (pp. 138-39). To attempt to use dialogue for exposition is wasteful and sometimes boring, as Trollope sometimes shows (pp. 73-75). Indeed, that dialogue "should be reserved for the culminating moments" is one of the few definite rules

36 The Reef (1912; rpt. New York: Scribner's, 1965), see discussion in Chapter I below; Ethan Frome, 1911; rpt. The Edith Wharton Reader, ed. Louis Auchincloss (New York: Scribner's, 1965), see Wharton's introduction, pp. 214-16; Hudson River Bracketed, pp. 322-23.
she sets down:

This lifting and scattering of the wave, the coruscation of the spray, even the mere material sight of the page broken into short, uneven paragraphs, all help to reinforce the contrast between such climaxes and the smooth effaced gliding of the narrative intervals; and the contrast enhances that sense of the passage of time for the producing of which the writer has to depend on his intervening narration. (p. 73)

A Backward Glance contains the claim that she functions as "merely a recording instrument" for the characters' dialogue, but limits her transcription to "the significant passages of their talk, in high relief against the narrative, and not uselessly embedded in it" (p. 203).

Any other technical issues, such as how to introduce characters, where to begin the story, length, the form of the end are, like the point of view and the depiction of time, determined by the subject itself. It is the author's supreme task to select the finest "illuminating incidents," which she lyrically calls "the magic casements of fiction, its vistas on infinity" (WF, p. 109). "... the art of rendering life in fiction can never, in the last analysis, be anything, or need to be anything, but the disengaging of crucial moments from the welter of existence" (WF, p. 14).

As a novice author Mrs. Wharton was astonished to read in a review of The Greater Inclination, 1899, that "a short story should always begin with dialogue." Such unreasonable absolutism, she claims, rendered her immune to dogmatic criticism of her work. A Backward Glance recounts the incident (as does "A Cycle of Reviewing"), and goes on to assert that her more mature concept that every work of art
"contains within itself the germ of its own particular form and dimensions, and ab ovo is the artist's only rule," dates from that time (p. 114). Walter Berry, she goes on, helped free her from rigid plans so that she might be directed by "only the novelist's essential sign-post; the inner significance of the 'case' selected" (p. 115).

It is with this attitude firmly in mind that we approach her central concept, form. Aristotle saw *harmonia*, or form, as the second instinct satisfied by poetry—form not as an end in itself, but as a means to the completion of what in the natural world seems fragmentary. Mrs. Wharton recognized that it was not a popular term in the English novelistic tradition, where it has usually been regarded in an "oddly limited" fashion as "an antithesis to subject or as something that subject puts on like an outer garment" ("CF," p. 229). "There is an inveterate tendency on the part of the Anglo-Saxon reader to regard 'feeling' and 'art' as antithetical" ("Henry James in His Letters," pp. 197-98). Indeed, she associates the sense of form with the Latin tradition:

A thousand years of form (in the widest disciplinary sense), of its observance, its application, its tacit acceptance as the first condition of artistic expression, have cleared the ground, for the French writer of fiction, of many superfluous encumbrances. As the soil of France is of all soils the most weeded, tilled, and ductile, so the field of art, wherever French culture extends, is the most worked-over and the most prepared for whatever seed is to be sown in it. (WF, p. 35)

Bate, pp. 4-7.
Form is apprehended by "taste," which, says French Ways and Their Meaning, is "not art--but it is the atmosphere in which art lives, and outside of which it cannot live." She goes on to say in that little handbook that "the essence of taste is suitability," which is "the mysterious demand of eye and mind for symmetry, harmony and order" (p. 41). "Taste" is an instinct of the artistic races, but an instinct which leads them to see the value of training it with "patience, deliberateness, reverence" (p. 55), which further sharpens it. The English have the native ability, but have not yet trained this "gift of the seeing eye" (pp. 51-55).

"Form," is, most broadly, then, the selection necessarily exercised in the face of reality. A Backward Glance ends with the plaintive statement "The world is a welter and has always been one" (p. 379). Thus "to imagine that form can ever be dispensed with is like saying that wine can be drunk without something to drink it from. The boundless gush of 'life,' to be tasted and savoured, must be caught in some outstretched vessel of perception; and to perceive is to limit and to choose" ("CF," p. 230). She goes on to commend rigorous selection: "once selection is exercised, why limit its uses, why not push it to the last point of its exquisite powers of pattern-making, and let it extract from raw life

the last drop of figurative beauty?" (p. 230). Does she, then, recommend aesthetic pattern of the sort sometimes associated with Henry James?39

In "Henry James in His Letters," an excellent review of Lubbock's 1920 edition which admirably sums up Mrs. Wharton's view of James's aesthetics, she defends her friend's theory of form. For Anglo-Saxons, she charges,

every creative writer preoccupied with the technique of his trade--from grammar and syntax to construction--is assumed to be indifferent to 'subject.' Even the French public, because Flaubert so overflowed to his correspondents on the importance of form and the difficulties of style, seems not yet to have discovered that he also wrote: 'Plus l'idée est belle, plus la phrase est sonore.' Still, in France careful execution is not regarded as the direct antithesis of deep feeling. Among English-speaking readers it too commonly is; and James is still looked upon by many as a super-subtle carver of cherry-stones, whereas in fact the vital matter for him was always subject, and the criterion of subject the extent of its moral register. (pp. 197-98)

When he began to write, English novels were nothing but "a 'sum in addition,' as he called it." His own work had "three-dimensional qualities" (lacking even to Balzac and Thackeray) built on a "central situation" and "centripetal incidents." His method of achieving a "centralised vision" was the use of "reflecting consciousnesses," a method that he did not think every novel should use. He explains, to a

bewildered Mrs. Humphrey Ward, that "'the promiscuous shift- ings of standpoint and centre of Tolstoi and Balzac for in- stance . . . are the inevitable result of the quantity of presenting their genius launches them in. With the complex- ity they pile up they can get no clearness without trying again and again for new centres'" (p. 200). Thus, she con- cludes, subject determines the rules of each composition, "the one preliminary requisite being that the novelist should have the eye to find, and the hand to extract" (pp. 200- 01), the aforementioned "taste."

"Goethe declared that only the Tree of Life was green, and that all theories were gray," Mrs. Wharton would write in The Writing of Fiction. She disagreed, stating that art must be consciously thought about, but lamenting that the "true pioneers" sometimes become "the slaves of their too- fascinating theories" (pp. 116-17). James in effect killed his Tree of Life, particularly in The Golden Bowl, with the utterly improbable, "dull-witted and frivolous" Assinghams (pp. 90-91). 40 Thus "Henry James in His Letters" ends with the pronouncement that the master "fell increasingly under the spell of his formula. From being a law almost uncon- sciously operative it became an inexorable convention" (p. 202). Manner stifled subject. Her final evaluation of James is in A Backward Glance, where she says that his tech- 40 Cf. also "Henry James in His Letters," p. 202. She never really analyzes James's use of design, such as in image patterns. She wrote nothing directly about The Ambas- sadors, to my knowledge.
nical experiments led him to tend to sacrifice "that spontaneity which is the life of fiction. Everything, in the latest novels, had to be fitted into a predestined design, and design, in his strict geometrical sense, is to me one of the least important things in fiction" (p. 190).

"Form," then, is not abstract plan or design. "The Criticism of Fiction" goes on to say that "if then, design is inevitable, the best art must be that in which it is most organic, most inherent in the soul of the subject" (p. 230) (italics mine). The Writing of Fiction uses the word to mean simply "the order, in time and importance, in which the incidents of the narrative are grouped" (pp. 23-24). The question of form in the novel is taken up in Chapter III, "Constructing a Novel," and given only five and one-half pages, about half devoted to criticism of the artificial double plot, about half to the necessity of, like the classical drama, selecting relevant characters and scenic details, interwoven in the drama by the judicious use of point of view (pp. 81-86).

But she implies that "form" is more than simply linear order or even total relevance. Her discussions of the creative process indicate a reverence for the completeness of art that is never really analyzed (see WF, p. 107). Impressions must be brooded over, she says, worked over until the first page contains the whole. "The precious instinct

41 This late attitude is consistent with her appreciation, expressed in "Mr. Sturgis's Belchamber" (1905), of the chose vue over lifeless design (p. 309).
of selection is distilled by that long patience which, if it be not genius, must be one of genius's chief reliances in communicating itself" (WF, p. 54).\(^42\) The creator does not merely reflect his experience: Dostoevsky's genius is not a mind chaotic enough to reflect chaotic Russian experience. The creative mind is not merely sympathetic; it is objective as well--but the detachment is harder to recognize in literature than in other arts because "the novelist works in the very material out of which the object he is trying to render is made. . . . it is infinitely difficult to render a human mind when one is employing the very word-dust with which thought is formulated" (WF, pp. 16-17). Thus the work of art is a transformation of reality, not a mere reflection of it.

It has been often, and inaccurately, said that the mind of a creative artist is a mirror, and the work of art the reflection of life in it. The mirror, indeed, is the artist's mind, with all his experiences reflected in it; but the work of art, from the smallest to the greatest, should be something projected, not reflected, something on which his mirrored experiences, at the right conjunction of the stars, are to be turned for its full illumination. (WF, p. 58)

That projection is Aristotle's harmonia, a whole consisting of precisely right "crucial moments" disengaged from the "welter of existence."

But the nature of that harmonia remains vague. She

\(^42\) Cf. "Visibility in Fiction," which calls genius "a quality of quietness," "that slow taking of pains" comparable to a "natural process" (p. 486). That is her explanation for Proust's achievement (see WF, pp. 165-66; "A Reconsideration," p. 234).
does not take into account Percy Lubbock's attempt to define form as "the book itself" in *The Craft of Fiction*, an interpretation of James's methods, particularly *The Ambassadors*, first published in 1921. Nor did the experimentation of the twenties or the expansive example of the Russian novelists expand her concept. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, avers "The Criticism of Fiction," have their effect in spite of their "seeming wastefulness of method." The critic must "insist upon the superior permanence and beauty of the subject deeply pondered, discerned, and released from encumbering trivialities" (p. 230). "Form," in her deepest analysis, is the unanalyzable result of patient selection.

Because she does not claim to be original, the question of her sources inevitably arises. By her own account she is, without so naming herself, a "classicist": *A Backward Glance* describes her growth as an artist in terms of what she learned from a great tradition and from a community of artist friends. She was educated at home. A family friend early introduced her to Greek mythology, which "domestic dramas" stimulated her to "make up," fabricate stories, because the Olympians "behaved so much like the ladies

---


and gentlemen who came to dine" (pp. 32-34). As a young girl, recuperating from typhoid fever, she was denied the discipline of Latin and Greek as too taxing, and instead studied "the modern languages and good manners," but also acquiring, most importantly, "a reverence for the English language as spoken according to the best usage," an "easy idiomatic English, neither pedantic nor 'literary'" (pp. 47-49). Furthermore, she was denied access to contemporary novelists by a careful mother, but she had access to the classics of her father's "gentleman's library," six or seven hundred volumes which "helped to give . . . [her] mind a temper which . . . [her] too-easy studies could not have produced" (pp. 65-66). By the time she was seventeen she had, she claims, looked into them all. "Those I devoured first were the poets and the few literary critics, foremost of course Sainte-Beuve" (p. 71). But the strongest impressions came from her "Awakeners," Sir William Hamilton's History of Philosophy, Coppee's Elements of Logic (two of her brother's college textbooks), as well as Darwin and Pascal, which "first introduction to the technique of thinking developed the bony structure about which . . . [her] vague gelatinous musings could cling and take shape" (pp. 71-72). 45

* A Backward Glance * goes on to show how friends introduced her to new ideas. Egerton Winthrop brought her the

45 Lyde, pp. 27-46, discusses these four thinkers—who share the belief that human reason is limited, but essential to morality, and that the individual is dependent upon the conventions of society in most cases—as the sources of Wharton's concepts of morality and convention.
contemporary French tradition and nineteenth century science, the evolutionists like Darwin, Huxley, and Spencer (p. 94). Julian Story introduced her to eighteenth century Italy, then little known (pp. 101-02). He and Paul Bourget cultivated her love for Italy, which blossomed into The Valley of Decision (1902). Her account of the preparation for that novel illustrates her joyful eclecticism:

The truth is that I have always found it hard to explain that gradual absorption into my pores of a myriad details—details of landscape, architecture, old furniture and eighteenth century portraits, the gossip of contemporary diarists and travellers, all vivified by repeated spring wanderings guided by Goethe and the Chevalier de Brosses, by Goldoni and Gozzi, Arthur Young, Dr. Burney and Ippolito Nievo, out of which the tale grew. (p. 128)

Walter Berry was the most important friend, however: "I cannot picture what the life of the spirit would have been to me without him" (p. 119). His influence over her began with his derisive laugh at her "lumpy" manuscript for The Decoration of Houses (1897) (p. 108), and worked both to prune her style into elegant simplicity and free her over-all conception from "the incubus of an artificially pre-designed plan" (p. 115). Because most of her other friends considered Berry a narrowing influence, most critics decide that Mrs. Wharton over-estimated his value as a literary adviser. 46

46 Lubbock, Portrait, pp. 48-50 and 205-09, portrays Berry as a dry, narrowing influence. Askew, pp. 28-34, follows. Auchincloss, Edith Wharton, pp. 15-17, does not believe, though he is sure Wharton did, that Berry taught her how to write. Wayne Andrews's introduction to The Best Short Stories of Edith Wharton (New York: Scribner's, 1958), enticingly entitled "The World of Edith Wharton: Fragment of a Biography in Progress," pp. vii-xxvi, contains some ex-
Her account of her relationships as a professional author with the literary world is more a record of friendships than an acknowledgement of debts. Chapter VII, "New York and the Mount," records her association with W. C. Brownell, whom she had memorialized as one of the finest critics of his day, Edward Burlingame, and W. D. Howells, whom she admires but accuses of an "incurable moral timidity" (p. 148). Chapter VIII recounts her friendship with James in charming anecdotes, but, except to repeat her disapproval of his strict design in later works, she ignores his work. Chapter IX, "The Secret Garden," modestly discusses her own work, particularly in terms of her ease in summoning up living characters, but takes no account of possible influences except James and Bourget (close friends both), as unique theoreticians of the novel (p. 199). A Backward Glance, then, reveals that as a solitary young girl Mrs. Wharton immersed herself in a library of classics, and that as a more aggressive and gregarious woman she approached new ideas through friends which her peculiar good fortune, leisure, and travel allowed her to cultivate.

Her criticism reveals her wide reading in the continental and English novel. "The Criticism of Fiction" uses excerpts from her diary which suggest that her love for Berry was frustrated (xx-xxiii). Most of her friends, says Andrews, thought Berry pompous (xviii), but Proust, who dedicated a book to him as "a Greek of the Golden Age," would probably agree with her high valuation (xix).

47 "William C. Brownell," Scribner's, 84 (November 1928), 596-602.
as a touchstone French criticism, particularly Sainte-Beuve, Anatole France, Jules Lemaître and Émile Faguet. *The Writing of Fiction* emphasizes French novelists, particularly Balzac and Stendhal, as the fathers of modern fiction, while frequent mention of Defoe, Richardson, Scott, Thackeray, Eliot, and James shows her intimate familiarity with the English tradition.  

Most critics give her credit for being well-educated. Some, however, believe that she learned by skimming voraciously and writing facilely. Percy Lubbock's *Portrait of Edith Wharton*, in a style that seems a bad imitation of James's epistolary fun, compares her to a bird of prey, who, fortunately, went straight for the best of culture, since she had no patience or assiduity. "Well," he writes, "she dressed, she furnished her house, she fed her guests, she laid out her garden, all better than anyone else. I never heard of such an apprenticeship for a writer, but it served in this case."  

---


50 *Portrait*, p. 33. See also pp. 22-23, 49-50, 98, and 107-08. I detect a real animus against Wharton in this little book, esp. pp. 18-19 and 136-37. Edmund Wilson,
Edith Wharton herself fosters the conclusion that she was not a systematic student. She says, "I never learned to concentrate except on subjects naturally interesting to me, and developed a restless curiosity which prevented my fixing my thoughts for long even on these" (pp. 47-48). She makes no claim to scholarship, tracing her mature art to ecstatic "making up"—holding a book important not for its content but for "rather heavy black type, and not much margin," like Alhambra (pp. 33-34). She never even applauds scholarship. In an early article, "The Vice of Reading" (1903), she admires, and, by implication at least, puts herself among, the "born readers."

In that acute character-study, "Manœuvring," Miss Edge­worth says of one of her characters: "Her mind had never been overwhelmed by a torrent of wasteful learning. That the stream of literature had passed over it was apparent only from its fertility." There could hardly be a happier description of those who read intuitively; and its antithesis as fitly por­trays the mechanical reader. His mind is devastated by that torrent of wasteful learning which his de­mands have helped to swell. (p. 518)

Mrs. Wharton was clearly not a member of a school, or movement. But she was not a withdrawn aesthete ignorant of ordinary life: it should be remembered that she was a pio­neer realist in her insistence on honesty in subject matter. A Backward Glance complains that she was considered a prude by 1934, but shocking earlier: "... I think it was in

"Edith Wharton: A Memoir by an English Friend," from Classics and Commercials (1950); rpt. EW: 20th Century Views, pp. 172-76, criticizes it for presenting a woman who wrote of "conflicts of purpose" and "stifled emotions" solely as "the hostess or the traveler de grand luxe" (p. 173).
reference to a tale in 'Crucial Instances' that I received what is surely one of the tersest and most vigorous letters ever penned by an amateur critic. 'Dear Madam,' my unknown correspondent wrote, 'have you never known a respectable woman? If you have, in the name of decency write about her!'" (p. 126). But she, along with James, was outside of the major stream of American literature of the early twentieth century, that of naturalism, which separated art from life and went after life unadorned. They represent what Robert Morss Lovett sees as an American realism quite distinct from continental and (I assume) American naturalism:

American realism was not continental naturalism. The Puritan inheritance of morality and the new spirit of culture combined to insist upon the claims of significance of subject matter (a significance which is necessarily in the large sense moral) and of beauty of form, as opposed to the requirement of sheer fidelity to the objective world. Into this America of the 1890's came Edith Wharton, and in it she has steadily remained. The most superficial reading of her work brings evidence of her absorption in the somewhat mechanical operations of culture, her preoccupation with the upper class, and her loyalty to the theory of the art of fiction set forth by Henry James, of which the basis was a recognition of moral values.

Indeed Mrs. Wharton is sometimes considered "the heiress of Henry James," a title which derives from Q. D. Leavis's 1938 article designed to introduce the English public to a writer more "serious" than their acquaintance with


her late magazine fiction had revealed. The essay makes the
dubious point that Mrs. Wharton took over James's excellent
social criticism when he turned away from it after The Bos­
tonians.53 The epithet reverberates in the mind, and the
relationship is examined by almost her every critic. Most
regard her theoretical criticism, represented by The Writing
of Fiction, as "Jamesian," especially in its insistence on
moral subject issuing in appropriate form, achieved by the
use of the limited point of view. E. K. Brown, for instance,
declares that "how far a high and original creative talent
can accommodate itself to the role of disciple is evidenced
in the interesting case of Edith Wharton." To Henry James
"she owes what is surest and finest in her technique. . . ."54

But some very good critics discount the notion that
Mrs. Wharton is a paler copy of James. Blake Nevius, for
instance, while noting their rare affinity in literary and
social backgrounds, decides that she is her own woman:

With certain departures, The Writing of Fiction is a
highly simplified restatement of James's basic theory
of fiction, but precisely for that reason--because of
its orthodoxy and its determinedly impersonal quality--
it is, for the student of Edith Wharton's own novels,
an exasperating document. Mrs. Wharton had a mind of her

53 Q. D. Leavis, "Henry James's Heiress: The Impor-
tance of Edith Wharton," Scrutiny, 7 (1938); rpt. EW: 20th
Century Views, pp. 73-88.

54 "Edith Wharton," in Pelham Edgar, The Art of the
Novel from 1700 to the Present Time (New York: Macmillan,
Buchan, however, stresses Wharton's rebellion against James
on the matter of the creative process.
own, but it expressed itself less in the form than in the tone and content of her fiction. If her literary intelligence was less patient and subtle than James's, it was usually more direct. Moreover, her strongest work is not her most Jamesian, so that any attempt to perpetuate a simple cause-and-effect view of their relationship is bound to be . . . misleading. . . .

Moreover, most critics see that Mrs. Wharton's novels (with the exception of The Reef) are more concerned with manners than morals and are, in fact, more sociological; and that they have, in addition, a skepticism denying transcendental values, a pessimism, that combines with the sociological slant to make her a fundamentally different kind of writer from James, despite their common interest in the sensitive international elite. But The Reef is a good illustration of Mrs. Wharton's simplified Jamesian theories, and will thus serve as a good example of the precepts we have just examined--although of course any of her books that satisfies its reader that its form is the appropriate vessel for its subject would illustrate her broad theoretical base.

55 Nevius, p. 31.
b. An Example of the Theory:

The Reef

The Reef is usually identified as Mrs. Wharton's "Jamesian" novel: its subject resembles that of The Golden Bowl. Mrs. Wharton wrote to W. C. Brownell in 1904 that she "could not read" the James of the last ten years; Lubbock charges that she but skimmed those abstruse works; But she must have gained passing acquaintance with the Ververs (and certainly had, as mentioned above, a real animus against the Assinghams). Here is James's "elaborate working out on all sides of a central situation." The subject is the effect upon one couple of the connection between another couple. George Darrow, an urbane American diplomat in the series of Walter Berry-like heroes running through Wharton's career, has a casual affair with a Europeanized American girl, Sophy Viner, charmingly natural but not the aristocrat of sensibility that Anna Leath, the second central character, an American widow of dilettante Fraser Leath, so clearly is.

---

57 The edition used is a 1965 reprint, with introduction by Louis Auchincloss, of the original 1912 Scribner's publication. Subsequent references will be identified by page number within the text.


58 M. Bell, p. 221. 59 Lubbock, Portrait, p. 17.

60 Ibid., pp. 205-09; but see Auchincloss, Edith Wharton, pp. 14-17, and Edmund Wilson, "Edith Wharton: a Memoir," pp. 175-76, for assertions that these "heroes" are not always idealized.
He had been on his way to Anna's country home Givré outside Paris, when he received her abrupt telegram saying that an "obstacle" would prevent her receiving him. Ten days with Sophy in Paris leave him full of loaching. Four months later, Anna awaits Darrow at Givré. Her stepson Owen is likewise contemplating marriage, and she will "see him through," since his grandmother, a Gallicized American, will object to his choice. The plot thickens when Darrow arrives, and learns that Sophy is now the governess of Anna's child, Effie. Slight signs and enormous sensitivity go into the discovery that Owen's choice is Sophy. The rest of the plot is the gradual discovery by each of the four principals that both marriages might well be made impossible by a central fact, that Sophy, unlike Darrow, fell in love during the Paris affair. Anna is left to contend with unsuspected dark areas in her soul, while Darrow, presumably, has refined his morality beyond its initial point, that there are ladies and non-ladies. Owen and Sophy are, in effect, exiled: Owen will see the world, Sophy will return to Mrs. Murett, symbol of her questionable past. Clearly the characters are delicate and refined; the setting is cosmopolitan; and the plot is an elaborate examination of the inner life. James loved it: "quite the finest thing you have done; both more done than even the best of your other doing, and more worth it through intrinsic value, interest and beauty," he wrote Mrs. Wharton.  

61 "On The Reef: A Letter," from The Letters of Henry James, ed. Percy Lubbock, 1948; rpt. EW: 20th Century Views, p. 148. The many subsequent references to this famous let-
He was most struck by "the unspeakably fouillé nature of the situation between the two principals (more gone into and with more undeviating truth than anything you have done)" (p. 148). "It all shows, partly," he goes on, "what strength of subject is, and how it carries and inspires, inasmuch as I think your subject in its essence very fine and takes in no end of beautiful things to do" (p. 148). Millicent Bell observes that Mrs. Wharton's formula "a good subject . . . must contain in itself something that sheds a light on our moral experience" is a patent simplification of his formula in "The Art of Fiction," "the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer;" but that here in The Reef Mrs. Wharton effectively employs his central theme, American innocence versus European experience, particularly in the figure of Sophy.62

Furthermore, the manner of The Reef resembles James. The Writing of Fiction commends the limited point of view, and this novel, written about twelve years earlier, is her first long work to use the Jamesian convention.63 Book I, chapters 1 through 8, are from Darrow's point of view; Book V, chapters 30 through 39, are from Anna's; and Books II through IV shift back and forth as the exigencies of the plot require. Oddly enough, the author of The Golden Bowl had to overcome doubts about the method:  

62 Bell, esp. 276-77. 63 Ibid., p. 268.
I suffer or worry a little from the fact that in the Prologue, as it were, we are admitted so much into the consciousness of the man, and that after the introduction of Anna . . . we see him almost only as she sees him—which gives our attention a different sort of work to do; yet this is really, I think, but a triumph of your method, for he remains of an absolute consistent verity, showing himself in that way better perhaps than in any other . . . . (letter, p. 149)

There is no "reliable narrator" as such: the story unfolds, as in The Golden Bowl, as each character discovers the implications of the situation with which the novel opens.

Under the terms of Wharton's "Jamesian" critical requirements we are obliged to ask what the novel tries to represent, how far it succeeds, and whether the subject was worth the effort ("CF," p. 230). We are, in short, to analyze the subject and manner ("Vice of Reading," p. 520). The subject here is a double one, the moral education of George Darrow and Anna Leath. More specifically, it is the moral education of Anna Leath by means of that of George Darrow. That the emphasis is on Anna is revealed by the structure: Chapter 1 introduces us to Darrow, who yearns for Anna, giving us by means of flashbacks a picture of their reunion after twelve years as well as a vision of her as a young lady ("elusive and inaccessible," p. 6) asking him to wait as she comes to him slowly down a garden path (p. 7). Book II, Chapter 9, introduces us to the consciousness of Anna, who in a similar manner of revery adds new dimensions to Darrow's external view. As a girl she had felt a veil between herself and life: on prosperous philistine West Fifty-fifth Street in New York "it was in the
visioned region of action and emotion that her fullest hours were spent" (p. 87). Other girls, "seemingly unaware of her world of hidden beauty, were yet possessed of some vital secret which escaped her. ... Love, she told herself, would one day release her from this spell of unreality" (pp. 87-88). Unable to express her feelings for him, Anna loses young Darrow to the bold Kitty Mayne. She marries the seemingly unconventional Fraser Leath (a distinct echo of James's Gilbert Osmond), only to discover that his French chateau Givre, at first the occasion for romantic visions, became "the very symbol of narrowness and monotony," and now that he is dead, "the shell of a life slowly adjusted to its dwelling," but, nevertheless, still full of "latent life" (see pp. 84-85). Thus the stage is set, by this double prologue: Anna waits for liberation into the real world by love, but her romantic ideals sequester her from it; Darrow, very much of the world, is held off, frustrated, and defeated. Enter Sophy Viner, proving to be, like Kitty Mayne, one of those girls with the "vital secret." Wharton uses the "attack": both Darrow and Anna are presented in media res, Darrow at a crowded pier, a scene of color and action; Anna overlooking Givre, a scene of expectant tranquillity; but by use of the revery they present enough biography and autobiography to indeed make the "last page latent in the first," though the windings of fate will emerge only later (BG, p. 208). Clearly that "vitality" that the exquisite Anna fears and that the worldly Darrow responds to will provide an "obstacle," indeed a "reef,"
upon which initial hopes will founder.

Like James, Mrs. Wharton insisted that we grant the author his subject. But for some readers this subject is unsatisfactory. For Louis Auchincloss, the theme has always been "faintly ridiculous," for Mrs. Leath is far too wounded by the situation, and the "situation," he cannot but think, is believed all the worse since Sophy is a governess, so that for once Mrs. Wharton seems as prudish and class-conscious as her severest critics think her.64 Edmund Wilson thinks this novel an unhealthy reversion to her early work, partaking too much of the "artificial moral problems" of Bourget and the "tenuity of analysis" of James.65 In short, they find (as so many critics of James do) a dither where none is justified. I disagree. One of Mrs. Wharton's central subjects is the "republic of the spirit."66 Charles K. Trueblood's perceptive essay describes it. Her books, he says, focus on those characters with whom "refinement of feeling . . . has grown up into a fusion with ethical principle and has given them an aesthetic morality," an aristocracy that is her "tacit standard, the instrument of her criticism, the secret of her detachment, her weapon of satire. It is not the upper classes merely that she has in her mind, but the upper and inner classes; and in her judgments she is

64 Auchincloss, Edith Wharton, pp. 22-23.
identified with them." Anna is a member of this aristocracy, and so is Darrow, but Sophy is not, for all her charm; and the real subject of the book is Anna's exposure to what is not consonant with her fine sensibility and how she is to handle the shock.

This subject should be presented in terms of living characters, not schemata, who reveal their inner lives by what they think and, more importantly, what they do. Darrow emerges in Book I as a man of refinement and discrimination, subject, however, to fits of pride. As the book opens he has been rebuffed, as he sees it, with no explanation, and the very umbrellas seem to mock him. "It was as though all the people about him had taken his measure and known his plight; as though they were contemptuously bumping and shoving him like the inconsiderable thing he had become" (p. 11).

He cannot decide whether to return to comfort in London, or push on across the stormy channel, and it is in this passive and aggrieved state that he responds to the fresh appeal of Sophy Viner, "clearly an American, but with the loose native quality strained through a closer woof of manners" (pp. 13-14). That he is of the elect emerges in their contrasting reactions to their subsequent journey together. He responds to her natural spontaneity, but is averse to her associations with a vulgar Mrs. Murett in whose house he had seen

---

her before, and her knowledgeableness about his interests there.

The unexpectedness of the thrust—as well as its doubtful taste—chilled his growing enjoyment of her chatter. He had really been getting to like her—had recovered, under the candid approval of her eye, his usual sense of being a personable young man, with all the privileges pertaining to the state, instead of the anonymous rag of humanity he had felt himself in the crowd on the pier. It annoyed him, at that particular moment, to be reminded that naturalness is not always consonant with taste. (p. 17)

But she "had roused in him the dormant habit of comparison" (p. 27) among "types" of ladies. Nevertheless he is forced, in Paris, to realize that her "naturalness," perhaps refreshing after Anna's intense formality, precludes the tact of sensibility that his own requires. Walking the quays of Paris, "she seemed hardly conscious of sensations of form and colour, or of any imaginative suggestion, and the spectacle before them—always, in its scenic splendour, so moving to her companion—broke up, under her scrutiny, into a thousand minor points," illustrated by her charming, but superficial, chatter (p. 38). She reacts to plays as to life itself, a poignant contrast to Anna's boredom from surfeit (see p. 33) and his own detachment due to critical accretions (p. 60). But Darrow sees, and cannot approve, that "it was on 'the story' that her mind was fixed, and in life also, he suspected, it would always be 'the story,' rather than its remoter imaginative issues, that would hold her. He did not believe there were ever any echoes in her soul . . ." (p. 62). Ten days later we discover him in his hotel, sunk in loathing at an intimacy which might have been tolerable but
for the rain that confines him to the room with "the nudge of a transient intimacy . . ." (p. 75). He has, then, dabbled with naturalness and found it wanting. He feels himself soiled, and throws Anna's long-awaited letter in the fire.

Anna is presented in Book II as a captive queen awaiting release. That she has changed since she signalled Darrow to wait while she walked the path to him is illustrated in her anomalous run to Owen: the letter from Darrow she holds is the promise of an ideal love, and she is full of "latent animation." "In every nerve and vein she was conscious of that equipoise of bliss which the fearful human heart scarce dares acknowledge . . . . She was not afraid now; but she felt a deep inward stillness" (p. 85). Her first interview with Darrow, Chapter 11, makes explicit that conflict "latent in the first page," for she is tremulous with the expectation of a perfect union ("'Between you and me everything matters,'" for she is worried about his four-month silence after her letter, which contained a virtual proposal), while he is determined to enjoy this moment of intimacy ("'Of course! . . . That's why,' he went on, "'everything,' for me, is here and now: on this bench, between you and me,'" for he has utterly forgotten the dalliance that prompted the silence) (p. 111). He reassures her, and she totally surrenders her feelings to him (p. 125). But Chapter 14 presents the obstacle, or the reef, Sophy Viner. A series of scenes show Anna's unspoken suspicions grow. Dar-
row perceives that she is quite interested in Sophy, "for all kinds of reasons," and senses her "hidden stir." It takes a couple of days and four chapters (from 14 to 18) for him to learn that the perturbation over Sophy is due to the fact that she is Owen's debatable intended, and we thus know that Anna's main concern is for Owen. It is not until Chapter 24 that her secret fears are confirmed: when accused by Owen of illicit connection, Sophy and Darrow do not look at each other (see p. 247). Sophy becomes "the embodiment of that unknown peril lurking in the background of every woman's thoughts about her lover" (p. 278), and lights up unknown "darknesses" in her heart. Chapters 27-39 (pp. 265-367), almost one-third of the book, are from Anna's point of view to explore her passionate reactions to this situation, a past she cannot understand and that will never go away. Darrow tries to reach her as she lies "suffering as a hurt animal must" (p. 285):

"You've always said you wanted, above all, to look at life, at the human problem, as it is, without fear and without hypocrisy; and it's not always a pleasant thing to look at." (p. 288)

She would have liked to stop her ears, to close her eyes, to shut out every sight and sound and suggestion of a world in which such things could be; and at the same time she was tormented by the desire to know more, to understand better, to feel herself less ignorant and inexpert in matters which made so much of the stuff of human experience. What did he mean by "a moment's folly, a flash of madness"? (p. 290)

Three days later he tries again:

"... when you've lived a little longer you'll see what complex blunderers we all are: how we're struck blind sometimes, and mad sometimes--and then,
when our sight and our senses come back, how we have to set to work, and build up, little by little, bit by bit, the precious things we'd smashed to atoms without knowing it. Life's just a perpetual piecing together of broken bits." (p. 313)

For she has realized now that the pure Darrow of her dreams and the tainted real Darrow are one and the same (pp. 299-300). "She knew now . . . the deep discord and still deeper compliances between what thought in her and what blindly wanted," so that her judgment of others would not henceforward be so absolute (p. 318). But she cannot forget the fact of the "infidelity." At last, in Chapter 36, she determines that she must give Darrow up. She instead apparently gives herself to him (though the final "curtain," p. 343, leaves the manner to the reader's imagination), so that she becomes his, irrevocably. The difficulties are not over, however: Owen has learned the truth about Sophy, and she had not told him.

The truth had come to light by the force of its irresistible pressure; and the perception gave her a startled sense of hidden powers, of a chaos of attractions and repulsions far beneath the ordered surfaces of intercourse. She looked back with melancholy derision on her old conception of life, as a kind of well-lit and well-policed suburb to dark places one need never know about. Here they were, those dark places, in her own bosom, and henceforth she would always have to traverse them to reach the beings she loved best! (p. 353)

Anna, then, has fallen from a state of innocence (a state that Darrow characterizes as "reticences and evasions," "the result of the deadening process of forming a 'lady,'" "afraid of life, of its ruthlessness, its danger and mystery," pp. 29-30, but which she sees as "fearless innocence," "well-lit
and well-policed") into a complex state of confusion.

The very interesting agent of this fall is Sophy Viner, who is always an object, never the subject and point of view, so that we depend first on Darrow's view of her, then Anna's. For Darrow, she is a lovely girl with dimly bad associations. She is spontaneous and natural but not, therefore, always tactful. An excellent symbol of her virtues and vices is in Chapter 4, her inability to indite a letter.

She was really powerless to put her thoughts in writing, and the inability seemed characteristic of her quick impressionable mind, and of the incessant come-and-go of her sensations. He thought of Anna Leath's letters... He saw the slender firm strokes of the pen, recalled the clear structure of the phrases... (pp. 44-45)

Darrow reflects that "she was the kind of girl in whom certain people would instantly have recognized the histrionic gift" (p. 42), but "he had a notion that, save in the mind of genius, the creative process absorbs too much of the whole stuff of being to leave much surplus for personal expression; and the girl before him... seemed destined to work in life itself rather than in any of its counterfeits" (p. 43). Indeed she is, according to Darrow, concerned with the "story," never "the remoter imaginative issues." But she is clearly more complex than he, egocentric dilettante that he is, gives her credit for. In Chapter 14 she emerges from the wings as "a jewel of a governess." Her courage in the face of the threat that Darrow represents makes him feel inferior, even graceless (p. 150). Throughout she acts with
a simplicity, even nobility, that puts him to shame and even in Chapter 20 kindles his interest in her. Her moral apex comes with the admission that the Paris adventure irrevocably changed her. She admits that she loves Darrow and will "choose" him, exiling herself from the Paradise of Givré (Chapter 26, pp. 255-64).

Anna's attitude toward the girl is more complex. At first, she is merely concerned to help Owen, to "see him through." Her attitude is detached, generous.

"Owen, you've been admirable all through."
He broke into a laugh in which the odd elder-brotherly note was once more perceptible.
"Admirable," she emphasized. "And so has she."
"Oh, and so have you to her!" His voice broke down to boyishness. (p. 103)

She questions Darrow about Sophy "for all kinds of reasons," some surely relating to her suspicions aroused by their mutual recognition (Chapter 16). It is a week later that her secret fears emerge, when Owen accuses Sophy and Darrow of complicity (Chapter 23), and later in bitterness she tells Darrow that she had always thought the girl an "adventuress," but, in recognizing her as that "unknown peril" like Kitty Mayne, she bows before wider experience. She recognizes that Sophy has known more of passion than she ever has (p. 307).

She vacillates over her course of action, but Sophy does not: she renounces Owen and promises not to see him, and it

68 Louis Auchincloss, "Edith Wharton and Her New Yorks," from Reflections of a Jacobite (1961), rpt. in EW: 20th Century Views, p. 33, cites this passage as a virtual parody of Jamesian dialogue. See also Pitlick, pp. 199-200, for a good discussion of the Jamesian hesitancies.
is partly in emulation of this noble singleness that Anna seeks her out in the final chapter (see p. 361).

The four other prominent characters are static but nonetheless lifelike. Owen, characterized throughout as boyish and impulsive, is reminiscent of Donatello's faun—he always seems to be striding in from the woods—and seems a curiously innocent contrast to the prematurely wise Sophy. Madame de Chantelle is purposely flat, a faded specimen of the eighteen-sixties. She is an amusing contrast to her friend Adelaide Painter, who stomps in with a simple solution to the complex problem, got from her refreshing "simpler mental state" (p. 212). She believes in legalizing "true love," a sentimental notion Mrs. Wharton apparently thinks little of. There is, finally, Effie, useful in the plot as the necessity for a governess. She reminds us of little Pearl in The Scarlet Letter: she gambols and frolics, the naughty "infant," though nine seems old for that sort of behavior, and sometimes penetrates with devilish precision to the heart of a complex matter. "And is Sophy awfully happy about it too?" she asks her mother and Darrow about their engagement (p. 223).

The characters are scarcely separable from their setting. The Writing of Fiction identified the most important step in the development of the modern novel as the recognition that each of us flows into adjacent people and things (p. 7). Setting, then, is never a mere backdrop but an integral part of characterization, of the subject itself. De-
tails, according to The Writing of Fiction, should be limited to "what the intelligence concerned would have noticed" (p. 85). By 1925 she seems to have recognized her error in The Valley of Decision (1902) where she describes a scene in great detail and then says her hero Odo Valsecca was too distracted to notice it. Book I takes place in the jostling world, then. Darrow and Sophy meet at a train station, and stay together at a hotel, both symbols of impersonality and transience. An excellent example of the use of setting to illuminate character is Chapter 8, where Darrow in disgusted reverie notes each detail of his room. "There was something sardonic, almost sinister, in its appearance of having deliberately 'made up' for its anonymous part, all in noncommittal drabs and browns, with a carpet and paper that nobody would remember, and chairs and tables as impersonal as railway porters" (p. 75).

Immediately juxtaposed is Anna's view of Givré. "The scene about her was known to satiety," and the afternoon pause in wait for Owen affords time to review what it once meant ("romantic associations"), what it became ("the very symbol of narrowness and monotony"), and what it is now ("the shell of a life slowly adjusted to its dwelling") (p. 71).

69 Nevius makes this point, p. 46.

But she tries to see it with Darrow's eyes, for it, like she, is full of "latent animation" in waiting for him. His view of Givré is important: "'And this is where you've been all these years,' he says, grateful for its mellow beauty (p. 109). Sophy sees it as a haven (see pp. 150-51), while Owen sees it as a trap: "'I want to get out of it, into a life that's big and ugly and struggling. If I can extract beauty out of that, so much the better: that'll prove my vocation. But I want to make beauty, not be drowned in the ready-made, like a bee in a pot of honey'" (p. 145).

It is, then, manufactured beauty. Fraser Leath decorated it. "Darrow wondered that... [his] filial respect should have prevailed over his aesthetic scruples to the extent of permitting such an anachronism [his mother's sixty-ish apartment] among the eighteenth century graces of Givré" (p. 189). And it is thus artificial, like Anna's innocence. The explosion of the truth exiles them from Givré. Sophy departs for Paris, as does Owen. After Anna's surrender to Darrow, and presumably to the moral tangle his life apparently is, they also entrain to Paris, where Anna finds not that intense security she felt on the train (Chapter 37) but horrifying reminders that Darrow had been here with Sophy. Dining out results in a terrible scene of jealousy that convinces Anna she must take a decisive step. It is then that she seeks Sophy out at the abode of her sister, Mrs. McTarvie-Birch, and finds an atmosphere so sordid, so different from anything she expected that discussion of its significance will
be reserved for consideration of the moral significance of the ending. 71

Setting, then, is bound up with consideration of point of view, singled out by The Writing of Fiction as one of the two major technical concerns of the novel. The author is "omniscient," of course, about his own story, but if he shifts point of view too often, he loses credibility. The Writing of Fiction presents what amounts to a recipe for the procedure used in The Reef a dozen years before:

... it is best to shift as seldom as possible, and to let the tale work itself out from not more than two (or at most three) angles of vision, choosing as reflecting consciousnesses persons either in close mental and moral relation to each other, or discerning enough to estimate each other's parts in the drama, so that the latter, even viewed from different angles, always presents itself to the reader as a whole. (pp. 87-88)

The Reef uses two centres of consciousness. Darrow is the centre of Book I, chapters 1 through 8; Anna is the centre of much of Books IV and V, chapters 27-39. The middle portion is divided between them: Anna, chapters 9-12; Darrow, 13-17; Anna, 18; Darrow, 19-22; Anna, 23-25; and Darrow, 26. I do not detect any hidden pattern, except for the obvious alternation, beyond the fact that each juncture is a dramatic turning point; but that observation could be made about the end of almost every chapter. The technique grows out of the subject at hand--on that point Mrs. Wharton agreed with

71 Most critics notice the organic use of setting. See Lovett, pp. 63-66; Pitlick, pp. 188-92; and Lyde, pp. 147-49.
Henry James. And this subject clearly benefits from dramatic treatment. By "drama" I mean "showing" rather than "telling," the Jamesian attempt, ably systematized by Percy Lubbock in *The Craft of Fiction*, to create the illusion that the reader is watching a mind reacting to events, or, rather, reading the record of how it reacted when, in the past, the events happened. The essence is the gradual unfolding of events to achieve maximum interest and suspense. I refer to "drama" for the characters themselves. Sophy and Darrow share an experience which subsequent events dictate they must hide; Anna, unnaturally "innocent," must learn of it gradually; her son, boyish but less naive, plays detective to bring the truth to light. At times lack of knowledge, played for dramatic irony, seems strained: Darrow arrives at Givre and learns that Owen must be safely married before he and Anna can marry, but he is not told for two days that Sophy, whom he clearly recognizes at once, is the fiancée in question. Mrs. Wharton supplies a reason: Anna has promised Owen to tell no one until the grandmother is informed, but it does not convince. The reader may feel that he is being invited to enjoy watching Darrow and Sophy circle around

---


each other in fear without full benefit of each other's true situation. Usually, however, a reader is intrigued with the unfolding passions.

I refer also to "drama" for the reader. Book I is given over to Darrow that we might see the obstacle, "the reef," for what it is, the better to watch Anna as she tries to learn about and understand it. We watch Darrow's initiation, then later catch glimpses of his new vision of Sophy as courageous, even noble, and his consequent maturation. The dramatic effect is largely due to Mrs. Wharton's firm control over the story: we clearly do not see the characters' minds at work as they confront the "welter of existence." She exercises artistic selection over the tangle of possibilities. Her control and economy are evidenced in two major ways.

First, the language is clearly hers. There are two "reflecting consciousnesses," but Mrs. Wharton's mind is the mirror which does not reflect their experience so much as project it in her own epigrammatic prose studded with many images.\(^\text{74}\) We are not given their thoughts directly, but the Whartonian version, a function of the subtle point of view. The author has an objectivity, a rationality that articulates and shapes even the reflecting consciousnesses' inarticulate and inchoate thoughts. Robert Morss Lovett observes that Mrs. Wharton rarely uses the first person to depict her characters. "She realizes that, however intelligent

\(^{74}\) See Pitlick on image patterns, esp. pp. 195-98.
they may be, their behavior can never be fully rationalized
by themselves. She therefore shows them through the medium
of an observing and directing intelligence, a device which
is necessary to give to the record of their experience the
general application, the economy, and the symmetry required
by the classic ideal toward which she strives. In short,
she makes the characters' thoughts intelligible, even when
they are experiencing only a whirl. Obvious examples are
the climactic scenes of great perturbation, where the descrip-
tion of the chaotic emotion is the same orderly discourse as
before. Only the occasional petering out of a paragraph
with three dots reveals the author's sympathetic excitement.
For instance, Darrow tries to distract himself with shooting
after the catastrophic introduction to Sophy:

But all the while, behind these voluntarily empha-
sized sensations, his secret consciousness continued
to revolve on a loud wheel of thought. For a time
it seemed to be sweeping him through deep gulfs of
darkness. His sensations were too swift and swarm-
ing to be disentangled. He had an almost physical
sense of struggling for air, of battling helplessly
with material obstructions, as though the russet
covert through which he trudged were the heart of a
maleficent jungle... (p. 144)

Similarly Mrs. Wharton describes Anna's mental condition in
a way in which Anna herself would have been unable to do:

She shrank from lighting the lights, and groped her
way about, trying to find what she needed. She

75 Lovett, pp. 67-68.

76 The major idea here comes from Lubbock, Craft,
Ch. XI, pp. 156-71, the famous chapter on point of view in
James's Ambassadors. See esp. pp. 161-65 on the subtle
authorial overview of Strether's thoughts.
seemed immeasurably far off from everyone, and most of all from herself. It was as if her consciousness had been transmitted to some stranger whose thoughts and gestures were indifferent to her... (p. 310)

But Mrs. Wharton does not use that insight to "tell" the reader what to think about either Darrow or Anna, for this is, after all, "drama"; but she "shows" us what we need to know to get the point.

For, secondly, the scenes are deftly manipulated. With the small cast and organic setting, the reader gets the impression, especially after complications set up in Book II, that he might be reading a scenario: the entrances, the exits, the meetings, interviews, encounters, the many occasions that people are "sent for" and prepared for, or recovered from, and, above all, the curtains convince that a performance is being staged. Note for example Chapter 14, wherein Owen and Anna Leath witness the shocked recognition of Darrow and Sophy in what must be called a tableau (see pp. 141-42). The same effect is achieved in Chapter 16, when Sophy enters a sitting room containing Anna and Darrow, and perceives their connection (p. 162). The supreme example is Chapter 24, wherein Owen confronts Anna with his suspicions that Darrow is behind Sophy's change of heart, and the curtain drops on Anna's intuition that indeed he is (p. 247). Sometimes, as in this case, the next chapter begins where the last left off (see p. 248). Other times such

---

77 Cf. James's Portrait of a Lady, Ch. 40, p. 336, where Isabel has a hint of the relation between her husband and Madame Merle because she enters upon a tête-à-tête wherein only Madame Merle stands.
an abrupt ending cuts off a line of enquiry, and the scene switches. An example is Darrow's exit in Chapter 29, which Anna believes to be final but is too proud to prevent. Chapter 30, and Book V, opens in Paris three days later, whence Anna has come for the aid of Miss Painter (pp. 293-97).

But it will be remembered that The Writing of Fiction found the novel of character and manners "superior in richness, variety and play of light and shade" to the novel of situation, associated with the drama (pp. 138-39). Mrs. Wharton's distinction rests on whether it is character or situation that governs the development. "Drama," in this view, is a situation with characters functioning as mouthpieces, as in Elective Affinities or The Scarlet Letter, clearly, to a critic who most values living characters, an inferior type. Henry James praised The Reef as "a Drama, and almost, as it seems to me, of the psychologic Racinian unity, intensity and gracility" (letter, p. 149). Nevius notes its formal design, "achieved with the economy of French classical drama."78 The question must be asked whether The Reef is a novel of situation or a novel of character, the latter of which Mrs. Wharton patently preferred, and, further, whether it has that "rigid design" she so deplored in the later James. The Writing of Fiction offers as a test to differentiate between the two only dialogue: the characters must sound like themselves, not as the situation requires they should (pp. 140-41). Like Matthew Arnold's touchstones,

78 Nevius, p. 134.
the "test" is actually a subjective one. The question amounts to whether the reader believes that the characters "live," and act in that irregular, unprogrammed fashion of real human beings. This reader finds that the delicate Anna "lives" indeed, as does Darrow: the situation, absolutely essential lest we founder in a slice of life, serves to provoke genuine growth and development. James was "not sure her oscillations are not beyond our notation," yet felt after all that "everything seems so to come of itself" (letter, pp. 148-49), and so, I believe, it does.

Secondly, in The Writing of Fiction Mrs. Wharton objects to "drama" in the sense of "the 'talked' novel" like James's Awkward Age, where dialogue is given the expository and developmental tasks properly belonging to narrative. The word "drama" here means action that can be seen and heard, and which needs "the special artifices of the theatre" (p. 72). It encourages our interest, as Oedipe at the Théâtre Français did Sophy's, in "'the story,' rather than its remotest imaginative issues" (Reef, p. 62). "The farther the novel is removed in treatment from theatrical modes of expression, the more nearly it . . . appeals to those more subtle imaginative requirements which the stage can never completely satisfy" (WF, pp. 138-39). Why limit fiction, she is asking, to the direct and obvious?

In The Reef there is clearly no attempt to limit what we learn to what the characters say and do: there is an overriding reliance on the revery, often in combination with

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
flashbacks, to convey information reaching beyond the immediate scene. As described before, Chapters 1 and 8, which introduce Darrow and Anna, both contain flashbacks in the form of reveries, with the present scene kept firmly in hand. Chapter 4 opens with Darrow's reactions to Sophy's first thrilled views of Paris, a scene which proves to be a flashback the next morning, from which we switch back to subsequent events the preceding night before proceeding with the happenings of the day. The effect is to provide a scenic locus for exploring surrounding events and the relevant past and to avoid what might become a monotonous chronological narrative.

Mrs. Wharton gives careful thought, it is clear, to the presentation of time, singled out in The Writing of Fiction as the second major technical problem of the novel (the first being point of view). Terming it "the great mystery of the art of fiction" and hailing Tolstoy as the master, she again (as with drama) broaches a very suggestive topic but treats it summarily. The characters, she says, must somehow change convincingly in those "inconspicuous transitional pages of narrative that lead from climax to climax" (p. 96). I suggest that she accomplished this vague aim by structuring dramatic climaxes—those walks, meetings, interviews, encounters, etc.—and strategically interspersing reveries to supply links. A most conspicuous example is the end of

79 Monroe substantiates this idea, p. 137.
Chapter 7, wherein Darrow makes Sophy his ambiguous "offer," and Chapter 8, ten days later and clearly the end of an affair, a gap between climactic moments later filled in by Darrow's revery in Chapter 26 (pp. 260-61) on how such an affair developed. Another example is Chapter 30, which opens on Anna in Miss Painter's apartment, where she is left to reflect on the last three days and how the jealous Owen had run away to Paris. "Narrative," then, that crucial record of change, is skillfully incorporated into the dramatic scenes as revery.

Mrs. Wharton's strictures against drama, then, do not rule out the kind of "drama," or "showing," admired above. The artist's task, she says repeatedly, is to show human character by means of the best illuminating incidents, the proper selection of which leads to the control over language, point of view, and presentation of scenes that I have described as the triumphant "drama" of The Reef.

But there are objections to the procedure. Nevius charges that the use of two narrators, without a "reliable narrator," creates an uncertain tone. We must rely on the more admirable, Anna, anxious for wider experience and thus entering "an unfamiliar moral realm" where we cannot trust her judgment. He concludes that the novel has Flaubert's recommended "personal equation," but "so hopelessly embedded in the point of view that we cannot confidently extract it."  


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
I would suggest, however, that Mrs. Wharton does in fact make a moral statement that can be extracted from the point of view. I suggested earlier that the subject is the moral education of Anna Leath by means of that of George Darrow. He opens the book as a cynical, self-appreciative young man but is forced by the fact that Sophy is no readily identifiable "type" to rethink his careless generalizations. By Chapter 8 he is utterly disgusted with the resulting affair and, one supposes, sure that it disqualifies him to be the finer Mrs. Leath's suitor. But after a lapse of four months he responds to a second letter from Anna and appears gratefully at Givré. Sophy comes as a rude shock, but he must deal with her. As an essentially passive and squeamish fellow, his procedure is to conceal the affair, to protect himself, for here are "material obstructions" (p. 144), and to protect Sophy, in the face of whose courage "he was left face to face with the mere graceless fact of his inferiority" (p. 150). He must tangle with the fact that he must help this girl though he does not believe she should be urged upon his dearest ones, while feeling his own cheapness and "vulgar obtuseness" in having cared so little for her (pp. 167, 170). Once he learns that she is engaged to Owen, he is angry, though "aware of cherishing the common doubt as to the disinterestedness of a woman who tries to rise above her past," "a mere blind motion of his blood" (p. 188). He tries to convince her that the marriage is not in her best interest, although Sophy characteristically sees through
that ploy (Chapter 20). The couples become engaged, but Darrow's peace of mind is disturbed by the "duality of impression" he gets from seeing Anna and Sophy, dressed as in Paris, in close proximity (see p. 227).

His regeneration is accomplished in Chapter 26. The truth is out, but Darrow has persuaded Anna that his motive in meeting Sophy was to test her suitability for Owen. He must, Anna charges, get another reason from Sophy for her departure. It is in this chapter that Sophy tells Darrow that she loves him and therefore can't marry Owen. He sees that it is he that should leave, but Sophy denies the utility of self-sacrifice.

"I'd always wanted adventures, and you'd given me one, and I tried to take your attitude about it, to 'play the game' and convince myself that I hadn't risked any more on it than you. Then, when I met you again, I suddenly saw that I had risked more, but that I'd won more, too--such worlds! ... I've had you and I mean to keep you. ... hidden away here," she ended, and put her hand upon her breast. (pp. 259-60)

This outcry of genuine passion causes Darrow to reassess the whole affair. Here is the revery that fills in the ten-day gap, Darrow's attempt to understand how this "perilous passion" had grown out of what he had in his immaturity considered a harmless adventure. In Chapter 27 his elaborate structure of lies breaks down: his eyes reveal to Anna that Sophy loves him and has had experiences with him that she has not. That revery is our last glimpse into Darrow's genuinely troubled mind, and it is my impression that the advice and comfort he subsequently gives Anna is Mrs. Wharton's
own. As recounted above, it is essentially an injunction to stoicism. Because we are all "complex blunderers," "life's just a perpetual piecing together of broken bits!" The "human problem" is "not always a pleasant thing," thus he urges that she compromise with her notions of purity and enter the world. "You were made to feel everything." It sounds the note of mortal limitation that constitutes a major theme in her work. The only issue is whether Anna is strong enough to live by the message.

That brings up the vexing issue of the last chapter. James's letter does not complain of it, but critics often do. Mrs. Wharton's close friend Charles Du Bos saw a discrepancy there, since "brilliant as it is in itself, /it/ belongs to another vein of Edith's, the vein of The Custom of the Country, and thereby, by a touch of bitterness, despoils the novel of the sweet yet majestic sadness of the close of Racine's tragedy." When he mentioned it to Mrs. Wharton, he says, she agreed, although her "utmost gentleness" might have been due to the fact that he seemed on his death-bed. Miss Pitlick evaluates the switch in methods:

If, as Charles Du Bos obliquely suggests, Mrs. Wharton intended the resolution of The Reef to resemble that of Racine's Bérénice, in which the principals

---

81 An especially good discussion of this point is Lyde, Ch. IV, "Social Convention and Edith Wharton's Concept of Truth," esp. p. 92 (compromise is not "an adjustment of conflicting principles by yielding a part to each," but "the balancing of individual idealism and social necessity," not the easy way out, but the only way out for mortals).

82 Lubbock, Portrait, p. 102. 83 Ibid.
reluctantly disperse because circumstances extort too much pain as the price of marriage, Mrs. Wharton may have used the scenic and the satiric to create the aesthetic distance necessary for a sense of remoteness and alienation. If so... she sacrificed story to technique at the point in the novel where she could least afford to do so... She should have studied the subtle but definite resolution of The Golden Bowl and The Wings of the Dove. ... 

Irving Howe finds the entire novel "feminine" in its "refined agonies of conscience," and regards the ending, "so painfully tendentious and damaging to all that has preceded it... also dependent on Mrs. Wharton's 'feminine' side, as this time it takes upon itself the privilege of moral retaliation." Seeing less malice in the ending than Howe, Miss Pitlick concludes that "the most accurate statement that can be made of the novel's ultimate moral posture is the conscious acceptance of human inadequacy."85

But, taking the theme as Anna Leath's moral education by means of Darrow's, the last chapter might be read another way. Anna must readjust her conscience, and the opening of Chapter 39 sets the terms of her dilemma. She cannot conquer her jealousy, nor can she give up Darrow, since "he and she were as profoundly and inextricably bound together as two trees with interwoven roots" (p. 360). The only course is definitive action, and she resolves to pledge to Sophy that she has given Darrow up, and act as definitively as Sophy herself had done. What she finds is the

84 Pitlick, p. 188.
86 Pitlick, p. 179.
milieu from which the noble Sophy emerged and to which, apparently, she has returned in the form of the fabled Mrs. Murrett. She finds the girl's sister, "Mrs. McTarvie-Birch."

In the roseate penumbra of the bed-curtains she presented to Anna's startled gaze an odd chromo-like resemblance to Sophy Viner, or a suggestion, rather, of what Sophy Viner might, with the years and in spite of the powder-puff, become. Larger, blonder, heavier-featured, she yet had glances and movements that disturbingly suggested what was freshest and most engaging in the girl; and as she stretched her bare plump arm across the bed she seemed to be pulling back the veil from dingy distances of family history. (p. 365)

Nevius quotes this passage, commenting that "the adjective 'dingy' gives the show away," for Mrs. Wharton most loathes dinginess. "Nothing has quite prepared us for the shock of this final revelation and the judgment it implies. With its depressingly narrow sense of human values, it is one of the most regrettable passages in Edith Wharton's fiction." But his quotation of the passage omits the all-important words "Larger, blonder, heavier-featured, she yet had glances and movements that disturbingly suggested what was freshest and most engaging in the girl," and I submit that we have been prepared from the very first for this double vision of Sophy's charms. Darrow early noted that her naturalness was not always consonant with taste, and "taste" is not quite the snobbery that Nevius implies. It is intimately related to Mrs. Wharton's conception of the aristocracy of the sensibility which, we have seen, does not include Sophy. The issue of the book is how such an aristocrat as Anna can rec-

87 Nevius, p. 140.
oncile herself to the dingy world. Darrow as dilettante had toyed with it and put it aside in disgust, but Sophy's very real passion (for it takes no aristocrat of sensibility to feel that with nobility) teaches him that his categories are too harsh. Anna also comes to respect Sophy's wider experience, and tries to accept Darrow's challenge to feel everything, for "to feel," she thinks, "was surely better than to judge" (p. 325). But she is completely uncomfortable out in the world: to dine out in Paris exposes her to all sorts of jealous terrors. Thus she decides to confront that fear, and finds the underside of that natural charm (as portrayed throughout) the vulgarity which, as an employee of Mrs. Murrett, the surely intelligent and noble Sophy has before, and will again, contend with. The method changes from internal analysis to "scene," as Miss Pitlick points out, because Anna must be shown in juxtaposition to the vulgar world: both are objects of our scrutiny. The importance of the scene is that it dramatizes the fact that Anna has not only heard with horror about, but actually seen, the world beyond the pale of West Fifty-fifth Street and Givré, has lost her "fearless innocence," and can never regain it. The curtain drops before we learn whether the vision of Sophy-as-she-might-become discredits the girl for Anna to the extent that she can stifle her jealousy and comfortably choose Darrow, or

88 Cf. Lubbock, Craft, on Strether as an occasional object, esp. pp. 166-67.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
whether it so disgusts her that she must renounce him.\textsuperscript{89}

But how she chooses is immaterial. It is a pre-eminently dramatic ending, Mrs. Wharton's most precipitous drop of the curtain. Like Nora's slamming of the door in \textit{A Doll's House}, Anna's departure matters not because she is going in a particular direction, but because she has finally rejected a factitious innocence. "Life's just a perpetual piecing together of broken bits." "Jamesian" in technique, \textit{The Reef} is also Jamesian in its moral vision: seeing clearly is more important than doing something. "Point of view" is all.

\textsuperscript{89} In sharp disagreement with my valuation of Anna is Walton, who sees the last scene as a scathing comment on her. The sister's vulgarity, he thinks, makes the reader realize "the distinction of Sophy's character, which has survived its environment with a simple integrity that Anna, with all her refinement, cannot achieve" (p. 70). He suggests that Anna might be an unconscious self-criticism by Wharton (p. 71).
CHAPTER II

VIRGINIA WOOLF'S THEORY OF THE NOVEL

a. The Function of Criticism

Virginia Woolf's criticism is a significant part of her canon. It covers much more than the novel, her own creative form: it is an act of imaginative appreciation of the entire English literary tradition. But it is not a logical system that is easy to explicate. Because she believes that the critic's main function is to communicate his own response to individual works, not to set up an absolute system whereby works are classified as "good" or "bad," she values intuitive spirit as much as (and sometimes more than) consistent matter. William Hazlitt, for example, is not...
systematic, but if "initiatory and inspiring rather than conclusive and complete, there is something to be said for the critic who starts the reader on a journey and fires him with a phrase to shoot off on adventures of his own" (I: 163). George Moore was able to convey "enthusiasm, which is the life-blood of criticism." Behind that enthusiasm is the combination of reason and feeling she so admires in Turgenev, his intuitive grasp of the need for both the fact and the vision (I: 249-50). Her good friend Roger Fry's comprehension of a work of art was a function, she thought, of "the union . . . of two different qualities--his reason and his sensibility. Many people have one; many people have the other. But few have both, and fewer still are able to make them both work in harmony" (IV: 89). Her favorite critics are, predictably, both critics and artists, like herself.  

Critics, then, are necessarily subjective: indeed, she applauds the eccentric. "And is it not because the fallible human being is absent in most books of criticism that we learn so little from them? Such is human imperfection that to love one thing you are almost constrained to


hate another" ("Winged Phrases," CW, p. 142). Her own essays stress her prejudices. "An Essay in Criticism" (1927), for instance, explores the consequences of her stance as a "modernist" (requiring that literature illuminate the subconscious) upon her attitude toward Hemingway (II: 252-58). She poses as Dr. Johnson's "common reader" with common limitations. "Letter to a Young Poet" (1932), for example, mockingly owns up to certain "defects," "the lack of a sound university training" and "the practice of prose," that will vitiate her advice (II: 183).

But, at the same time, Mrs. Woolf believes that the critic must try to make as objective an analysis of a work as possible. She takes vigorous issue with J. E. Spingarn's contention that criticism is an end in itself equal to art, which depends, she says, "upon the assumption that the task of the critic is to ask himself--'What has the poet tried to express and how has he expressed it?' . . . It does not seem possible to say of critical work, as it is possible to say of poetical work, that 'beauty is its own excuse for being.'" The critic should isolate the essential. In "William Hazlitt" Mrs. Woolf declares that Hazlitt "singles out the peculiar quality of his author and stamps it vigorously" (I: 163). When working on that essay Woolf wrote in her diary, "I am not sure that I have speared that little eel in the middle--that marrow--which is one's object in criticism."^5

---

5 "Creative Criticism," TLS, 7 June 1917, p. 271.
Such accuracy requires not only "a ridiculous amount of time, more of trouble" (Diary, p. 156), but also proper perspective, which almost always requires distance in time. Thus she distinguishes between "criticism," which deals with the past in terms of established principles (and which is thus very hard to write at the present time), and "reviewing," which deals with new books ("Reviewing," II: 204-15). Reviewing is risky: "Lockhart's Criticism," recalling that Lockhart damned himself with his adverse reaction to John Keats, concludes that "a good reviewer of contemporary work will get the proportions roughly right, but the detail wrong" (I: 184). Mrs. Woolf often comments on the difficulty of evaluating one's contemporaries. As the Diary notes, "the reception of living work is too coarse and partial if you're doing the same thing yourself" (20 April 1935, p. 237).  

Once there were standards to assist in critical analysis: not absolutely reliable opinions, of course, but "a centralizing influence" in the person of a Dryden, Johnson, Coleridge, or Arnold. Good criticism should discuss, as those men were able to, rules, genres, techniques, themes,

---


historical background, literary history, and moral questions ("Creative Criticism," p. 271). The novel, such an elastic form, could benefit particularly from such criticism:

For possibly, if fiction is, as we suggest, in difficulties, it may be because nobody grasps her firmly and defines her severely. She has had no rules drawn up for her, very little thinking done on her behalf. And though rules may be wrong and must be broken, they have this advantage—they confer dignity and order upon their subject; they admit her to a place in civilized society; they prove that she is worthy of consideration. ("The Art of Fiction," II: 52)

And E. M. Forster, she goes on to say, failed in Aspects of the Novel to give the form an aesthetic identity. So concerned that the novel "bounce us into life," he evaluates it in humanistic rather than aesthetic terms (I: 53-55). "How It Strikes a Contemporary" gives a broader reason for critics' refusal to give rules, the loss of objective belief suffered by the modern mind (II: 157-60). "Great critics, if they are not themselves great poets, are bred from the profusion of the age. . . . But our age is meagre to the verge of destitution" (p. 155). Now the only advice critics can offer a reader is "to respect one's own instincts, to follow them fearlessly and, rather than submit them to the control of any critic or reviewer alive, to check them by reading and reading again the masterpieces of the past" (p. 154).

She welcomes attempts to provide tools for analysis. "On Re-reading Novels" applauds Percy Lubbock's Craft of Fiction in this connection (II: 123). But she condemns manuals for writing fiction. "The Anatomy of Fiction" is a contemptuous look at Clayton Hamilton's Materials and Methods of Fiction,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
seen as a disgusting example of American ingenuity (II: 137-40).  

Virginia Woolf's own criticism is, then, an attempt to recreate her own literary experience, to convey her enthusiasm, in a combination of analysis and rhapsody aiming at the essence of enjoyment, resting on a set of standards as coherent as possible in a world deprived of belief. She uses any material that seems relevant: biography, as in her treatment of the four great women novelists in A Room of One's Own; history, as in "The Pastons and Chaucer" (III: 1-17); sociology, as in "The Leaning Tower" (II: 162-81). Further, she uses any method that seems productive. For example, she sometimes casts criticism into a fictional situation. "Walter Sickert" is in the form of a dinner conversation (II: 233-44). "The Patron and the Crocus" is in the form of an anecdote about a writer confronted with a beautiful crocus and the desire to describe it, expanded to give organic form to observations on the "crocuses," or attempts at representation, of all kinds of writers (II: 149-52). Sometimes that situation is very personal: "Reading" (II: 12-33) and "Phases of Fiction" (II: 56-102) are statements on the nature of literature structured around Mrs. Woolf's description of her own desultory browsing. Other times Mrs.  

---

Woolf exploits a figure of speech. "The Elizabethan Lumber Room" is an exploration of the diverse treasures, literary and otherwise, of a period deriving its rich variety from Hakluyt's Travels (I: 46-53). "Gas at Abbotsford" shows her illustration of Scott's combination of rhetoric and flashes of truth by figuratively expanding the combination of "gas and daylight, ventriloquy and truth" at his famous home (I: 134-39). The cleverness is undeniable, but read in large quantity the essays seem somehow "tricky" as if to avoid systematic exposition. Woolf gives valuable insights but, most critics agree, no system. In fact, few of her essays are general. As M. P. King points out, most concern individual authors or works which—despite the fact that selection was often made by editors—correspond with her personal taste. "Almost half the books she reviewed (136) were biographies or memoirs of one sort or another, with fiction next (84), and general essays (21), criticism (20), poetry (18), history (6), and drama (4) completing the list." King observes further that she often wrote about extraordinary women, especially writers, and writers engaged in experiments.


12 King, p. 151.
like hers, just as one would expect.  

Criticism was as important to Virginia Woolf as her fiction. The Diary shows her recognition of a "cleavage in the brain," a battle of two spirits most amicably settled by working on two books at once, to give both expression (see pp. 134, 176, 244, 248, 309, 312). She certainly worked as hard on her criticism as on her novels: "when I write a review I write every sentence as if it were going to be tried before three Chief Justices" (Diary, 18 Feb. 1922, p. 45).

That meant not only content but form as well. When compiling the first Common Reader she sought "to envelop each essay in its own atmosphere. To get them into a current of life, and so to shape the book," which she proposes to do by means of a conversational structure, since she finds the collection of articles "an inartistic method" (17 Aug. 1923, p. 57). Near the end of her life she was still yearning for a new kind of criticism: "something swifter and lighter and more colloquial and yet intense: more to the point and less composed; more fluid and following the flight; than my C. R. essays. The old problem: how to keep the flight of the mind, yet be exact" (Diary, 22 June 1940, p. 324).

b. Virginia Woolf's Theory of the Novel

Virginia Woolf says in A Room of One's Own that "masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by

---

13 Ibid., pp. 151-52.
the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice" (p. 66). But, in view of her impressionistic methods, it is not surprising that Virginia Woolf did not write a systematic chronological history of the novel. Because she so often examined that tradition for what it offers the modern novelist, it is possible, however, to sketch out a composite picture of the tradition she so revered.

Chaucer, for instance, had the now-rare "story-teller's gift," with a now-lost conviction about his characters, "but also about the world they live in, its end, its nature, and his own craft and technique, so that his mind is free to apply its force fully to its object" ("The Pastons and Chaucer," III: 8, 10). She often returns to the Elizabethans as to the source of the river of English literature. "The Elizabethan Lumber Room," for instance, describes the plenty of Hakluyt's Travels, a cornucopia of words giving rise to "the greatest age of English poetry" (kept in trim by rhyme and meter), but a cumbersome, even if vibrant, prose (exemplified by Sidney), disciplined in time by Dryden and the requirements of the drama (I: 46-51). She sees both the poetry and the prose as manifestations of an exocentric spirit, from which she in time instinctively turns to the egocentric Sir Thomas Browne, who "paved the way for all psychological novelists, autobiographers, confession-mongers, and dealers in the curious shades of our private life" (p. 51).\(^{14}\) Sidney had also been

\(^{14}\) Cf. "Reading" (II: 29-30), which cites Browne as

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
seminal: Mrs. Woolf sees in "Arcadia" the latent seeds of all English fiction, "romance and realism, poetry and psychology" (though the young man left it "unfinished in all its beauty and absurdity") ("The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia," I: 27). The Elizabethans remain a model of youthful vigor. She condones Meredith's linguistic exuberance with their example: "we cannot avoid all memory of Shakespeare" ("The Novels of George Meredith," I: 232).

The novel proper begins with Defoe, one of the unconscious artists who ostensibly reported facts to avoid the "lying" that fiction made possible, but who selected them so unerringly that they have enormous spiritual significance for us now: Robinson Crusoe is a literary Stonehenge in the national consciousness ("Defoe," Essays, I: 62). But the first "modern" novelist is Laurence Sterne, who has a peculiarly private scale of values, an idiosyncratic point of view, but who, nevertheless, remains primarily interested in facts, in things for themselves, a general view that puts him among the poets of the novel ("The Sentimental Journey," I: 97-98). Then the novel reaches a watershed with Jane

the first "personal" author in English.

15 Re-reading Defoe for this essay made Woolf actually see London through his eyes. "Yes, a great writer surely to be there imposing himself on me after 200 years. A great writer--and Forster has never read his books!" (Diary, 12 April 1919, p. 11).

16 Cf. Robert Humphrey, Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel (Berkeley: Univ. of Cal. Press, 1954), who says Sterne uses free association but did not write the first "stream of consciousness" novel in English because
Austen, "the most perfect artist among women" ("Jane Austen," I: 153-54), who achieves a perfection of form within her limited territory which would require that later novelists find new territories. *Persuasion* implies that even she would have changed had she lived longer: "she would have devised a method, clear and composed as ever, but deeper and more suggestive, for conveying not only what people say, but what they leave unsaid; not only what they are, but what life is" (I: 153).

Jane Austen is the first of the four great women novelists who nourished themselves on a slender professional tradition beginning with Aphra Behn. Austen, the Brontës, and George Eliot wrote novels instead of poems and plays because only novels suited their harassing domestic confinement (*Room*, Ch. IV). Jane Austen's and Emily Bronte's free minds and feminine styles were a triumph over circumstance (*Room*, p. 75). The Brontës are notable for being "poets": Charlotte a powerful personal one, Emily, whose *Wuthering Heights* is one of the masterpieces of the English novel, a greater impersonal one ("Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights," I: 185-90). George Eliot is a mastermind, although her disgrace "his concerns are not serious in representing psychic content for its own sake and as a means for achieving essences of characterization" (p. 125). Contrast Melvin J. Friedman, *Stream of Consciousness: A Study in Literary Method* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1955), who says Sterne did write the first English stream of consciousness novel because he uses a detached narrator and makes time subjective, proceeding by association (pp. 28-30). Virginia Woolf's concept of "modern" is of course broader than Humphrey's and Friedman's differing technical definitions of "stream of consciousness."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
and consequent isolation caused a loss of perspective. But
*Middlemarch* is, in Virginia Woolf's famous phrase, "the mag­
nificent book which with all its imperfections is one of the
few English novels written for grown-up people" ("George

"It is a possible contention that after those two
perfect novels, *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Small House at
Allington*, English fiction had to escape from the dominion
of that perfection, as English poetry had to escape from the
perfection of Tennyson," she writes in "The Novels of George
Meredith" (I: 230-31). But meanwhile, in another realm en­
tirely, two prolific masters were pouring forth volumes
which Mrs. Woolf can neither wholeheartedly admire nor ig­
nore. Scott (see especially "The Antiquary," I: 139-43) and
Dickens (see especially "David Copperfield," I: 191-95) are
both dramatists: they visualize a scene, like Shakespeare,
from the outside, and the reader supplies what nuances he
can. Meredith and Hardy, on the other hand, continues "The
Novels of George Meredith," were trying to enlarge the novel
to include "qualities, of thought and of poetry, that are
perhaps incompatible with fiction at its most perfect" (I:
231).

Then Henry James makes the English novel an art form
fully conscious of itself. "'The only real scholar in the
art' beats the amateurs" ("On Re-reading Novels," II: 128).
Nevertheless the maturity of James, and Flaubert, shows a
loss of the youthful vigor of Scott and the unwieldy Victo-
rians (pp. 128-29). After 1912 the Russians made an enormous impression on the English public in Constance Garnett's translations, and introduced to them a new concept: the soul in relation to its own health. Woolf finds Dostoevsky too formless and abnormal, and in fact privately agrees with T. S. Eliot that he has been "the ruin of English literature" (Diary, 26 Sept. 1922, p. 49). But Turgenev gives a "generalized and harmonized picture of life." And Tolstoy, "the greatest of all novelists," deals with every aspect of life, although he chills us by questioning it. But the Russian sadness and inconclusiveness are, finally, alien to the English temper:

English fiction from Sterne to Meredith bears witness to our natural delight in humour and comedy, in the beauty of earth, in the activities of the intellect, and in the splendour of the body. But any deductions that we may draw from the comparison of two fictions so immeasurably far apart are futile save indeed as they flood us with a view of the infinite possibilities of the art. . . . ("Modern Fiction," II: 109-10)

But before turning to Mrs. Woolf's assessment of con-

---


temporary fiction and her own ambitions, it is essential to examine her theory of the novel a different way, for it is clear that she finds no sharply definable chronological line of development in form or function, but examines any novel in terms of several values. She does, it is true, occasionally suggest certain groups. For example, she observes casually, "Some descend from Jane Austen; others from Dickens" ("The Leaning Tower," II: 163). But it is against the very nature of this sensitive impressionistic criticism, aiming at the marrow of each particular eel, to set up categories. Her criticism of the novel rests, however, on certain assumptions.

Mrs. Woolf believes that the basic function of the novel is to interpret human life, a traditional assumption. Indeed, it operates as vicarious experience:

... one element remains constant in all novels, and that is the human element; they are about people, they excite in us the feelings that people excite in us in real life. The novel is the only form of art which seeks to make us believe that it is giving a full and truthful record of the life of a real person. ... We seem to be continuing to live, only in another house or country perhaps. ("Phases of Fiction," II: 99)

But the novel must transform life. "Life and the Novelist" says that "stridently, clamorously, life is forever pleading that she is the proper end of fiction. ... She does not add, however, that she is grossly impure; and that the side she flaunts uppermost is often, for the novelist, of no value

---

whatever" (II: 135). For instance, Turgenev's short and seemingly thin novels are built on the perfect details about the characters he so thoroughly knows, and thus present "a generalized and harmonized picture of life" ("The Novels of Turgenev," I: 248-50). Mrs. Woolf's diary records a conversation with Maynard Keynes about Night and Day: "Oh, it's a dull book, I know, I said; but don't you see you must put it all in before you can leave out" (26 May 1921, p. 34).

She believes that this representation of human life is in terms of character.

I believe that all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite. I believe that all novels, that is to say, deal with character, and that it is to express character—not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved. ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," I: 324)

Of course the "very widest interpretation" can be put on the words "to express character," since our view of the "Mrs. Brown" who serves as her model varies with our peculiar angles of vision on "life itself" (I: 324-27).

In the traditional novel Woolf looks for a "Mrs. Brown" that is a "living" character, a rounded human being. Oliver Goldsmith as essayist used his novelist's gift: "An idea at once dresses itself up in flesh and blood and becomes a human being. . . . He has a perpetual instinct to make concrete, to bring into being" ("Oliver Goldsmith," I: 109). Characters must be both particular and universal: Thomas Hardy, for example, had "the true novelist's power—to make us believe that his characters are fellow-beings driven
by their own passions and idiosyncrasies, while they have—and this is the poet's gift—something symbolical about them which is common to us all" ("The Novels of Thomas Hardy," I: 261). Living characters will seem different each time we read about them:

However often one may have read The Antiquary, Jonathan Oldbuck is slightly different every time. We notice different things; our observation of face and voice differs; and thus Scott's characters, like Shakespeare's and Jane Austen's, have the seed of life in them. They change as we change. But... Scott's characters... suffer from a serious disability; it is only when they speak that they are alive; they never think; as for prying into their minds himself, or drawing inferences from their behaviour, Scott never attempted it. ("The Antiquary," I: 141)

Dickens too had dramatic characters: he "made his books blaze up... by throwing another handful of people upon the fire," but most of his books (David Copperfield being an exception) remain a bundle of characters ("David Copperfield," I: 194-95). But while Scott and Dickens see their characters only from the outside, others see them only from the inside: Charlotte Brontë presents a universe circumscribed by Jane Eyre's passions ("Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights," I: 187), and George Eliot's autobiographical heroines bring out the worst in her ("George Eliot," I: 202-03). The test for the required roundness is dialogue: Scott and Dickens betray their lack of grasp on the deep emotions when their characters "croak" and "rave" (I: 140, 192-93). When reading George Eliot Mrs. Woolf nervously "anticipates the brewing and gathering and thickening of the cloud which will burst upon our heads at the moment of crisis in a shower of disil-
lusionment and verbosity" (I: 203). Mrs. Woolf decides that George Moore's *Esther Waters* is not, after all, a great book because "both scenes and characters are . . . curiously flat. The dialogue is always toneless and monotonous" ("A Born Writer," *CW*, p. 148). She wrote Lytton Strachey that she was pleased he had realized that "dialogue was what . . . [she] was after" in *Night and Day*. "I can't help thinking it's the problem, if one is to write novels at all. . . ."²⁰

Is the novel, then, a psychological study? It is true that the greatest novelists, Tolstoy, Stendhal, and Proust (in contrast to Scott) are "great observers of the intricacies of the heart" ("The Antiquary," I: 142). Stendhal, Chekhov, and Austen give us a knowledge of their characters "so intimate that we can almost dispense with 'great scenes' altogether. . . . We have been wrought upon by nine hundred and ninety-nine little touches; the thousandth, when it comes, is as slight as the others, but the effect is prodigious" ("The Novels of George Meredith," I: 229). But, as we shall see, she harshly criticizes her contemporaries' solipsism; for while she concentrates on character it is not for its own sake but rather as a window through which we view reality.

For Virginia Woolf holds that a great novel has its own perspective, and thus she approaches each book as a world in itself.


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Our first task, and it is often formidable enough, is to master his perspective. In masterpieces, that is, where the vision is clear and order has been achieved--he inflicts his own perspective upon us so severely that as often as not we suffer agonies--our vanity is injured because our own order is upset. Yet from anger, fear, and boredom a rare and lasting delight is sometimes born. ("Robinson Crusoe," I: 70-71)

The artist's delicate problem is to find just the right perspective. Mrs. Woolf finds the fantastic Elizabethans sometimes too high above ground, but finds everyday reality, "Smith" and "Liverpool," too close, and just as unreal, so that "the great artist is the man who knows where to place himself above the shifting scenery" ("Notes on an Elizabethan Play," I: 55). But he is rare. In most novels the belief flags; the realities are mixed: the perspective shifts and, instead of a final clarity, we get a baffling, if only momentary, confusion" ("Phases of Fiction," II: 59. Cf. "How Should One Read a Book?" II: 2-3). Brilliant writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning (I: 213-14), George Eliot (I: 199-200), even Henry James (I: 282-83) could not maintain their perspectives because they secluded themselves from the world. Others have simply adopted a false position. Meredith was altogether too "noble" (I: 235-36); Gissing thought for a time that "ugliness is truth, truth ugliness" (I: 298). J. D. Beresford seems to write only with his head (CW, p. 156), Vernon Lee only with her heart. 21

This balanced perspective is an individual matter and

not a function of perceiving universals, which may or may not exist. Sterne anticipated the modern vision when he implies that "it is all a question of one's point of view," thus transferring our interest "from the outer to the inner" ("The Sentimental Journey," I: 97). We all see Mrs. Brown from our own point of view. There is a question, of course, whether "reality" is out there, whether there is an objective order under (or above) the apparent chaos, or whether the mind creates order. The Diary records constant speculation on the nature of reality, "something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky; beside which nothing matters; in which I shall rest and continue to exist" (10 Sept. 1928, pp. 129-30), and sometimes even reaches "conclusions," such as that "there are four? dimensions: all to be produced, in human life. . . . I; and the not I; and the outer and the inner--no I'm too tired to say: but I see it . . . ." (18 Nov. 1935, p. 250). Such inquiry has led some critics to see her as a mystic, or even a philosopher. But I subscribe

22 Daiches, Virginia Woolf, presents a good discussion of Woolf's subjective view of reality, pp. 34-52.

23 See also Diary, 27 Feb. 1926, pp. 84-85, and 4 Jan. 1929, p. 138.

24 Especially Morris Beja, Epiphany in the Novel (London: Peter Owen, 1971), pp. 114-16; and Herbert E. Francis, Jr., "Virginia Woolf and 'The Moment,'" Emory Univ. Quarterly, 16 (Fall 1960), 139-51 (although Francis stresses that Woolf's intellect finally overcame her mystical intuition).

to the view of Jean Guiguet: "Virginia Woolf is less an artist in quest of a form than a consciousness in quest of reality, a human being in quest of herself." But she is not therefore a "philosopher" or a "drawing-room intellectual," he avers. "Bergsonians, relativists, empiricists, associationists, idealists, existentialists, may each in turn claim her as an adept: she belongs to none of these philosophical schools, and she participates in all of them. She has no pretensions to abstract thought: her domain is life, not ideology."²⁶

The individual perspective must be "moral," in a broad sense. Throughout her career she admires sanity and good sense. She defends Congreve's comedies against Dr. Johnson: their "morality" lies in the "discipline of plain speech," the evidence of "the indefatigable hard work of a great writer," and the satire which create "the serene, impersonal, and indestructible world of art" ("Congreve's Comedies," I: 80-84). (Cf. her observation that Conrad's early style shows, "with its reserve, its pride, its vast and implacable integrity, how it is better to be good than bad, how loyalty is good and honesty and courage /sic/, though ostensibly Conrad is concerned merely to show us the

²⁶ Guiguet, p. 460.
beauty of a night at sea" ("Joseph Conrad," I: 303). Addison seems contemporary in being "on the side of sense and taste and civilization" ("Addison," I: 90). Jane Austen's fool "departs from the model of sanity and sense which she has in mind, and conveys to us unmistakably even while she makes us laugh. Never did any novelist make more use of an impeccable sense of human values" ("Jane Austen," I: 150).

But while "Creative Criticism," a TLS essay of 1917, says "we cannot help thinking that of two poems the one with the higher morality is better aesthetically than one with a lower morality" (p. 271), she opposes didacticism. "Oliver Goldsmith" states mildly that "the art of the moralist is out of fashion in fiction," so that The Vicar of Wakefield's black-and-white morality grates on modern readers (I: 110). The novels of Thomas Hardy are better with impressions (The Mayor of Casterbridge) than arguments (Jude the Obscure) (I: 264). The writings of women are only marred and weakened by anger or special pleading ("Women and Fiction," II: 144-45; Room, Ch. IV).

Thus she contrasts the preachers and teachers (Tolstoy, Dickens) with the pure artists (Austen, Turgenev), although it is clear that those pure artists have the basic morality of sanity and good sense ("The Novels of E. M. Forster," I: 345. Forster's problem, thought Woolf, was his attempt to belong to both camps, pp. 345-48). Elsewhere she calls them the priests (Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley) and the laymen (an example being Chaucer, who takes the way
of the novelist):

His morality lies in the way men and women behave to each other. . . . instead of being solemnly exhorted we are left to stray and stare and make out a meaning for ourselves. It is the morality of ordinary intercourse, the morality of the novel, which parents and librarians rightly judge to be far more persuasive than the morality of poetry. ("The Pastons and Chaucer," III: 13-14)

The diary strongly objects to D. H. Lawrence's system: "Art is being rid of all preaching: things in themselves: the sentence in itself beautiful: multitudinous seas; daffodils that come before the swallow dares: whereas Lawrence would only say what proved something. . . . Why not some system that includes the good? What a discovery that would be—a system that did not shut out" (2 October 1932, p. 183). The entry is not fair to Lawrence: it admits, "I haven't read him of course" (p. 183). But the point is valid: she objects to didacticism because it narrows morality, circumscribes the view of reality.

It is the direct perception of "reality," thus defined as a proper perspective, a sane vision, that explains Mrs. Woolf's central concept of poetry. She uses the word frequently, but it usually has no reference to verse, toward which she half-seriously confessed ignorance ("Letter to a Young Poet," II: 183). A rare examination of a poem, "Aurora Leigh," concentrates on its failure in plot and dialogue to achieve its novelistic aim of presenting daily life (I: 209-18). As Mrs. Woolf employs the word, "poetry" is, first, general truth achieved in a flash of insight, whether presented in verse or prose. "Notes on an Elizabethan Play"
compares 'Tis pity she's a Whore as poetry with Anna Karenina as prose:

... the prime differences emerge; the long leisurely accumulated novel; the little contracted play; the emotion all split up, dissipated and then woven together slowly and gradually massed into a whole, in the novel; the emotion concentrated, generalized, heightened in the play. ... The extremes of passion are not for the novelist; ... he must tame his swiftness to sluggardry. ... (I: 58)

"How Should One Read a Book" re-phrases this often-repeated distinction: "the impact of poetry is so hard and direct that for the moment there is no other sensation except that of the poem itself. What profound depths we visit then. ... The illusion of fiction is gradual; its effects are prepared ..." (II: 6). Not only is it concentrated, but it is, secondly, impersonal. The Diary says that Paradise Lost is possibly "the essence, of which almost all other poetry is the dilution," and its uniqueness lies, she thinks, "in the sublime aloofness and impersonality of the emotion. ... He deals in horror and immensity and squalor and sublimity but never in the passions of the human heart" (10 September 1918, pp. 5-6). "A Letter to a Young Poet" urges him to turn away from himself to the world outside (II: 182-95). Poetry is, thirdly, enormously suggestive. "By the bold and running use of metaphor ... /Aeschylus/ will amplify and give us, not the thing itself, but the reverberation and reflection which, taken into his mind, the thing has made; close enough to the original to illustrate it, remote enough to heighten, enlarge, and make splendid" ("On Not Knowing Greek," I: 7-8). Mrs. Woolf wrote Vita Sackville-West that
"the truth of one's sensations is not in the fact, but in the reverberations." 27

What Virginia Woolf means by "poetry" as applied to the form of the novel, as well as her definition of "form" itself, can be seen most easily in "Phases of Fiction" (II: 56-102), an essay written in 1929 which finds a pattern in the novel—a progression from fact to poetry—which sums up her ideas, as analyzed above, in a fashion much closer to her spirit of imaginative inquiry, and will serve to introduce her prescription for the future of the novel. She disclaims historical or critical perspectives, proposing simply to follow her inclinations toward a shelf of books to see what pattern of appetites emerges. The most basic appetite, she believes, is "the desire to believe wholly and entirely in something which is fictitious" (p. 57); thus she first turns to the Truth-tellers, best represented by Defoe, who presents facts in a perfectly proportioned whole (pp. 58-60). Maupassant gives unpleasant truth, which forces her to admit that the English temper is more sanguine than the French, that Trollope's country-doctor wisdom is more comfortable to her (pp. 61-63). Yet his work is likely to degenerate into "a thin-blooded catalogue" (p. 63); so we turn in relief to the Romantics (Scott, Stevenson, Radcliffe), who include in their varying ways nature, in a misty picture calculated to satisfy our deep, genuine need for mystery and intrigue (pp. 64-66).

Disgusted with Mrs. Radcliffe's creaky machinery but still in the romantic mood we turn to Character-Mongers and Comedians, and stop first at the extravagant Bleak House, where all the characters are extremes, except the more complex Inspector Bucket, who makes us want intimacy with real people (pp. 71-74). Thus we turn to Jane Austen, who limits her perspective to personal relationships—and, knowing their limitations, shows the comedy in them. "So truthful, so clear, so sane a vision" is "unstained by personality" (p. 76). Furthermore, she has form.

Virginia Woolf often discusses form, both as design in the book and emotional reaction in the reader. "On Re-reading Novels" (II: 122-30), her review of Percy Lubbock's Craft of Fiction, had objected to his definition of "form" as the "book itself," and to the word "form" itself as associated with the visual arts. She proposed instead the idea that "the 'book itself' is not form which you see, but emotion which you feel" (p. 126), and analyzed Flaubert's "Un Coeur Simple" in terms of "moments of understanding" by the reader, an emotional form often compared to Roger Fry's and Clive Bell's Post-Impressionistic aesthetic, "significant form."

to strongly enough to read twice "is there not something beyond emotion, something which though it is inspired by emotion, tranquillizes it, orders it, composes it?—that which Mr. Lubbock calls form, which, for simplicity's sake, we will call art?" (p. 127). Her conclusion:

... when we speak of form we mean that certain emotions have been placed in the right relations to each other; then that the novelist is able to dispose these emotions and make them tell by methods which he inherits, bends to his purpose, models anew, or even invents for himself. Further, that the reader can detect these devices, and by doing so will deepen his understanding of the book. . . . (pp. 129-30)

"Form," then, at least in the best books, is both a sense of completeness felt by the reader and an order in the book itself. "Phases of Fiction" credits Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice with both. It produces "a satisfaction which turns our minds back upon what we have just read, rather than forward to something fresh. . . . To say that Pride and Prejudice is like a shell, a gem, a crystal, what--


29 It seems to me that Woolf is actually quite close to Lubbock. He defines the book as first "a passage of experience," which the reader must try afterwards to reconstruct in his mind as a completed experience, comparable to the form of a statue (see Craft of Fiction, Ch. II, pp. 14-24). She describes the first reading as producing "moments of understanding," second reading as allowing perception of Lubbock's "form," which she prefers to call "art." Goldman, "The Critic as Reader," notices the double use, first as emotional form, from Fry and Bell, then as control, like Lubbock (pp. 161-63).
ever image we may choose, is to see the same thing under a
different guise" (II: 77). What she is trying to express is
"a quality which is not in the story but above it, not in
the things themselves but in their arrangement" (italics
mine) (II: 77), a concept not significantly different, I be­
lieve, from Lubbock's "book itself."

Throughout her criticism Virginia Woolf tried to de­
fine this quality that always "escapes analysis" (II: 77). Sometimes she discusses it in terms of the rounded arrange­
ment, the order comparable to what "Phases of Fiction" com­
pares to a shell or gem, what "On Re-reading" calls simply
"art." Thus she admires Sentimental Journey (I: 96), The
Vicar of Wakefield (I: 110), Sons and Lovers (I: 353), Three
Black Pennies (CW, p. 105), and Esther Waters (CW, pp. 146-47).
"Life and the Novelist" had said "take one thing and let it
stand for twenty," and these novels show cunning selection
and consequent order. "The Method of Henry James" suggests
as his real importance the design he made to explain his
conception of The Awkward Age, which he described as "the
neat figure of a circle consisting of small rounds disposed
at equal distances about a central object." "One has to
look for something like that in the later books--" she com­
ments, "not a plot, or a collection of characters, or a view

30 Gerald Hoag, "Henry James and the Criticism of
Virginia Woolf," Wichita State University Bulletin, Univer­
sity Studies, No. 92, Vol. 48 (August 1972), 7, regrets that
Woolf departs from Lubbock and James by considering form un­
analyzable, an accent on unconscious creation Hoag attrib­
utes to her Bloomsbury ties with Moore, Fry, and Bell.
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." But she also admires the
emotional configuration in many works which produces an emo-
tional satisfaction in the reader. David Copperfield is
saved from being just a bunch of characters by "some common
feeling" (I: 194-95). Dostoevsky presents "a new panorama
of the human mind," not separate scenes but "streaked, in-
volved, inextricably confused" (I: 243). Turgenev was simi-
larly concerned with the soul itself.

. . . ['He] did not see his books as a succession of
events; he saw them as a succession of emotions ra-
diating from some character at the centre. . . . The
connexion is not of events but of emotions, and if
at the end of the book we feel a sense of completeness,
it must be that in spite of his defects as a story-
teller Turgenev's ear for emotion was so fine that
. . . all is held together by the truth of his in-
sight. ("The Novels of Turgenev," I: 251)
The basic problem with order, as discussed at the end of
"Phases of Fiction," is that the reader, who responds to the
novel as to real life, experiences a tension between art and
life (II: 100-01). The artist must exercise a control over
his material that the reader, caught up in vicarious experi-
ence, might well resent.

. . . when the book is finished, we seem to see (it
is strange how visual the impression is) something
girding it about like the firm road of Defoe's story-

31 "The Method of Henry James," review of Joseph War-
ren Beach's The Method of Henry James, TLS, 26 Dec. 1918,
p. 655. Notice the interesting similarity between this con-
ception and the design that unites Katharine and Ralph in
Night and Day (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1920), first pub-
telling; or we see it shaped and symmetrical with dome and column complete, like Pride and Prejudice and Emma. But this "power" is a danger as well. For the most characteristic qualities of the novel—that it registers slow growth and development of feeling, . . . are the very qualities that are most incompatible with design and order. . . . The most complete novelist must be the novelist who can balance the two powers so that the one enhances the other." (II: 101).

Jane Austen performed this miracle, so that we turn sated to another "phase" in the novels of George Eliot, a disjunction between author and book, a breaking down of Austen's supreme "impersonality," which foreshadows the modern novel. Silas Marner shows a new perspective: now an "I" offers reflection, analysis of characters pitted against forces larger than themselves (pp. 79-80), a movement toward the omniscient stance of the Psychologists. As made explicit in "The Leaning Tower," Mrs. Woolf believes that the modern thinker is concerned with the self because all else has been rendered uncertain but that this solipsism will be proven worthwhile only if it can re-establish that unconsciousness of self necessary to create objective art (II: 177-78).

Thus she is rather harsh with two "psychologists," James and Dostoevsky. James abandons the outer world in What Maisie Knew, and tries to make mental states concrete. The delicate indirect revelations give aesthetic pleasure, but he

---

32 The language in "Phases of Fiction," written several years after Woolf's attempt in "On Re-reading Novels" to distinguish herself from Lubbock, sounds amazingly like his, especially in the emphasis on a visual impression left by the book. But of course she does, unlike Lubbock, regard it as a danger.

"diminishes the interest and importance of his subject in order to bring about a symmetry which is dear to him," or, he sacrifices life to art (pp. 80-82). In addition, Mrs. Woolf resents "the perpetual tutelage of the author's presence, his arrangements, his anxieties" (p. 83). As she said in her diary of The Wings of the Dove, "instead of feeling the artist you merely feel the man who is posing the subject" (12 Sept. 1921, p. 39). Thus we turn to Proust, who, unlike James, "stretches wider and wider and serves not to enforce a view but to enclose a world" (p. 83). Although we crave a shaping order, we are forced to look at everything, with digressions and analyses by an impersonal narrator, giving us various angles to cope with, a "content obliquity" that we must synthesize, with difficulty, since consciousness is so complex (pp. 83-84). But then, "as if the mind, having carried its powers as far as possible in analysis, suddenly rose in the air and from a station high up gave us a different view of the same object in terms of metaphor" (p. 85), Proust supplements his psychology with poetry, thus attaining a "dual vision" yielding characters like globes. Dostoevsky, in contrast, goes straight to the heart of the matter, but, as a consequence of this analytical leap, "be-

34 Woolf's objections to James are often very personal. Hoag quotes Leonard Woolf's Sowing (pp. 107-09) to the effect that James found the young Stephen girls "unlady-like" (p. 3). It is perhaps as a result that she found him too anxious for refinement (Diary, p. 39), even "vulgar" (see letter to Lytton, Letters, p. 70; "The Method of Henry James," p. 655). A good survey of her comments on James is Jane Novak, "Virginia Woolf—'A Fickle Jacobean,'" Virginia Woolf Newsletter, III (April 1972), 1-8.
neath this crude surface" of savage free characters "all is
chaos and complication" (p. 86), and our only understanding
is, "so perhaps madmen act" (p. 88). But Proust, by giving
us a "thread of observation which is always going in and out
of this mind and that mind" (p. 87), has slowly accumulated
the necessary information for full understanding of his
characters. Unlike the psychologists, Dickens sees his
characters from the same angle as the reader, and comments
on them not at all; but James, Proust, and Dostoevsky brood
on their characters, and the result, perhaps inevitably, is
unhappy books (pp. 88-89).

The Satirists and Fantastics clear the mind: they
control the world. The Diary explains why they are so ad-
vanced on Woolf's scale:

I wanted mystery, romance, psychology, I suppose.
And now more than anything I want beautiful prose.
I relish it more and more exquisitely. And I enjoy
satire more. I like the scepticism of his [Peacock's]
mind more. I enjoy intellectuality. Moreover, fan-
tasticity does a good deal better than sham psy-
chology. One touch of red in the cheek is all he
gives, but I can do the rest. (15 February 1922,
p. 41)

Peacock is detached, ironic, and unrealistic, and is thus
more "poetic." He imbues us with his own particular vision
of the world (pp. 89-91). In Tristram Shandy Sterne also
analyzes his own complex vision, using Uncle Toby as a simple
foil. The style is so beautiful and the subject so elevated
("the humours, contortions, and oddities of the spirit" with-
out the conventional material trappings) that it goes above
fiction. We "pass beyond the range of personality," and thus
turn to the Poets.

Fiction can have various kinds of poetry. Sterne exemplifies that of language, for he, like Browning, Peacock, Butler, and DeQuincey is a solitary eccentric who has overcome the natural tendency of prose to avoid poetry as too direct, hard, and compact ("Impassioned Prose," 1926, I: 165-72). But perhaps more natural to the novel is the poetry of situation used by Tolstoy. We remember Natasha looking at the stars, and "our feelings of the poetry of the moment do not lie in what she says so much as in our sense of her who is saying it" (I: 95). It is integrated into the novel. Contrast Meredith and Hardy, whose poetic vision is broader than the characters who present it, whose poetry "seems to mean something impersonal, generalized, hostile to the idiosyncracy of character, so that the two suffer if brought into touch . . ." (p. 95). Emily Brontë and Herman Melville use simplified characters to express a generalized atmosphere, a vision of the universe. She notes that both "ignore the greater part of those spoils of the modern spirit which Proust grasps so tenaciously and transforms so triumphantly" (p. 96). Proust, as mentioned above, uses a poetry of language to give another dimension to his acute psychological analysis, so that he achieves the "double vision" that makes his work "so spherical, so comprehensive." "Poetry" in the novel, then, means many things, but, most importantly for the present age, it means the synthesis that our spirits demand to complement psychological analysis.
The novel, it is agreed, can follow life; it can amass details. But can it also select? Can it symbolize? Can it give us an epitome as well as an inventory? It was some such function as this that poetry discharged in the past. But . . . poetry with her rhythms, her poetic diction, her strong flavour of tradition, is too far from us today to do for us what she did for our parents. Prose perhaps is the instrument best fitted to the complexity and difficulty of modern life. (p. 102)

"Poetry" is the future of the novel. But let us examine two essays, "Modern Fiction" (1919) and "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1923-24), for their attitudes toward her contemporaries, and Jacob's Room for an idea of her own contribution to the effort, before turning to a third essay, "The Narrow Bridge of Art" (1927), for her prescription for this new poetic novel and her controversial filling of it; The Waves.

c. The Contemporary Novel: Jacob's Room

"Modern Fiction" (1919) (II: 103-10) condemns the materialism of most current fiction. Curiously, it develops an argument put forward in a review of Dorothy Richardson's Tunnel written two months earlier, and used to evaluate (rather unfavorably) Richardson's pioneering effort to explore consciousness without "the old deliberate business"; but it singles out Hardy, Conrad, and some Hudson for commendation, omitting any reference to Richardson. 35 Mrs. 

35 Guiguet, pp. 371-73. "The Tunnel," TLS, 13 Feb. 1919, rpt. CW, pp. 120-22; and "Romance and the Heart," Nation and Athenaeum, 19 May 1923, rpt. CW, pp. 123-25, are actually quite critical of Richardson's failure to shape her observations (which Woolf thought superficial) into the coherent whole reached by other means in conventional novels.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Woolf has no quarrel with the classics: the masters did their jobs well, but conditions are different now. Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy disappoint us because it is with the body rather than with the spirit that they are concerned. They use their considerable skill "making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and enduring" (p. 105). They miss life. "Nevertheless, we ... those dependent on the tradition they represent ... go on perseveringly, conscientiously, constructing our two and thirty chapters after a design which more and more ceases to resemble the vision in our minds" (p. 105). The writer is forced "to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole ..." (p. 106). But the vision in her mind, "life," is different indeed:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old. . . . Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? (p. 106)


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Joyce exemplifies the young spiritual writers "concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain" (p. 107). But he fails, at least in the fragment of Ulysses she has read, perhaps partly because of the poverty of his mind, and perhaps because his method makes us feel "centred in a self which, in spite of its tremor of susceptibility, never embraces or creates what is outside itself and beyond" (p. 108). (The Diary would later record her opinion that "the damned egotistical self . . . ruins Joyce and Richardson to my mind," 26 Jan. 1920, p. 22). But then, she quickly adds, any method is all right that expresses the author's intention (p. 108).

The intention of a modern, she goes on, is very likely to record "the dark places of psychology," so that at once finds the theory eloquent but hardly new: Benjamin Constant said it earlier (pp. 193-94).


38 Woolf's opinion of Joyce was always rather harsh. Cf. "How It Strikes a Contemporary" (1923), II: 156. Privately she was scornful. See letter to Lytton Strachey, 24 August 1922, quoted by Michael Holroyd, Lytton Strachey (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), II: 368-69, and discussed as an instance of Woolf's usual malice. Letters, edited by Leonard Woolf and James Strachey, omits the passage. The Diary is a running commentary on her reactions to Ulysses. T. S. Eliot and friends modified her initial distaste, but she always thought the book an indecent failure (see pp. 46, 48, 49). See also 15 Jan. 1941, p. 349, a recollection of the past upon the occasion of Joyce's death that makes both Eliot's and her own reactions more positive than reported at the time.
"the accent falls a little differently" (p. 108). The example given is Chekhov's "Gusev," which seems at first mere fragments until we adjust our vision to comprehend its "vague and inconclusive" whole (pp. 108-09). Thus "'the proper stuff of fiction' does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, . . . no perception comes amiss" /Italics mine/ (p. 110).

This article is often cited as a recipe for a novel. Critics sometimes think she meant to write about showers of atoms and did so, to her discredit. But most recognize that she was forced to select, to modify this theory in practice: no novel, as Edwin Muir points out, is as formless as life itself. "... even Ulysses is less confusing than Dublin." A recent commentator denies that "let us record the atoms as they fall" is a recommendation at all: James Naremore says that she brings it up simply to dismiss it as too centred in the self. But while it is true that


42 The World Without a Self (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 71-72. Haflcy anticipates this point but does not discuss it with the same fullness (p. 37).
she criticizes Joyce, and even questions his method, she pre-
sents the "atoms" view of reality as the current (and admi-
rable) attempt to go beyond the materialism of Wells, Ben-
nett, and Galsworthy. She does indeed, as Naremore observes,
try to dissociate herself from this effort by posing as ju-
dicious critic. The famous "luminous halo" passage is fol-
lowed by the reservation that "it is, at any rate, in some
such fashion as this that we seek to define the quality which
distinguishes the work of several young writers, among whom
Mr. Joyce is the most notable, from that of their predeces-
sors" (pp. 106-07). The formulation of Joyce's method is
followed by the qualification, "anyone who has read . . .
/Portrait of the Artist or Ulysses/ will have hazarded some
theory of this nature as to Mr. Joyce's intention" (p. 107),
and she proceeds to register "our" dissatisfaction with his
sincere efforts to carry it out. But the detached stance
fools few readers. If "life" is not a "luminous halo" to
Virginia Woolf in 1919, she is guilty of writing some mem-
orable and detachable phrases in the tone of a manifesto, not
really to be altered by subsequent provisos.

Besides, this article, written in the spring of 1919,
bears an unmistakable resemblance to the novel she first en-
visioned 26 January 1920.43

. . . having this afternoon arrived at some idea of

43 Guiguet observes that "Modern Fiction," written in
the spring of 1919, points the way to Jacob's Room, first
conceived in January, 1920 (p. 422). Cf. Ralph Freedman,
The Lyrical Novel (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963),
pp. 212-13, and Beja, p. 128.
a new form for a new novel. Suppose one thing should open out of another—as in an unwritten novel—only not for 10 pages but 200 or so—doesn't that give the looseness and lightness I want; doesn't that get closer and yet keep form and speed, and enclose everything, everything? My doubt is how far it will enclose the human heart—Am I sufficiently mistress of my dialogue to net it there? For I figure that the approach will be entirely different this time: no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist. . . . conceive(?) /sic/ Mark on the Wall, K./ew/ G./ardens/ and Unwritten Novel taking hands and dancing in unity. What the unity shall be I have yet to discover; the theme is a blank to me; but I see immense possibilities in the form I hit upon two weeks ago. I suppose the danger is the damned egotistical self; which ruins Joyce and Richard­son to my mind. . . . (Diary, p. 22)

She will dispense with "scaffolding," as she had in "The Mark on the Wall," "Kew Gardens," and "An Unwritten Novel," three of the eight sketches published in 1921 in the collection named Monday or Tuesday, devoted to capturing the moment whole.44 But a novel is a succession of moments, and she must plan how to make them coherent. One thing is to "open out of another," to make a form that will "enclose everything." The focus is the "human heart," not the self (the self, that is, of the author herself).

The first thing that strikes one upon opening the resulting novel, Jacob's Room, is its subjective vision. We literally see through Betty Flanders' tearful eyes. "The entire bay quivered. . . . She winked again. The mast was

44 The eight are reprinted with some additional sketches in A Haunted House (1944; rpt. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1973). They are often noted as the turning-point in Woolf's career. See Daiches, Virginia Woolf, pp. 43-52; Friedman, p. 190; Guiguet, pp. 329-43, 384-87; and Hafley, pp. 40-47.
straight. ...#45 We might even be led to expect that we will get a story about her, her children, and the mysterious Captain Barfoot. The second thing we notice is the book's fragmentation, for we turn—with only a double-space to warn us—to Archer calling Jacob, then turn again to the consciousness of a painter, Charles Steele, who provides an external view of Betty Flanders who is, uncooperatively, moving as he tries to incorporate her figure into his landscape; and whom we might expect, in an ordinary novel providing "comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole" (II: 106), to become a suitor to the weeping widow, but who will never appear again. The expectations of the tyrannical reader so resented in "Modern Fiction" are to be foiled, for life is not like that, but rather like a "luminous halo." The first reading of Jacob's Room is puzzling, even irritating. R. L. Chambers, disliking the mystery, compares it to a dot-to-dot game, where links between points must be supplied by the reader; Aileen Pippett, intrigued by the same mystery, says we must read it three times to get acquainted gradually, as we do at a party.46 And it is difficult on subsequent readings to recapture that sense of bafflement at the numerous allusions, dropped casually, sometimes to be explained or developed (who is Seabrook, p. 7? 


her dead husband, pp. 15-16), sometimes to be dropped (poor Morty's" downfall, p. 15). But the theme is clear from the first: section 1, a synecdoche, concerns an obstinate little individual, Jacob, who proves to be elusive to others, and who confronts death, in the form of a skull (p. 10). 47

Each section might be said to "open out" of the preceding one, for there is a certain widening of vision. There is a basic chronological progression, enough so that the book can be seen as an elliptical variant on the conventional chronicle. 48 But it is not a stiff march of time but an impressionistic dance around it. For instance, Section 1 covers an afternoon and night, while Section 2 covers the rest of Jacob's childhood, traversed, as it were, in the recital of Mr. Floyd's career, as well as suggesting the entire history of Scarborough, in the form of a "tour" by the narrator put in motion by Mrs. Flanders' view from the top of Dod's Hill (pp. 17-19). Section 3 contains several episodes—not specifically dated—which comprise Jacob's career at Cambridge. Section 4 relates Jacob to society through a college friend, Section 5 to society at large in London. And so on until Section 9 which, by showing Jacob at work in the British Museum, relates him, and his whole generation,

47 The skull foreshadows an important symbol in To the Lighthouse (1927; rpt. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Harvest Books, 1955). Mrs. Ramsey covers a similarly frightening boar's skull with her shawl (pp. 171-73), though the impersonal forces of time loosen it (pp. 196, 200).

48 Friedman, p. 190; Guiguet, pp. 358-59; Hafley, p. 50; Muir, p. 115; Schaefer, p. 67.
to civilization itself. In Section 11 he proceeds to Paris, thence to Italy and Greece, to test his youthful ideals, and it is as a returned hero (his friend Bonamy finds him "more sublime, devastating, terrific than ever, though he was still, and perhaps would be for ever, barbaric, obscure," p. 164) that we last see him. The narrator gives quick glimpses at those who love him and yearn for him. The final sweep is given to things—the moors, the sea, the Parthenon. Mrs. Flanders hears "nocturnal women" in the act of "beating great carpets"—her oblique register of "her sons fighting for their country." Section 14 depicts Bonamy and Mrs. Flanders in Jacob's room. Three-quarters of the one-page chapter is repeated material, and Bonamy's cry for Jacob echoes Archer's in Section 1: Jacob is gone, but no more than when he lived.49 He is now truly preoccupied with the skull, death itself.

Thus the novel moves from the small circumference of a child's world to the ideals of civilization itself, from Jacob's fear at the harmless skull to his "wild horses" of inhuman joy at his growing perception of the world. But such a summary is misleading, for this "plot" emerges only upon re-reading the separate fragments. The connections are not built upon story, "what happens next?"50 Instead, they

---

49 Schaefer made this observation (pp. 79-80). I disagree with her conviction, however, that the repeated material is not particularly evocative.

50 Forster, Aspects, pp. 25-42, regrets that the novel must tell a story, but admits that a novel must have "time-sense," and should impart values as well. Woolf shares his scorn for plots. "Plots don't matter," she
follow a clever—sometimes too obviously clever—method of free association. 51

Section 9 (pp. 100-13) illustrates how it works. The first section depicts a luncheon at the home of the Countess Rocksbier (a forbiddingly aristocratic contrast to named individuals outside), who "had been a great rider to hounds" (p. 100). Jacob thinks her rude, but is flattered by her attention.

The second opens with an essay on precisely how it feels to jump a horse. Jacob rides in Essex; he has tea at the Inn. We see, like a camera, what the (named) individuals do.

Mrs. Papworth, Bonamy's maid, is our point of view for a violent argument between "Sanders" (Jacob) and Bonamy over an idea. We get only what she can perceive, "and where an inquisitive old woman gets a name wrong, what chance is there that she will faithfully report an argument?" (p. 102)

Again, there is a rather cryptic section wherein old friends of Mrs. Flanders entertain Jacob. They defer to him in an allusive conversation, reported as it might glance off a half-attentive ear.

writes, perhaps half-mockingly, to Lytton Strachey (Letters, p. 19). "I can make up situations, but I cannot make up plots. . . . This is the germ of such fictitious gift as I have" (Diary, 5 Oct. 1927, p. 114). But as seen above, Jacob's Room remains in essence Forster's "narrative of events arranged in their time sequence" (p. 27).

51 See Humphrey for a good discussion of free association (which does not, however, include Jacob's Room), pp. 41-61. See also Daiches; Virginia Woolf, esp. p. 61.
The description of a room obliquely introduces Jacob's visit to Laurette, a prostitute, with whom he discusses riding last Saturday (presumably referring to the second section above). The encounter is made disagreeable by the Madame's "lewdness," "which threatens to spill the whole bag of ordure" (p. 105).

The British Museum Reading Room, where various (named) individuals are at work under the dome, comes next. "But what brought Jacob Flanders to read Marlowe in the British Museum?"

The answer begins the next section:

Youth, youth—something savage—something pedantic. For example, there is Mr. Masefield, there is Mr. Bennett. Stuff them into the flame of Marlowe and burn them to cinders. Let not a shred remain. Don't palter with the second rate. Detest your own age. Build a better one. And to set that on foot read incredibly dull essays upon Marlowe to your friends. For which purpose one must collate editions in the British Museum. One must do the thing oneself. Useless to trust to the Victorians, who disembowel, or to the living, who are mere publicists. The flesh and blood of the future depends entirely upon six young men. And as Jacob was one of them, no doubt he looked a little regal and pompous as he turned his page, and Julia Hedge disliked him naturally enough. (p. 107)

Everyone leaves. The British Museum is represented as an enormous mind, the cumulative intellect of the race. "Stone lies solid over the British Museum, as bone lies cool over the visions and heat of the brain" (p. 109). We follow Jacob's heat of the brain as he reads Plato in his room—oblivious to the noise outside—simultaneously with the continued existence of the things, the relics of civilization, in the museum, until "Plato's argument is stowed away in Ja-
cobb's mind, and for five minutes Jacob's mind continues
alone, onwards, into the darkness" (p. 110). Then he looks
onto the street and is brought back to earth.

A party: snatches of conversation. Some guests spy
Jacob ("indeed he looked quiet, not indifferent, but like
some one on a beach, watching," p. 111), and as usual he
draws admiration for his distinction.

At two or three o'clock in the morning, presumably
after the same party ("Mangin" seems a link) Jacob is exhi­
rated, and thus the world itself is vibrant (just as the bay
quivered in his mother's tearful vision, Section 1). "A
young man has nothing to fear. On the contrary, though he
may not have said anything brilliant, he feels pretty confi­
dent he can hold his own. . . . In short, all the drums and
trumpets were sounding" (p. 112).

"Drums and trumpets" are substantiated in the con­
cluding fragment, where the view widens to the incessant pro­
cession across Waterloo Bridge. Notice that the narrator
turns to the present tense, for she generalizes Jacob's ex­
hilaration to that momentum behind all humanity.52 "The
river races beneath us. . . . That old man has been crossing
the Bridge these six hundred years. . . . No one stands
still. It seems as if we marched to the sound of music;

52 Schaefer has a good discussion of how Woolf uses
imagery, changes in verb tense, and repetition to show "the
simultaneous existence of the personal event and the anony­
rous stream of life," but she concludes that Jacob's Room is
too clever, therefore just a tour de force (pp. 73-81).
(Cf. note 49).
perhaps the wind and the river; perhaps these same drums and trumpets—the ecstasy and hubbub of the soul" (p. 113). One passer-by in this procession that might have been described by Walt Whitman is a "bright yet vague" young woman. Section 10 gives her a name, and thus is introduced Fanny Elmer, yet another lover of Jacob, in a transition by contiguity foreshadowing Mrs. Dalloway's famous sky-writing scene.53

The summary shows that each fragment is connected to the next either by a substantive or an emotional link. There is similarity in content: the Countess rode, Jacob rides; or contrast in content: Mrs. Flanders's old friends entertain Jacob, he visits the prostitute; or the bordello's "whole bag of ordure," then the British Museum's "enormous mind." Or perhaps similarity in mood: the party, Jacob's subsequent "drums and trumpets," then those of all humanity; or a contrast in mood: Jacob's Platonic revery, the mundane party conversation. In addition, the section moves from Jacob's personal feelings to the collective emotions of all humanity. But the links should not be over-emphasized, for that would make a "scaffolding." The point, I believe, is Chambers's dots—the shower of atoms—not the connecting lines he so resents drawing.

For clearly Mrs. Woolf wants to present snatches, not a conventional story with "an air of probability embalming the whole" (II: 106). Some readers like this procedure be-

cause it reflects the irregularity of life. Bernard Blackstone, for instance, says that like all youths' lives Jacob's life is unhappy and fragmentary:

And this fragmentariness is admirably conveyed by the writer's technique of flashing scene after scene at us, cinematographically, scenes which almost but never quite unite to form a pattern. Yes, life is like that, we say; it is especially like that when one is young. Later life brings some conviction of a plan, a purpose. But it is open to doubt whether this conviction may not be a defence-mechanism. . . ."54

Other readers dislike the procedure because it fails to reduce that same irregularity to order. A spokesman is C. E. M. Joad:

Brilliantly observed, the separate items recorded are nevertheless unrelated. They are happenings in the same place at the same time; but beyond the spatio-temporal connection there is no other. Life is like that, Mrs. Woolf might have replied, if charged with presenting a fragmentary version of it. And that life is like that nobody will want to deny. The only questions that may legitimately be raised are, why, if life is only like that, it should be recorded, and whether life is not sometimes, perhaps always, rather more than that.

Still other readers detect a pattern, usually based on emotional associations. Ralph Freedman, for example, thinks her description of Chekhov's Gusev, where the author has chosen "this, that, and the other" with unexpected emphases, for a new vision (II: 109) a projection of what she herself would


do in Jacob's Room. Notice that Mrs. Woolf said of Gusev that "at first it seems as if there were no emphasis at all; and then, as the eyes accustom themselves to twilight and discern the shapes of things in a room we see how complete the story is" (II: 108-09), which is as much as saying that what Lubbock would call "form," or "the book itself," is particularly hard for the reader to discern, but that its intention toward the reader, "the emotion that you feel," is the reader's responsibility: he must adjust his vision to the twilight. I believe that a major intention of Jacob's Room is to show the elusiveness of character, so that cryptic technique is central, and that the discovery of a clear design in the book, such as Aileen Pippett's comparison of the book to an opera, or even a twirling globe, imposes upon it something that is not there. Remember that Mrs. Woolf's fear, recorded in the Diary, was not that she might not achieve a tight design, but that she might miss "the human


57 Some critics find patterns, but charge that they do not work. Guiguet thinks the reader cannot accept these isolated spots of time (pp. 422-24); Schaefer says we cannot all be convinced that character is really so elusive (pp. 80-81).

58 Pippett, pp. 147-49.
heart," with "everything as bright as fire in the mist" (p. 22). Some feel that heart, like Bernard Blackstone; some do not, like Joad.

The "heart" is, of course, Jacob himself. "It seems that a profound, impartial, and absolutely just opinion of our fellow-creatures is utterly unknown. . . . And why, if this and much more than this is true, why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us—why indeed? For the moment after we know nothing about him" (pp. 71-72). But Leonard Woolf said "the people are ghosts" (Diary, 26 July 1922, p. 45), and Mrs. Woolf expected that Jacob's Room "will be crabbed by people who want human character" (14 October 1922, p. 51). Arnold Bennett obliged her in "Is the Novel Decaying?" in the Cassell's Weekly of March 28, 1923, in effect replying to her attack on his "materialism" in "Modern Fiction" four years earlier. He charged that Jacob's Room proves that she could not create character. The Diary records her reaction:

My answer is—but I leave that to the Nation: it's only the old argument that character is dissipated into shreds now; the old post-Dostoievsky argument. I daresay it's true, however, that I haven't that

59 A good account of the years-long quarrel between Woolf and Bennett is given by Samuel Hynes, "The Whole Contention Between Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Woolf," Novel, 1 (Fall 1967), 34-44. See also Irving Kreutz, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Woolf," MFS, 8 (Summer 1962), 103-15, for a discussion of Woolf's powers of characterization. Both articles are, interestingly enough, defenses of Bennett.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
"reality" gift. I insubstantiate, wilfully to some extent, distrusting reality—its cheapness. But to get further. Have I the power of conveying the true reality? Or do I write essays about myself? (19 June 1923, p. 56)

Mrs. Woolf's public reaction to Bennett was the first version of "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," initially published in the New York Evening Post Literary Review (17 Nov. 1923), then the Nation and Athenaeum (1 Dec. 1923). As Guiguet observes, the essay stresses life-like characters (the sort that her criticism always values) as the key to great novels: "They love, they joke, they hunt, they marry, they lead us from hall to cottage, from field to slum. The whole country, the whole society is revealed to us through the astonishing vividness and reality of the characters."⁶⁰ The second and final version, considerably revised and published in Criterion (July 1924), alters the conception of "character" to a means of presenting a vision:

... if you think of these books /The "great novels"/, you do at once think of 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 it itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes. ... And in all these novels all these great novelists have brought us to see whatever they wish us to see through some character. (I: 325-26)

"Character" becomes something else besides the representation of real human beings. She does not precisely define it, but, typically, offers instead a "true" little story about a mysterious woman on a train, actually an adaptation of "An Un-

⁶⁰ Quoted and analyzed by Guiguet, p. 360. See Haller, Note 1 to Ch. 1, p. 181, for a concise history of the publications of this article.
written Novel," a sketch from Monday or Tuesday worked into the first version of the essay as if to prove that she could indeed create character.

This evolving conception of character reflects her belief that "in or about December, 1910, human character changed" (I: 320). Thus while she agrees with Bennett that "character" is the essence of fiction, it is "character" having a new complexity and demanding new forms. She pits the "Edwardians" (Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy) against the "Georgians" (Forster, Lawrence, Strachey, Joyce, and Eliot), and purports to defend the Georgians against Bennett's charge that they cannot create characters—although, just as in "Modern Fiction," she has her own criticisms of the avant-garde. But she will not be abstract: take the case of Mrs. Brown, whom she saw in the train, of utmost importance because, she says, she believes that all novels "deal with character, and that it is to express character— not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel... has been evolved" (p. 324). But of course "the very widest interpretation can be put upon those words." Depicting character is a subjective process, influenced by the times, the country, the temperament of the writer, as well as the conventions, or tools, at his disposal. The Edwardians use the

61 Frierson, xi-xvi and Ch. XI, "The Years 1900-1915," and Hafley, pp. 10-13, substantiate Woolf's largely unsupported contention that there was a major literary change about this time.
tools of appurtenances and social issues, which stress "the fabric of things." Forster and Lawrence, she charges, are two Georgians who vitiated their early work by using, at least part of the time, those same tools. But she will not use them to describe Mrs. Brown, and so finds herself rather helpless. "All I could do was to report as accurately as I could what was said, to describe in detail what was worn, to say, despairingly, that all sorts of scenes rushed into my mind, to proceed to tumble them out pell-mell, and to describe this vivid, this overmastering impression by likening it to a draught or a smell of burning" (p. 331).

She should have done something much more difficult: the real challenge is "to experiment with one thing and another; to try this sentence and that, referring each word to my vision, matching it as exactly as possible, and knowing that somehow I had to find a common ground between us, a convention which would not seem to you too odd, unreal, and far-fetched to believe in" (pp. 331-32).

Thus the Georgians are tearing down old conventions and trying to find new ones. They are courageous and sincere,

---

Woolf's attitude toward both was always largely unfavorable. Cf. "The Novels of E. M. Forster" (I: 342-51) and "The Art of Fiction" (II: 51-55), where her main complaint is that he is humanistic, sometimes overtly moralistic, rather than "pure," aesthetic. For an account of their literary quarrel, see Mark Goldman, "Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster: a Critical Dialogue," TSLL, 7 (Winter 1966), 387-400, and Quentin Bell, II: 132-35.

On Lawrence, see "Postscript or Prelude?" a review of The Lost Girl, TLS, 2 Dec. 1920, rpt. CW, pp. 158-60; "Notes On D. H. Lawrence" (1931), I: 352-55; and Diary, 2 October 1932, pp. 182-83, where she complains of his sexuality, his preaching, and his Bennett-like realism.
even if they are (indecently) dull like Joyce, or obscure, like T. S. Eliot, or weak, like Strachey (pp. 334-35). Thus "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" (p. 335).\footnote{Wyndham Lewis's rage at Woolf's dismissal of Ulysses as a fragment is recorded in Men Without Art (1934; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), pp. 163-68.} But the reader must insist that writers "shall come down off their plinths and pedestals, and describe beautifully if possible, truthfully at any rate, our Mrs. Brown" (p. 336). A great age of literature can be reached only "if we are determined never, never to desert Mrs. Brown" (p. 337).

For "she is, of course, the spirit we live by, life itself" (p. 337). The ideal toward which Virginia Woolf strives is subjective reality, the inner life.\footnote{See Brewster and Burrell, p. 102, and Guiguet, pp. 353-81. An excellent dissertation on Virginia Woolf's evolving conception of character is Evelyn Haller, "The Search for 'Life Itself': Characterization and Its Relation to Form in the Novels of Virginia Woolf," Diss. Emory 1968.} Nevertheless, many critics have insisted on evaluating Woolf's avowedly unsatisfactory attempt to capture "Mrs. Brown" in the essay (as well as the characters in her subsequent novels) as Woolf's best effort at character-drawing, and have, predictably, found that she lacks substance.\footnote{Frrierson, pp. 220-23, summarizes the hostile reaction to "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." See also Haller,} Perhaps the best ex-
planation of Woolf's endeavor is found in the source for "Mrs. Brown," "An Unwritten Novel," one of those short stories that "dances in unity" in her vision of the form of Jacob's Room. 66

In a train the first-person narrator of "An Unwritten Novel" is caught up by the unconcealed sadness in the eyes of the old woman opposite, for "life's what you see in people's eyes" (p. 14). He proceeds to construct her story from external signs: clean and threadbare, she is Minnie Marsh, and has tortured relations with her family. His vision purposely leaves out facts ("But this we'll skip; ornaments, curtains, trefoil china plate . . .", p. 17) and spiritual speculations ("Who's the God of Minnie Marsh . . . oh, dear--this seeing of Gods!", p. 18) to build up to Minnie's supposed emotional climax:

But when the self speaks to the self, who is speaking?--the entombed soul, the spirit driven in, in, in to the central catacomb; the self that took the veil and left the world--a coward perhaps, yet somehow beautiful as it flits with its lantern restlessly up and down the dark corridors. (p. 25)

The vision builds, builds. The sentences are short, breathless--until the train stops, and she alights, to be met by

"a strange young man," her son, a warm familiar figure not figuring at all in the vision. The narrator is desolate: he has looked outward, away from the "damned egotistical self," to other people, only to find that his guesses about what lies underneath appearances may well be wrong. But all is not lost: "mother and son" conjure up a new vision.

Wherever I go, mysterious figures, I see you, turning the corner, mothers and sons; you, you, you. I hasten, I follow. . . . If I fall on my knees, if I go through the ritual, the ancient antics, it's you, unknown figures, you I adore; if I open my arms, it's you I embrace, you I draw to me—adorable world! (p. 27)

Just like the Minnie Marsh and Mrs. Brown called into play to defend the method of *Jacob's Room*, Jacob fascinates Woolf. As narrator she tries to capture his reality, for "the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us" (*J's R*, p. 72). Sometimes she cannot know Jacob's thoughts. In Section 8 the narrator, baffled, describes herself as ten years older and of the opposite sex to Jacob (p. 94), but she is not a character in the book known to the other characters. She does, however, deliver digressions, almost essays, to the reader in her own person. Here in Section 8 she has just discussed letters as attempts to bind us together which fail, since "words have been used too often; touched and turned" (pp. 92-93), and then turned us back to the characters by describing their epistolary efforts (p. 94). At

67 Many critics think these direct addresses to the audience betray an uneasiness with the method. See Bennett,
other times she does know Jacob's thoughts, as when the wo-
men at chapel, "though separately devout, distinguished, and
vouched for by the theology, mathematics, Latin, and Greek
of their husbands," distract him ("For one thing, thought
Jacob, they're as ugly as sin," p. 33). If the narrative
method is considered in terms of "point of view," then, it
is muddled. But of course Virginia Woolf was quite aware
of the inconsistency. During the composition of Jacob's
Room she told Lytton Strachey that Gibbon was like Henry
James. To explain, she said, "'He has a point of view and
sticks to it... And so do you. I wobble!'" (29 April
1921, p. 33).

It seems that just like the "novelist" in "An Unwrit-
ten Novel" Mrs. Woolf as narrator is examining, testing
reality in an effort to find release from the self. Some-
times she hazards guesses about Jacob and others, sometimes
she refuses to take such a chance and remains on the outside
of the characters; but she is always conscious of herself as
the receiver of puzzling data, much as if she were a camera
that could not only register impressions, but wonder what

---

pp. 25, 91-95; Chambers, pp. 10-11, finding an odd resemblance
to Lamb; Daiches, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 60; Friedman, p. 192;
Johnstone, pp. 334-35.

68 Wayne C. Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* might have
examined Jacob's Room in terms of "privilege," which Booth
sees as an interesting, largely uncharted area (pp. 160-63).
Grabo (pp. 297-306) and Hafley (pp. 48-53, and Note 14,
p. 176, commenting that Woolf's later novels move away from
the idea that we cannot know other people) complain of the
inconsistency in point of view.
they meant. It is clear that she is an omniscient narrator toying with the notion of omniscience for the purpose not only of presenting her own peculiar view of reality, her version of "Mrs. Brown," but also to present unexpected emphases, to try to strike a new relationship with the post-1910 audience. In her search for a convention to reach that audience, she uses any device that she thinks will match her vision of the moment. Thus she sometimes sees inside the character's mind (as Evan Williams's, p. 143); she sometimes limits her vision to a minor character's point of view (Mrs. Norman, Section 3; Mrs. Papworth, Section 9). Sometimes as observer she cannot even really see or hear very clearly. For instance, the argument between Jacob and Timmy, Section 4, is reported by its incompletely observed external signs only ("These half-sentences are like flags set on tops of buildings to the observer of external sights down below," p. 50). The party scenes are blurs and snatches. The rather annoying enumerations of things, or of people glimpsed once but supplied with names, even attitudes, are part of this groping process where sometimes she knows everything, sometimes next to nothing.

Mrs. Woolf herself had great qualms about the method. The first page of the manuscript in the Berg Collection carries the note, "Yet what about form? Let us suppose that

69 Holtby first discussed the cinematic technique of Jacob's Room (Chapter V, "Cinematograph," pp. 116-36). See also Blackstone, p. 67, and Guiguet, pp. 221-22.
the Room will hold it together." A letter to Logan Pear-
sall Smith admits that *Jacob's Room* is not quite a success: "the effort of breaking with complete representation sends one flying into the air. Next time I shall stick like a leech to my hero, or heroine." The Diary records some pleasure in the production: "There's no doubt in my mind that I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice" (26 July 1922, p. 46). But her fears that the novel might be considered "mad," "a disconnected rhapsody" (Diary, 23 June 1922, p. 45), were not wholly unjusti-

fied. For while she was mainly concerned with Jacob, the hu-

man heart, it was with the shower of atoms—things and people—

that she sought to capture him. Some readers have indeed found him a convincing character, or rather see him as a symbol of "life itself" so that insubstantiality, even misteriousness, is no criticism. Others say Jacob is all sensibility and performs no real action, and thus is no charac-

ter at all. Like Guiguet, however, I believe that Mrs.

---

70 John D. Gordan, "New in the Berg Collection: 1959-


71 Letter to L. P. Smith, 26 Oct. 1922, Logan Pear-
sall Smith papers, Library of Congress, Ac. 6752, quoted with permission by Haller, p. 111.

72 Brewster and Burrell, pp. 111-15; Guiguet, pp.

224-25, 371-73; Alice van Buren Kelley, *The Novels of Vir-

ginia Woolf: Fact and Vision* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago

Press, 1973), pp. 63-87 (Jacob as an ideal combination of"fact" and "vision," although too "significant" to be plausible).

73 J. W. Beach, "Virginia Woolf," pp. 606-08; William

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Woolf meant Jacob to be elusive, in life as well as in death: he is youth, full of promise cut off before maturity by a senseless war. He is a dream figure described throughout by other characters as distinguished: "barbaric yet obscure," he is posited as the ideal youth, the beautiful young man with the promise of Mrs. Woolf's own dead brother Thoby. She loves him, and formulates as much about his "luminous halo" as she dares. Perhaps her sly disclaimers of intimate knowledge are too artificial and self-conscious, however: I respond most fully to those passages where, instead of bemoaning her lack of omniscience, the narrator seizes it, and submerges the ultimately mysterious characters in the general life (as in the Waterloo bridge sequence, pp. 112-13, or in the final sweep of moors, sea and Greece, pp. 174-75), which in their intuition of general impersonal truths are examples of "poetry." Virginia Woolf herself must have felt those parts of the work central, for it is toward that same kind of synthesis that she would later theorize the novel is obligated to take us.

d. The Novel of the Future:  The Waves

"The Narrow Bridge of Art" (1927) (II: 218-29) projects a new novel, a form of art necessary in the modern

---


74 Lytton Strachey wrote to Virginia Woolf, "Jacob himself I think is very successful... Of course I see something of Thoby in him, as I suppose was intended" (Letters, p. 144). See also Pippett, p. 53.
world of doubt and conflict, where poetry, requiring a beauty now lost, and drama, too rigid, no longer satisfy our needs. It is to have both poetry and drama. "Poetry" here is predominantly that poetic detachment she so admires rather than language. For she is talking of a prose form, and she looks to prose as free, fearless, flexible, patient, and acquisitive, though she recognizes the loss of the "incantation" and "mystery" of rhyme and metre (p. 226). She means particularly that this new prose will give "the outline rather than the detail," making "little use of the marvellous fact-recording power, which is one of the attributes of fiction" (pp. 224-25). It will not, in the language of "Modern Fiction," be materialistic. With these limitations, "it will express the feeling and ideas of the characters closely and vividly, but from a different angle." Instead of giving human relations, it will show "the relation of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude" (p. 225). "Mrs. Brown," really only a mask for "life itself," is gone now. Mrs. Woolf is impatient with "Tom" and "Judith," conventional lovers (perhaps even with "Jacob" and "Sandra Wentworth Williams"). "We long for ideas, for dreams, for imaginations, for poetry." But the new novel will not therefore be abstract: "it will also give the sneer, the contrast, the question, the closeness and complexity of life." It will, in short, "take the mould of that queer conglomerate of incongruous things—the modern mind" (p. 226). The "poetry" must not come in purple patches, as in Meredith or Charlotte
Brontë: the new novel, like *Tristram Shandy*, must be all purple, reaching a high perspective for "imagination, wit, fantasy." That entails the loss of "the more substantial vegetables that grow on the ground," presumably the homely realism of the traditional English novel. That is the "narrow bridge of art": some renunciation is inevitable (p. 227).

"Drama" here does not mean "play," for she believes that the novelist "cannot compress into dialogue all the comment, all the analysis, all the richness that he wants to give," even though he covets the emotional effect that drama gives. The implication is that a new narrative voice is needed: it must be dramatic "speech" but also authorial comment. It should order the materials:

> Tumult is vile; confusion is hateful; everything in a work of art should be mastered and ordered. His effort will be to generalize and split up. Instead of enumerating details he will mould blocks. His characters thus will have a dramatic power which the minutely realized characters of contemporary fiction often sacrifice in the interests of psychology. (p. 228)

The new form will encompass new content—"the power of music, the stimulus of sight, the effect on us of the shape of trees or the play of colour. . ." (p. 229). For life, in effect, is a "luminous halo": "every moment is the centre and meeting-place of an extraordinary number of perceptions which have not yet been expressed" (p. 229).

The insistence on new subject-matter echoes "Modern Fiction" and "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," but the open-ended invitation to experimentation in those essays is replaced by a rather detailed description of a new form, one
stressing the detachment of poetry and the bold strokes of drama. Notice that the emphasis is still on "character," but character in relation to things, life itself, rather than to other characters. "The Narrow Bridge of Art" does not leave Mrs. Woolf open, as did "Mr. Bennett," to the expectation that she will create "realistic," rounded human beings. In fact, its main meaning is that art is a narrow bridge, that choice of particular effects excludes others, and leads us to expect a loss of substantiality, conventional realism.

In fact, the essay reads like a description of The Waves, a work first envisioned in 1926. Woolf wrote Vita Sackville-West about that endeavor that the main thing in beginning a novel is to feel, not that you can write it, but that it exists on the far side of a gulf, which words can't cross; that it's to be pulled through only in a breathless anguish. . . . A novel, to be good, should seem, before one writes it, something unwriteable; but only visible; so that for nine months one lives in despair, and only when one has forgotten what one meant, does the book seem tolerable.73

The Waves had first surfaced as an ineffable vision 30 September 1926: "... it is not oneself but something in the universe that one's left with. . . . One sees a fin passing far out. What image can I reach to convey what I mean? Really there is none, I think. . . . I hazard the guess that it may be the impulse behind another book. . . . I want to trace my own process" (Diary, p. 100). She does: the Diary contains a full account of the genesis and development of

75 Quoted by Pippett, p. 288.
The Moths, in time renamed The Waves (pp. 100-168). It shows how a writer goes about "referring each word to . . . /her/ vision . . . and knowing that somehow . . . /she/ had to find a common ground between us" (I: 332).

The vision, "this angular shape in my mind" (Diary, p. 139), inspires wild speculation on form. She calls it a "play-poem" (pp. 107, 134). Sometimes she thinks of it in terms of a play: on 21 February 1927 she describes a loose fragmented form:

Woman thinks...
He does.
Organ plays.
She writes. . . .
They say:
She sings. (p. 103)

On 18 June 1927 she envisions the play-poem in terms of a "love story": "she might talk, or think, about the age of the earth; the death of humanity; then the moths keep on coming. Perhaps the man could be left absolutely dim.

France: hear the sea; at night; a garden under the window.

. . ." (p. 107). Sometimes she emphasizes the poetry:

. . . what I want now to do is to saturate every atom. I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes. Say that the moment is a combination of thought; sensation; the voice of the sea. Waste, deadness, come from the inclusion of things that don't belong to the moment; this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner: it is false, unreal, merely conventional.

. . . The poets succeeding by simplifying: practically everything is left out. I want to put practically everything in: yet to saturate. That is what I want to do in The Moths. It must include nonsense, fact, sordidity: but made transparent.

(28 Nov. 1928, p. 136)

She is trying to capture people in relation to things: "the
play-poem idea; the idea of some continuous stream, not solely of human thought, but of the ship, the night etc., all flowing together" (18 June 1927, p. 107).

The first version of *The Moths* was finished 29 April 1930 in "the greatest stretch of mind I ever knew" (p. 155). It represented seven months of hard work, and three years' gestation during which she had written *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own*. But it needed, she thought, "re-building, yes, not only re-modelling" (p. 155). It is interesting that she describes the painful process, lasting until 7 February 1931, nine more months, in terms applying both to the "play" and the "poem": "Narrow Bridge" called for blocks of characters, not delicate psychological drawings, and she wants "to begin cutting out masses of irrelevance and clearing, sharpening and making the good phrases shine" (pp. 155-56). Of the first version she had said ". . . I think it possible that I have got my statues against the sky" (p. 154). On the other hand, she is concerned as well with the poetic rhythm: "so as to avoid those cuts; so as to make the blood run like a torrent from end to end--I don't want the waste that the breaks give" (p. 160). She wants "statues against the sky," dramatic form; she wants "to make the blood run like a torrent from end to end," poetic saturation. With this second version she felt she had "netted that fin," and it was achieved, she felt, by tossing aside the prepared symbols, and leaving "the sound of the sea and the birds, dawn and garden subconsciously present, doing their work under ground"
(7 Feb. 1931, p. 165). She would rework the manuscript a third time, to expand the condensed 332 pages (p. 166).

Throughout the composition she had searched for the right angle of vision. She wanted "a mind thinking. . . life itself going on," but not "a Lavinia or a Penelope: I want 'she.' But that becomes arty," (p. 140). Again, "... this shall be childhood; but it must not be my childhood; . . . unreality; things oddly proportioned" (p. 141). But "who thinks it? And am I outside the thinker? One wants some device which is not a trick" (p. 143). She seeks some "solvent": "I am convinced that I am right to seek for a station whence I can set my people against time and the sea," but it is incredibly difficult (p. 146). It is not until she is in the second revision, 20 August 1930, that she finds the manuscript "resolving itself (I am at page 100) into a series of dramatic soliloquies. The thing is to keep them running homogeneously in and out, in the rhythm of the waves" (p. 156). Thus the narrative voice that dominates the book is a device arrived at late and painfully.76

The published version of The Waves has the following plan.77 There are nine sections (not "chapters," which she

76 Good summaries of this Diary account are found in Bennett, pp. 134-41, and Guiguet, pp. 75-96. An excellent article, utilizing the first two drafts of The Waves now in the Berg Collection, N.Y.P.L., and discussing the evolution of the point of view from first-person narrator, similar to that of Jacob's Room, to the disguised bardic voice, is J. W. Graham, "Point of View in The Waves: Some Services of the Style," UTQ, 39 (April 1970), 193-211.

77 The text used is The Waves (1931; rpt. Harmonds-
eschewed). They are introduced by italicized "interludes." Guiguet observes that "their essential character is even more quickly grasped when they are read consecutively—as they seem to have been written in the second version. They are heard, then, as what I believe they really are, the overture to an opera, presenting all the essential motifs in compressed form and in their mutual relationship."\(^{78}\) Mrs. Woolf found them "very difficult yet I think essential; so as to bridge and also to give a background—the sea; insensitive nature—I don't know" (26 Jan. 1930, p. 150). They seem to me like cinematic surveys of things seen and heard for themselves alone, in varying perspectives (long shots, close-ups), clearly the "poetry" of "The Narrow Bridge of Art," new subject matter seen from new angles. They are not blank and "unhuman" as sometimes said:\(^{79}\) much of the imagery depicting the sea, the garden, and the house is tied with human beings (see Section 1, the sun as a woman raising a


\(^{78}\) Guiguet, p. 282. He cites the Diary, p. 158: "Then, as I think, I shall make one consecutive writing of The Waves etc.—the interludes—so as to work it into one..." (quoted p. 282, n. 393).

Critics not sympathetic to the device include Bennett, pp. 105-07 (over-ingenious); Daiches, Virginia Woolf, pp. 105-07 (too rigid); and Holtby, p. 195 ("the waves were in the book already, without being set in neatly framed seascapes and hung between each chapter").

lamp, pp. 5-6; Section 2, the birds singing like "skaters rollicking arm-in-arm," p. 23; Section 3, the waves as "turbaned men" advancing on a flock, p. 64) or their artifacts (the house, garden, the kitchen with implements). In fact, Sections 5 and 9 feature real human beings: the women washing by the river in "the southern village" (p. 126) and "girls, sitting on verandas" who look at the snow (p. 203). But the pictures are static in their movement, like friezes, and the point seems to be that these are the things that show "the relation of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude" (II: 225). The speaker is alone and looking with the whole self outward. It sees the sea, a garden, a house, its interior, and, in Section 5, foreshadowing the news of the death of Percival, far beyond to a southern country, presumably India (pp. 126-27); it hears the sounds of the birds and the sea. The sun rises, reaches its zenith, and sets. The birds move from "blank melody" to concert, then split asunder to their individual fates, until in Section 9 "there was no sound save the cry of a bird seeking some lonelier tree" (p. 203). It is generally accepted that the "day" and the groupings of the birds are a paradigm for the lives of the six participating characters, and that the interludes serve to "set the stage" for their presence.  

80 McConnell questions this common interpretation as a "deliberately planted instance of our willingness to assume an overeas mastery of the universe of things" (p. 127). The more convincing interpretation is the traditional one as presented by Freedman, esp. pp. 244-47, 263-67; Guiguet, pp. 299-301; Johnstone, p. 357; and Troy, p. 33.
Then the "play" begins. Against the background of the
dawn described in the interlude, or, in this case, prologue,
the characters "speak" short declarative sentences in the
present tense introducing their characteristic images. It
is like a recitation: the characters sound like a single
voice. It is only when the name becomes more closely asso-
ciated with the image cluster that the speakers are differ-
entiated. They report sense impressions: they tell how
the world of the prologue makes them feel.

Louis dissociates himself from the group, and begins
a sequence of soliloquies giving not only sense impressions
but also the facts normally supplied by the narrator as de-
scription ("'I am a boy in grey flannels with a belt fastened
by a brass snake up here,'" p. 9). He gives his conscious
thoughts ("She has kissed me. All is shattered," p. 10) as
well as some possibly unconscious thoughts ("'I hold a stalk
in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths
of the world. . . .'" (p. 9). Louis even has a species of ra-
cial memory (seeing women passing with red pitchers to the
Nile, p. 9) giving this initial speech a cosmic loneliness
that reinforces the solitude of the prologue and sets the
rather mournful tone of the entire book. He identifies him-
self closely with Rhoda. All the others, he thinks, "brush
the surface of the world" (p. 9). Jinny, as the quintessen-
tial skimmer ("'I dance. I ripple,'" p. 10) comes next, and

81 See J. W. Graham, "Point of View in The Waves,"
for an excellent comparison of the narrative voice to a
translator of six different speakers (p. 196).
establishes her characteristic love of motion and color. Susan is similarly physical, basic, but instead of skimming lightly she is rooted deeply, as Louis is rooted. Horribly jealous of the kiss Jinny gave Louis, she wraps her agony in a handkerchief, and screws it "tight into a ball" (p. 10). Working with Neville at carving, Bernard sees her and "tells" Neville that he will follow her. Bernard and Susan "talk" to each other about themselves. They are different: Susan "says," "'I am tied down with single words. But you wander off; you slip away; you rise up higher, with words and words in phrases,'" those phrases which he had said "will break up this knot of hardness" so hurting her (pp. 12-13). But both explore for relief, and so visit "Elvedon," an estate where "no one has been before," but where they risk their lives to see the tableau of the lady writing, the gardeners sweeping in a moment of vision that lasts a lifetime. Rhoda, like Louis, is essentially solitary. She floats petals in a basin. "'One sails alone. That is my ship. It sails into icy caverns where the sea-bear barks and stalactites swing green chains!'" (p. 15). Neville is not, like Rhoda, concerned with things, but with one person, now Bernard, whom he condemns as "dangling," "twangling," while he himself loves categories, order. "'I hate wandering and mixing things together!'" (p. 15). At this point Neville notes that "'the copy-books are laid out side by side on the green baize table!'" (p. 15). The six characters have each had a soliloquy of at least one-half page.
Particular events—lessons, a walk, the actions and talk of servants (for things do happen, as in a traditional narrative)—form the matrix for the subsequent soliloquies, which have fear as a major theme. Jinny, significantly, speaks the least, and then it is only to stress "'This is here . . . this is now'" (p. 19). Her immersion in the moment makes her brave, even later, when she is growing old (see pp. 165-68, 188-90). Louis fears his social inferiority ("My father is a banker in Brisbane and I speak with an Australian accent," p. 16). Again he begins the sequence of soliloquies, giving enough biography of the others to identify them as upper middle-class English children, much like Virginia Woolf herself (p. 16). Rhoda fears her isolation: "'the world is entire, and I am outside of it, crying, "Oh, save me from being blown for ever outside the loop of time'" (p. 17). Bernard retreats into a story-world where "'everything is strange. Things are huge and very small.'" He is not fearful ("'We are giants, lying here, who can make forests quiver'"), but he observes strange, horrible, threatening things (the birds "'pick at a worm—that is a hooded cobra—and leave it with a festering brown scar to be mauled by lions'" (pp. 18-19). But it is Neville, he who clings to the idea that "there is an order in this world" (p. 17), who first confronts the threat of reality in the form of "death among the apple trees," and who is unable to overcome it. He overhears the servants talk about the victim of a murder. "'He was found with his throat cut. . . . I was unable to
lift my foot up the stair. . . . We are doomed, all of us, by the apple trees, by the immitigable tree which we cannot pass'" (p. 20). Susan too is startled by servants: Ernest kisses Florrie, "with the pyjamas blown out hard between them," but is not afraid, proclaiming "'I am not afraid of heat, nor of the frozen winter'" (pp. 20-21). Once again, all six have spoken, and Louis says "'we all rise; we all stand up . . . . afraid of much, I of my accent, Rhoda of figures; yet resolute to conquer'" (p. 21).

The final two speeches are in the nature of summary and projection. Bernard experiences "bright arrows of sensation" as Mrs. Constable squeezes the sponge over his back, and "down showers the day" (p. 22). Rhoda loses herself: "'Out of me now my mind can pour. . . . I am tumbled; I am stretched, among these long lights, these long waves, these endless paths, with people pursuing, pursuing'" (pp. 22-23), forecasting the gathering of the waves into a sea of pure perception accomplished by Bernard in the climactic summing-up.

"The Narrow Bridge of Art" had asked the novelist to mould blocks rather than enumerate details (II: 228). Although it might at first seem that The Waves is all detail, it quickly becomes apparent that each character is a "block," a pure essence—with the exception of Bernard, who depends on other people for his very identity (pp. 64-69). This is

---

82 Cf. the constant refrain in Mrs. Dalloway from Cymbeline, "Fear no more the heat o' the sun/Nor the furious winter's rages" (p. 13 and passim).
particularly clear in Section 3 where, except for the "dialogue" between Bernard and Neville, the speeches are in literal blocks with strong linking devices, creating the effect of a six-sided crystal turned slowly around. Each character ponders his direction in life. Neville sees the glory in a life devoted to perfection, but has a "fatal hesitancy" (pp. 69-71). With his need to be loved by one person he contracts the multifarious Bernard into one, but Bernard sees himself as more complex than that, unlike the mechanical Louis (pp. 71-79). That leads to Louis, who will translate the higher order into a poem for common humanity. He is weak and young. He is cursed into seeing the present in terms of the past, unlike Susan, who "sits stitching" (p. 82). That leads to Susan, triumphantly at one with nature ("'I am the seasons,'" p. 84), but thinking of Jinny and Rhoda dancing in London (p. 86). There at a party the door opens for both of them. For Jinny that means "'Oh, come, I say to this one!'"; for Rhoda that means "'the tiger leaps... terror rushes in'" (p. 90). In addition to these obvious links, there are verbal echoes throughout. For example, both Louis and Rhoda claim to be the "youngest" (see pp. 82, 91). Jinny says "'There is a line of chimney-pots against the sky'" (p. 86); Rhoda says "'Night has wheeled a little farther over the chimney-pots'" (p. 90), as if they shared the same vantage point.

But the characters are not just static portraits with inter-related images. There is a story of sorts centering on
Percival, a character who is seen only from the outside, having no "voice" of his own, but who, unlike any of the speakers, has the unqualified love of each. He first appears in Section 2 at the boys' school as an unconscious pagan god whom Bernard, Louis, and particularly Neville adore, "the real thing," as Henry James would say, whom Louis's "boasting boys" ineffectually imitate. Neville is contemptuous of his mind ("'he cannot read'"), but knows that he himself is "a clinger to the outsides of words," while "not a thread, not a sheet of paper lies between him and the sun" (p. 40). The climax of The Waves is its centre, the middle of Section 4, when Percival arrives at the dinner-party where the six have assembled to honor him before his departure for India. He is the man of action, perhaps a symbol of society itself who goes to a larger world.83

Now, says Neville, "'Our isolation, our preparation is over'" (pp. 105-06), and the characters present seriatim a recapitulation of their lives, using words like "then," "but," and "however" as if the account were chronological, or logical, when in fact the links are emotional. The conversation suggests those rambling sharing sessions of old friends united by common feeling (pp. 106-08). Bernard asks, "'Shall we call it, conveniently, "love"?'" (p. 108)

'We have come together . . . to make one thing, not enduring--for, what endures?--but seen by many eyes simultaneously. There is a red carnation in that vase. A single flower as we sat here waiting, but

83 Collins, p. 15.
now a seven-sided flower . . . a whole flower to
which every eye brings its own contribution;' (p.
108)

They experience "this globe whose walls are made of Perci-
val, of youth and beauty" (Jinny, p. 124) until the dread
moment when he goes. The catastrophe is registered in Sec-
tion 5: he is dead from a riding accident in India.

For Neville, "there stands the tree which I cannot
pass" (p. 128), and it is the reaction to this figurative
tree of Percival's death (just as in Bernard's summing-up he
gives each character's reaction to the willow tree, pp. 214
ff.) that is a principal device of characterization.\footnote{Freedman, esp. pp. 255-56; Haller, pp. 137-44.}

Bernard feels sorrow, but also joy that his son is born, and is
forced into unwonted solitude, outside the sequence (the notion
that human activity can be captured by phrases, shaped into
stories), to discover that Percival, unconsciousness itself,
was his opposite, "a great master of the art of living" (pp.
133-34). Rhoda feels ungovernable terror, in which she takes
a perverse sort of pleasure, and seeks restoration of beauty.
She finds it at a concert of music, where "a square stands
upon an oblong" (pp. 135-41). Neville is momentarily
crushed, stopped, experiencing again "death among the apple
trees" (p. 130); but Bernard and Rhoda begin to repair them-
selves with phrases, visions of order, both buffers against
the "immitigable tree." The ultimate effects of the death
are measured at the second dinner, a reunion after some twen-
ty years at Hampton Court, where the moment of vision is a
"silence" filled with "speeches" expressing the characters' battle against time, their vain attempt to achieve permanence—an epiphany in a minor key.

'The flower,' said Bernard, 'the red carnation that stood in the vase on the table of the restaurant when we dined together with Percival, is become a six-sided flower; made of six lives.'

'A mysterious illumination,' said Louis, 'visible against those yew trees.'

'Built up with much pain, many strokes,' said Jinny. (p. 196)

But the book does not remain a "story" on this level of plot. For Bernard, differentiated as he is from the other five speakers by absorbing into his many selves what he experiences, rather than experiencing in terms of that which he is, emerges from their midst as an individual growing, changing. Perhaps it is because he is engaged in the quest of finding the perfect phrase for the moment (p. 59), because he is working, in a winningly spasmodic fashion, on a "collection of valuable observations upon the true nature of human life" (p. 57), and because he has a sense of humility about himself lacking to the orderly Neville and zealous Louis, that he emerges, as early as Section 2, as an interesting spokesman. "I do not believe in separation. We are not single" (p. 57). Section 3 identifies him as a Woolfian hero. He says, "... joined "to the sensibility of a woman" (I am here quoting my own biographer) "Bernard possessed the logical sobriety of a man." ... Underneath, and, at the moment when I am most disparate, I am also integrated. ... [But] ... something remains floating, unattached" (p. 65). In Section 4 Bernard, always distin-
guished by his "phrases," becomes spokesman for the group as he introduces the dinner for Percival with a long monologue on the individual and the general life. He wants to "'embrace the whole world with the arms of understanding--impossible to those who act'" (p. 97). But after "one moment of enormous peace" he is drawn back by "pricking sensations," and his phrases refuse to coalesce into "a summing up that completes" (the first signal of what Bernard, and The Waves itself, works toward) (pp. 98-99). After the mystic communion of the farewell dinner he again questions the "stories": "'observe how meretricious the phrase is--made up of what evasions and old lies'" (p. 114). But he voices the wisdom born of the occasion:

'We have proved, sitting eating, sitting talking, that we can add to the treasury of moments. We are not slaves bound to suffer incessantly unrecorded petty blows on our bent backs. We are not sheep either, following a master. We are creators. We too have made something that will join the innumerable congregations of past time.' (p. 125)

But that moment depended on Percival, and after his death Bernard must "find out what is of great importance." He manages to stay "alone outside the machine" looking at the death itself, by will power, and even adds something to his insight that (and this is the second signal) will someday "fructify," until the "arrows of sensation" pull him back into life, and he must see Jinny (p. 135). He does not speak again until Section 7 when, alone in Rome, the phrase-maker must admit limitations. The "new drop," recognition that his youth is gone, hurls him outside the sequence again.
'Leaning over this parapet I see far out a waste of water. A fin turns. This bare visual impression is unattached to any line of reason. . . . Visual impressions often communicate thus briefly statements that we shall in time to come uncover and coax into words'" (p. 162).

At the second dinner at Hampton Court, Bernard appears a crotchety old man, separated from the rest by his phrases (p. 186) and lulled, perhaps dulled, by the sequence he has always loved and fought, "the happy concatenation of one event following another in our lives. Knock, knock, knock. Must, must, must" (p. 201). His speech is by this time clear and straightforward: it has lost the sometimes irritating poetic complexity of the beginning sections, and seems almost realistically conversational.

'Let us stay for a moment,' said Bernard, 'before we go. Let us pace the terrace by the river almost alone. It is nearly bed-time. People have gone home. Now how comforting it is to watch the lights coming out in the bedrooms of small shopkeepers on the other side of the river. . . . (p. 200)

The last section is a change of key, or the removal of a film: Bernard speaks to a stranger in a cafe in a manner reminding of the conversational technique in a novel by Camus published much later, The Fall. His monologue is not entirely "realistic," as we shall see, but it does take the information of the first eight sections and rearrange it into a more straightforward narrative. The result must not be confused with the despised "sequence," submission to the "phrase," for he still holds that "stories" are inadequate representations of reality:
Also, how I distrust neat designs of life that are drawn upon half-sheets of note-paper. I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement. I begin to seek some design more in accordance with those moments of humiliation and triumph that come now and then undeniably. Lying in a ditch on a stormy day, when it has been raining, then enormous clouds come marching over the sky. . . . What delights me then is the confusion, the height, the indifference and the fury. . . . Of story, of design, I do not see a trace then. (pp. 204-05)

Of course Bernard does not really use "inarticulate words" at all, but well-chosen simple words that do in fact communicate a design. He summarizes the experiences of the six other characters as if turning over the pages of a child's picture-book (p. 205), but interest slowly focuses on his own quest, as it did in the eight sections themselves, and we see again how he submits to the "sequence," but is jarred out of it by Percival's death, goes back in again, (a blank first time around: Bernard does not appear in Section 6), is jarred out by the falling drop, at which point he seeks his friends, and realizes fully, and this time without self-deprecation for his susceptibility, that his friends, "how seldom visited, how little known," are actually part of himself:

'. . . when I meet an unknown person, and try to break off, here at this table, what I call "my life," it is not one life that I look back upon; I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am -- Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs.' (p. 237) (See also pp. 242 and 248-49)

This sense leads them to "burn triumphant" at Hampton Court for just one moment. "'And then Neville, Jinny, Susan and I,
as a wave breaks, burst asunder, surrendered," losing that pure reality that Rhoda and Louis, the authentics, kept (p. 239). Rhoda kills herself, seeking that reality, but Bernard is "no mystic; something always plucks at" him to bring him "to the surface" (p. 241).

Mrs. Woolf provides for the resolution of this paradox of individuality and unity with the central image of the book, the waves. Upon second revision she felt she had tossed aside her prepared symbols, leaving "the sound of the sea and the birds, dawn and garden subconsciously present, doing their work under ground" (Diary, 7 Feb. 1931, p. 165). Nevertheless the waves pound explicitly throughout the book. They dominate the interludes as the ineluctable reality surrounding the six speakers. From time to time in the soliloquies each of the speakers relates himself to the waves in a way that illuminates his peculiar essence. Rhoda rocks petals in a bowl of water, fantasizing the solitary voyage of her ship to ultimate reality (p. 15), and indeed in time she kills herself, perhaps by living out her fantasy of hurling herself from a precipice into the sea (p. 177). Her fellow solitary Louis hears always "the sullen thud of the waves; and the chained beast stamps on the beach" (p. 49). These two have the unity of the sea, desolate as it might be, but the other four experience it only momentarily as they mature. It is true that as youngsters at school they existed, according to Bernard, "not only separately but in undifferentiated blobs of matter!" (p. 211). ("Nothing, nothing, nothing
broke with its fin that leaden waste of waters," p. 210). But they become individuals, and must place themselves in relation to the sea. Neville wants to seek perfection in the sand, a dry element, but he is necessarily confronted with chaos, disorder. The uproar of London "sounds and resounds under this glass roof like the surge of a sea. . . . We are whirled asunder" (p. 61). Susan is "'debased and hide-bound by the bestial and beautiful passion of maternity'": her children are like "the waves of the sea" under her (p. 113). Jinny, as the skimmer, is reconciled to the flux: "'there is nothing staid, nothing settled in this universe. All is rippling, all is dancing; all is quickness and triumph'" (p. 38). "'I am going to be buffeted; to be flung up, and flung down, among men, like a ship on the sea'" (p. 151).

The unification of the waves into the sea is accomplished in the figure of Bernard. That unbroken waste of waters is first broken by showers of warm water, the "bright arrows of sensation" flowing down Bernard's back from Mrs. Constable's sponge (p. 22), later by "the fin" arising in "a waste of water" in Rome (p. 162)--both operating to make him conscious of pure sensation, pure perception which, to sustain, requires a frightening loss of self. On the other hand, that same desperately grasped self holds terrors of its own, for while ordinarily "'we are swept on by the torrent of things grown so familiar that they cast no shadow. We float, we float'" (p. 221), then suddenly a drop will

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
fall, and we realize that the sequence is mere habit, an il-

lusion (p. 233).

'The crystal, the globe of life as one calls it, far
from being hard and cold to the touch, has walls of
thinnest air. If I press them all will burst. What-
ever sentence I extract whole and entire from this
cauldron is only a string of six little fish that
let themselves be caught while a million others leap
and sizzle. . . . Faces recur, faces and faces—they
press their beauty to the walls of my bubble—Neville,
Susan, Louis, Jinny, Rhoda and a thousand others. How
impossible to order them rightly; to detach one sepa-
ately, or to give the effect of the whole—again
like music. What a symphony with its concord and its
discord, and its tunes on top and its complicated
bass beneath, then grew up! (p. 220)

What is an appropriate "design" for their lives that will
also preserve "the confusion, the height, the indifference
and the fury" of the storm clouds? (p. 205). Reality seems
chaos, and Bernard's attempts to order it fail, and "so back
again to the welter; to the torture" (p. 221). The problem
seems insoluble.

Until, that is, Bernard leans over the gate and looks
out into the field, and sees reality itself (pp. 243 ff.).
Then the sequence is over. "No fin breaks the waste of this
immeasurable sea" (p. 244). "'But how describe the world
seen without a self? There are no words!'" (p. 247), but,
again, Bernard remains articulate and utters the language of
the interludes, that which for Virginia Woolf is the purest
expression of the thing-in-itself. 85

85 See McConnell, esp. p. 128. A much clearer exami-
nation of the same point is Igor Webb, "'Things in Them-
selves': Virginia Woolf's The Waves," MFS, 17 (Winter 1971-
72), 570-73. See Richter, 110-11, on cross-references in
the summing-up.
'How then does light return to the world after the eclipse of the sun? Miraculously. Frailly. In thin stripes. It hangs like a glass cage. It is a hoop to be fractured by a tiny jar.' (p. 246. Cf. interlude, p. 62)

Desire is gone. He can go anywhere.

Day rises; the girl lifts the watery fire-hearted jewels to her brow; the sun levels his beams straight at the sleeping house; the waves deepen their bars; they fling themselves on shore. . . . (p. 251. Cf. interlude, pp. 5-6)

Although the presence of the dinner companion threatens to pull him back into the sequence, Bernard now exists alone. He will simply sit among the things in themselves, "myself being myself" (p. 254). But dawn comes. In a speech mixing peevish colloquial prose ("There is a sense of the break of day. I will not call it dawn. What is dawn in the city to an elderly man standing in the street looking up rather dizzyly at the sky?" p. 255) and impersonal poetic prose ("The bars deepen themselves between the waves. The film of mist thickens on the fields" (p. 255), he announces a resurgence of defiance within himself. The last enemy comes. Likening himself to Percival, he shouts "'Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!'" (p. 256).

Bernard does not begin The Waves: the prologue--a look at life itself--does. But Bernard comes to include the other characters, in a sense, and sees the life itself of the interludes for himself, an achievement which puts him on a par with the author herself. Many critics think that the book is about just one character, that the six constitute a
Indeed Mrs. Woolf told her husband shortly before the book was published that the characters were meant to be "severally facets of a single complete person." Some think that person is the artist, perhaps Virginia Woolf herself. Such an interpretation is abetted by Woolf's suggestion in her diary that The Moths might be called "Autobiography" (28 May 1929, p. 140), and her dismay that The Times praised her characters, when she meant to have none (Diary, 5 Oct. 1931, p. 170). Some readers, however, find only a rigid formal voice that precludes any valid characterization. David Daiches, for instance, has made an often-quoted comparison of the characters to the "masks" of Yeats and O'Neill, a stiff procedure that demands antecedent sympathy from the audience. But an attempt so ambitious is likely to seem a failure to some. Woolf rather ruefully summarized her intentions in a letter to John Lehmann:

... I wanted to eliminate all detail; all fact; and analysis; and myself; and yet not be rigid and rhetorical; and not monotonous (which I am) and to keep the swiftness of prose and yet strike one or two sparks, and not to write poetical, but purebred prose, and keep the elements of character; and yet

86 Bennett, pp. 110-11; Collins, pp. 9-10, 14 (personae in a ritual); Freedman, pp. 247-56; Graham, "Point of View," p. 206; Haller, pp. 123-44; Richter, pp. 120-22.


88 Gruber, pp. 73 ff.; Guiguet, pp. 296-98; Irma Rantavaara, Virginia Woolf's 'The Waves' (Port Washington, N. Y.: Kennikat Press, 1960), Ch. II.

89 Daiches, Virginia Woolf, pp. 103-11. See also Friedman, pp. 204-07; Troy, p. 36.
that there should be many characters and only one; and also an infinity, a background behind -- well, I admit I was biting off too much."

Virginia Woolf did, in my opinion, achieve the play-poem she envisioned. The identification between author and characters is so complete that some critics see the book as constructed entirely of the authorial voice, while at the same time others see it as entirely dramatic rendering of the characters' consciousnesses. Author and characters are coterminous: one cannot readily tell whether the author dominates everything, or has "exited." This is the impersonality of poetry: there is no disjunction between the poetic vision of the author and the capacities of the characters that so jarred Woolf in Hardy's and Meredith's novels. She certainly examined new subject matter, even "the power of music, the stimulus of sight, the effect on us of the shape of trees or the play of colour" (II: 229). She achieved a new angle of vision, as the interludes and the intricate examinations of the conscious, subconscious, and perhaps even racial memories of the six characters show. The language has the concentration and suggestiveness her criticism always associated with "poetry." The drama (beyond

---

90 The Whispering Gallery, p. 171, quoted by Schaefer, p. 157. This kind of language encourages Hafley's Bergsonian reading (see The Glass Roof, p. 108).

91 For example, Freedman, pp. 263-67; Guiguet, pp. 282-86; Hafley, p. 108; King, p. 130; Naremore, pp. 151-89; Rantavaara, pp. 12-19; Richter, Ch. IX, pp. 129-48.

92 Beja, p. 129; Lawrence E. Bowling, What is the Stream of Consciousness Technique? PMLA 65 (June 1950), 339; Chambers, 43-44; Humphrey, pp. 35-38.
the obvious resemblances to the play form in the interludes, as settings, and the "speeches," as dialogue) is achieved in the characters, moulded in great blocks, primarily by inter-related image patterns. But the principal achievement, it seems to me, is Bernard's summing-up, where the poetry and the drama combine in a complex pattern—where the characters' threads, spun out initially in short spurts, then intertwined by images and memory, are woven into a whole fabric; and where, in addition, he achieves the vision of the interludes and incorporates them into his very speech. He unifies the whole with the central image of the book: the six characters, many yet one, and the world of the interludes, constitute the waves, which become incorporated into Bernard himself. "And in me too the wave rises. It swells. . . . It is death against whom I ride. . . ." (pp. 255-56). The world is one: outer and inner. "The waves broke upon the shore" (p. 256).

This was Virginia Woolf's supreme effort to match her words to her vision. The Diary records her fear that since she had tried, "by hook or crook," to say what she meant, the very "hookedness" might discourage readers (2 Feb. 1931, p. 163), and perhaps it does. The book requires multiple

---

93 Good discussions of the image patterns are in Freedman, pp. 244-68; Humphrey, pp. 99-104; Rantavaara; Schaefer, pp. 137-164.

94 Contrast Michael Payne, "The Eclipse of Order: the Ironic Structure of The Waves," MFS, 15 (Summer 1969), 217-18, who argues that Bernard failed to find the artistic order he desired, but found existential order instead, though the implied author produces artistic order for the reader with the last line.
readings, but each is more rewarding than the last. Even after the first eight sections acquire their suggestive glow the summing-up is still a glorious shock, much like the Grosse Fuge originally ending Beethoven's String Quartet in B flat major, Op. 130 (and indeed Woolf did listen to late Beethoven during the nights of preliminary work on The Moths (Diary, p. 107). The contrapuntal complexity has magnificent dramatic effect: it is a poetic synthesis with a challenge appropriate to the fragmented generation to which Woolf addressed herself—"effort," "defiance," "personality" (Diary, 22 Dec. 1930, p. 159).

e. A Note on Influences

Virginia Woolf's criticism is integrally related to her fiction, as the interrelationships between "An Unwritten Novel," Jacob's Room, and "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" have shown. And her fiction is best read in conjunction with the concurrent essays, as the relationship between the visionary "Narrow Bridge of Art" and The Waves has shown. The Diary, with its explication of evolving intentions and its stringent self-criticism, is ancillary to all the works after 1918. In fact, the essays and the diary, plus letters, almost perform a narrative function, like a good guidebook in a museum of new sculpture or painting.

The theories behind both are idiosyncratic and personal, but because they deal with common concerns like the nature of reality and the function of art they are often traced to others. The basic influence is sometimes said to
come from Mrs. Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, but I believe his stern parental presence actually yielded very general lessons to his daughter. She wrote of his intellectual legacy:

To read what one liked because one liked it, never to pretend to admire what one did not—that was his only lesson in the art of reading. To write in the fewest possible words, as clearly as possible, exactly what one meant—that was his only lesson in the art of writing. All the rest must be learnt for oneself. ("Leslie Stephen," IV: 80)

After his death in 1904 Virginia Woolf and siblings lived Bohemian fashion among a group of friends, later derisively known as "Bloomsbury." J. K. Johnstone leads those who (while denying homogeneity) trace in Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, E. M. Forster and others the pervasive influence of G. E. Moore, particularly in that famous passage from Principia Ethica declaring that "the most valuable things, which we know or can imagine, are certain states of consciousness, which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects." Roger Fry and Clive Bell, each in his own way, are said to have applied Moore's abstractions on the good to art, making an aesthetic centering on "significant form," often related to Woolf's rather amorphous version of "form."

---

95 Cf. Guiguert, pp. 142-45 (Woolf inherited an ideal of the continuity of art and life); Hafley, pp. 24-25; and Richter, pp. 18-24.

96 Quoted by Johnstone, p. 41. Cf. also Kelley, p. 2.

97 See the thorough treatment of this topic by Proud-fit.
study has excited rebuttal, however: Jean Guiguet asserts that Bloomsbury is "not a sum of ideas, still less of literary prescriptions. It is merely a fertile climate of intellectual and artistic life (in fact of life, pure and simple) in which divergences, originality and discussion played as great a part as likenesses, affinities and sympathy."\(^{98}\)

Michael Holroyd also dismisses the notion of "Bloomsbury" as intellectually coherent, although he detects similar attitudes based on a vague ideal of ancient Greece and the French salon built around the arts.\(^{99}\)

As a working editor of the Hogarth Press and as a serious reviewer, Virginia Woolf was always aware of her contemporaries. Many critics relate her to Proust, his possible mentor Bergson, Joyce, and Dorothy Richardson.\(^{100}\) Because she was also a serious student of the English tradition, critics sometimes point up her affinities with the great prose writers like Sir Thomas Browne, De Quincey, and Ruskin.\(^{101}\) But while the similarities are often striking, and the implications fascinating,\(^{102}\) I must, if only because of the range


\(^{99}\) An excellent survey of the Bloomsbury controversy is given by Holroyd, I: 395-424.

\(^{100}\) For Proust, see Ruth Z. Temple, "Never Say 'I': To the Lighthouse as Vision and Confession," in VW: 20th-Century Views, pp. 90-100. For Bergson, see Hafley. For Joyce et al., see Edel, esp. p. 190, and Chambers, pp. 24-28. For Richardson, see Guiguet, pp. 371-73.

\(^{101}\) Gruber, p. 38; Monroe, p. 222.

\(^{102}\) For instance, Hafley's collation of the last para-
of her affinities, agree with those critics who view her
criticism as essentially personal, and deeply bound up with
her creative efforts.\(^\text{103}\) The Diary, with its honest gropings
and self-criticism, seems rebuttal enough to those who would
find the philosophical certainty of Leslie Stephen or G. E.
Moore.

\(^{103}\) Guiguet, Chs. II and III. See also Brewster and
Burrell, esp. pp. 79-80; Fishman, esp. p. 321; and Holtby,
pp. 37-60.
CHAPTER III

THE CRITICAL THEORIES OF EDITH WHARTON AND
VIRGINIA WOOLF: FROM DRAMA TO POETRY

We have examined in detail the critical presuppositions of both Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf. Perhaps it is already apparent that although the first is associated with the idea that "the art of rendering life in fiction" is simply "the disengaging of crucial moments from the welter of existence" (WF, p. 14), and the second with the seemingly opposing idea that life is not "a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged," but rather "a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (II: 106), nevertheless the two theorists start from the same point, a traditional one. But to make the comparison explicit, let us retrace our steps through their basic assumptions, to discover where, and why, their paths diverge.

a. The Function of Criticism

Both Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf regard the novel as a nascent form with infinite possibilities, Wharton seeing it as "the newest, most fluid and least formulated of the arts" (WF, p. 3), Woolf as "the youngest and most vigorous of the arts" ("Phases of Fiction," II: 101). Both recog-
nize that, at least until Henry James, no English novelist was an explicit theorist as well. Thus criticism of the novel, both agree, is rudimentary. Mrs. Woolf might speak for both when she writes that fiction "has had no rules drawn up for her, very little thinking done on her behalf" ("The Art of Fiction," II: 52).

This lack of tradition is the partial explanation for the inadequacy of most criticism of the novel. Mrs. Wharton claims in "A Cycle of Reviewing" and *A Backward Glance* that her critics' dogmatism (often contradicting itself) rendered her immune to reviewers; Mrs. Woolf also affects indifference in defensive essays like "Reviewing" (II: 204-15). But both clearly suffered at the hands of critics who had not enough sensitivity to their aims. Mrs. Wharton complained of reviewers who only gave summaries ("The Vice of Reading," p. 520), or who took the dialogue as the expression of the author's philosophy ("CF," p. 230), or who--worst of all--attempted to secure for the public what they thought it wanted, such as examinations of everyday life, the accursed "man with the dinner pail" ("The Great American Novel," "A

---


2 The proof is in the tone of Wharton's "Cycle," Woolf's "Reviewing." But see also on Wharton, LaGuardia, "Edith Wharton on Critics and Criticism;" on Woolf, Quentin Bell, II: 28-29 ("Her dread of the ruthless mockery of the world contained within it the deeper fear that her art, and therefore her self, was a kind of sham, an idiot's dream of no value to anyone," p. 28).
Cycle," p. 45). Mrs. Woolf complained of reviewers' terrible powers over the reputations of writers, and went so far as to divorce "reviewing," reactions to current books, from "criticism," analyses of works of the past, using established standards ("Reviewing," II: 204-15).

Both called for a more responsible, informed kind of criticism for the novel. Mrs. Wharton emulated the "trained criticism" of France exemplified by Sainte-Beuve. Having "an intelligent criticism of life in general," the critic should have a sense of "form," a concern with "every detail of creation, and hence, and above all, with the point of view of the creator" ("CF," p. 229). Mrs. Woolf emulated the enthusiasm of the English "spiritual tradition," exemplified by Hazlitt and Coleridge, that with a combination of reason and sensibility could isolate the essence of a work, communicate it to the reader, and send him off on voyages of discovery of his own ("William Hazlitt," I: 155-64). Mrs. Wharton was suspicious of the artist-critic, noting his tendency to build theoretical houses for succeeding artists to live in (WF, pp. 116-17); but Mrs. Woolf, perhaps because she herself found criticism an integral part of her creative life, preferred her critic to be an artist as well, since he would therefore know first-hand all aspects of the art he analyzes ("Books and Persons," CW, pp. 60-62).  

3 On Mrs. Wharton's belief, contra James and Lubbock, that art defied critical analysis, see Buchan, esp. pp. 345-47, 355-57. On Mrs. Woolf's ambivalent feelings on the question (critical belief like James's and Lubbock's that
But art is far more important than criticism to both these artists-critics. That seems axiomatic, but it was a principle not to be taken for granted, apparently, in the wake of J. E. Spingarn, who in 1910 created a sensation with his "New Criticism," an address at Columbia announcing, according to Pritchard, that "art is expression, with criticism the study of that expression. The critic should be satisfied with answering Goethe's two questions: what did the artist intend to do? and how well did he do it? Criticism holds the mirror up to literature as literature holds it up to nature."4

Edith Wharton's "Criticism of Fiction" (1914) seems to take this formulation specifically into account. An earlier essay, "The Vice of Reading" (1903) had phrased the task of the critic as simply to analyze both subject and manner. But in 1914 she says it differently: the critic must "first seek to find out what particular thing each particular novel is trying to be" (p. 230). He should use two criteria, primarily: "What has the author tried to represent, and how far has he succeeded?--and a third, which is dependent on them: Was the subject chosen worth representing--has it the quality of being what Balzac called 'vrai dans l'art'?" Mrs. Wharton would explain this allusion in The

form is definable, but artistic belief like Bloomsbury associates that art is unconscious), see Hoag. See also the earlier Goldman, "Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster; a Critical Dialogue," which makes much the same point.

4 Pritchard, p. 200.
Writing of Fiction by recounting Balzac's criticism of the brilliant Waterloo scene at the beginning of *La Chartreuse de Parme*: "M. Beyle has chosen a subject /the Waterloo episode/ which is real in nature but not in art." That is, being out of place in that particular work of art, it loses its reality as art and remains merely a masterly study of a corner of a battle-field..." (pp. 101-02). Mrs. Wharton regains for criticism the judgmental function that Spingarn eschews. No matter what anyone might say about the subjectivity of criticism, Mrs. Wharton says, "any criticism whatever implies references to a collective standard" ("CF," p. 230).

Virginia Woolf reacts to Spingarn's contentions in a review of his *Essays on the Unity of Genius and Taste*, in the TLS of 7 June 1917. If the critic confines himself to those two questions, she says, many other issues will be ignored, such as rules, genres, technique, themes, historical background, literary history, and moral issues. Criticism is not its own excuse for being. "Although to feel is of the first importance, to know why one feels is of great importance too" (p. 271). Precisely like Mrs. Wharton, Mrs. Woolf longs for the standards supplied by the great critics of the past, but, unlike Mrs. Wharton, she feels that certain standards are lost to the modern world, so that the critic, reduced to the status of a "common reader" himself, must concentrate on isolating the essential value in each work ("How It Strikes a Contemporary," II: 154). But in-
spiration can be found in the past. Coleridge's notes on Shakespeare, for example, "possess one of the marks which we are apt to discover in the finest art, the power of seeming to bring to light what was already there beforehand, instead of imposing anything from the outside." Hazlitt, as noted above, isolates the essential; and, in writing on Hazlitt, Virginia Woolf herself tried to spear "that little eel in the middle— that marrow— which is one's object in criticism" (Diary, p. 156). "Robinson Crusoe" advises what would at first seem like Spingarn's objective approach:

Our first task, and it is often formidable enough, is to master his /the author's/ perspective. Until we know how the novelist orders his world, the ornaments of that world, which the critics press upon us, the adventures of the writer, to which the biographers draw attention, are superfluous possessions of which we can make no use. All alone we must climb upon the novelist's shoulders and gaze through his eyes until we, too, understand in what order he ranges the large common objects upon which novelists are fated to gaze: man and men; behind them Nature; and above them that power which for convenience and brevity we may call God. (I: 70)

Suzanne Henig observes that Mrs. Woolf heavily revised the original essay on Robinson Crusoe to make this point, which must be considered a critical departure for a writer who so often uses historical and biographical methods. But I see the passage as consistent with her many other discussions of authorial perspective, which require sanity or balance, as discussed in Chapter II, and which imply a process of analy-

6 Henig, pp. 162-63.
sis using any available information, including history and biography, and a standard as potent—even if largely unspoken—as the judicial functions reserved by Mrs. Wharton. Spingarn asks that criticism reflect literature, just as literature reflects nature; both Mrs. Wharton and Mrs. Woolf object to being mere mirrors, and both exercise the power of not only analyzing, but judging what it is that the author has tried to do.

For criticism has a heuristic function. Very much like Matthew Arnold, who saw the function of criticism as creating the proper spiritual and intellectual atmosphere for artists, both Mrs. Wharton and Mrs. Woolf asked that the critic improve the novel. The English novelist, says Mrs. Wharton, has been hampered both in regard to subject (since the English atmosphere works against seeing life both steadily and whole, WF, p. 64) and form (since the English critic has used the word "either as an antithesis to subject or as something that subject puts on like an outer garment," "CF," p. 229). English criticism should help the floundering novelist by defining technique—that which separates the amateurs from the artists ("CF," p. 229). Mrs. Woolf has a similar view of the artist's dependence on his culture, which puts him in a pitiable state at the present time ("The Leaning Tower," II: 162-81). She goes so far as to personify fiction as "a lady who has somehow got herself into trouble,"

perhaps because "nobody grasps her firmly and defines her severely," especially the humble and discursive E. M. Forster ("The Art of Fiction," II: 51-52).

The novelist yearns for objective judgment. Mrs. Wharton's "Cycle of Reviewing," a long complaint against her own reviewers, asks for better criticism for "the writer who thirsts to know how much of the inward vision he has succeeded in making visible to others" (p. 45). Mrs. Woolf's "Reviewing," a comparable complaint, perhaps half-mockingly asks that critics, like doctors, have private consultations with writers, instead of publishing ill-judged diagnoses, to help them improve their work. Yet both writers recognize that any "rules" the critic might draw up are provisional at best. Mrs. Wharton compares them to "a lamp in a mine, or a hand-rail down a black stairway" (WF, p. 42); Mrs. Woolf reminds that "rules may be wrong and must be broken," but notes that nevertheless "they confer dignity and order upon their subject; they admit her to a place in civilized society; they prove that she is worthy of consideration" (II: 52).

But while Mrs. Wharton and Mrs. Woolf basically agree on the function of novelistic criticism, they produce criticism in very different forms. Mrs. Wharton's theory is contained in scattered reviews and one book, The Writing of Fiction, which is a taut examination of categories of novels, meant to offer such technical advice as she feels qualified to make, although it is in fact more a description of master-
pieces than really practical advice. She indulges in no extended analyses of particular works. I am reminded of Percy Lubbock's remark on her conversation that "perhaps there is a contradiction between skating and taking the plunge—and Edith was such a flawless skater." Mrs. Woolf's theory is contained in numerous reviews and essays, which are discursive examinations of, usually, particular works or individual authors, impressionistic attempts to pinpoint the essence of the work, and capture her own complex response to it. I am reminded of Aileen Pippett's reflection that she took hold of an anecdote "as though it were a painted top, tossing it up in the air, setting it spinning, and then describing, not the top, but the radiations it gave off as it whirled around. What began as a plaything ... might end, once she got her hands on it, as the great globe itself, the very platonic form of a top." The contrast is effectively described by both women. Mrs. Wharton herself divided the world into "the Gothically and the classically minded, just as intellectually it is divided into those who rise to the general idea, and those who pause at the particular instance," and, remarks a thoughtful critic of Mrs. Wharton, Robert Morss Lovett, she herself is one of the classically minded. Mrs. Woolf contrasted the continuous, discursive manner of Coleridge with the short "bow-wow" manner of Dr. Johnson, and

---

8 Lubbock, Portrait, p. 98. 9 Pippett, pp. 63-64.

10 Lovett quotes Mrs. Wharton's Italian Backgrounds (1905) in his Edith Wharton, p. 52.
identified herself, in effect, with the spiritual Coleridge ("Coleridge as Critic," p. 67). Mrs. Wharton often denied that she was handing down rules (e.g. WF, pp. 42, 73); Mrs. Woolf often proclaimed the need for rules ("The Art of Fiction," II: 52; "On Re-reading Novels," II: 122-30); but the fact remains that Mrs. Wharton produces the classical "bow-wow," Mrs. Woolf more impressionistic songs.

b. The Function of the Novel

Mrs. Wharton and Mrs. Woolf agree on the basic function of the novel, as they did on the basic function of the criticism of the novel: it is, as Henry James would express it, to give "a personal, a direct impression of life" ("The Art of Fiction," p. 8), to represent life. Paradoxically, it is the "classical" Mrs. Wharton who is shy about stating this traditional position. "It has been so often said that all art is re-presentation—the giving back in conscious form of the shapeless raw material of experience—that one would willingly avoid insisting on such a truism" (WF, p. 16). Mrs. Woolf is more bold. "The novel is the only form of art which seeks to make us believe that it is giving a full and truthful record of the life of a real person. ... We seem to be continuing to live, only in another house or country perhaps" ("Phases of Fiction," II: 99). I agree with Joan Bennett, and apply her point to Edith Wharton as well, that "fiction for Virginia Woolf, as for Jane Austen or George

11 Hoag, esp. pp. 7-8, substantiates this inference.
Eliot, was a representation of life; she never used a character as a symbol nor shaped a story as an allegory.\textsuperscript{12}

Thus both have a vigorous appreciation for "the story." Edith Wharton's "memory rings with the joyous clatter of Dumas the elder, Herman Melville, Captain Marryat and Stevenson," writers of the kind of stories built on "what was already a perfect formula, created in the dawn of time by the world-old appeal: 'Tell us another story!'" (\textit{WF}, p. 68). Virginia Woolf finds the basic appetite of the reader to be "the desire to believe wholly and entirely in something which is fictitious," "our wish to believe" ("Phases of Fiction" II: 57) that gives her a hearty appreciation of Defoe and Scott, and even—until his "bright hardness" fatigues her—Captain Marryat as well ("The Captain's Death Bed," I: 178).

Of course the writing of a "story" involves selection and transformation of life. For Mrs. Wharton "any theory must begin by assuming the need of selection" (\textit{WF}, p. 8), and indeed "the art of rendering life in fiction can never . . . be anything . . . but the disengaging of crucial moments from the welter of existence" (\textit{WF}, p. 14). It is predictable that a writer like Mrs. Wharton, famous for crisp short stories and well-made novels, should stress "selection"; but perhaps

\textsuperscript{12} Bennett, ix. Cf. Leavis, \textit{The Great Tradition}, who observes, without approval, that the main tradition in the English novel (to which both Wharton and Woolf could be said to belong, though Leavis thought Woolf engaged in no more than "Georgian poetizing," p. 150) was to "create a world," not tell moral fables (p. 258).
it should be emphasized for a writer like Mrs. Woolf, famous for her dictum that "life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" ("Modern Fiction," II: 106). Mrs. Wharton patently selects to achieve what Mrs. Woolf would call her "series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged" (II: 106), but Mrs. Woolf requires selection as well. "Life and the Novelist," an essay written in 1926 about the same time that she was pondering the beginning of The Moths, eventually The Waves, aimed at saturating every moment (see Diary, 30 September 1926, p. 100, and the following sixty pages), makes it clear (II: 131-36). Life claims, she writes there, to be the "proper end of fiction," but she is "grossly impure." Thus "the writer's task is to take one thing and let it stand for twenty: a task of danger and difficulty; but only so is the reader relieved of the swarm and confusion of life and branded effectively with the particular aspect which the writer wishes him to see" (II: 135). Mrs. Wharton rather predictably condemns "slice-of-life" and "stream-of-consciousness" theories, which she rather carelessly, as we shall see, assumes based upon "unsorted abundance" (WF, p. 12). Mrs. Woolf, more surprisingly, follows suit. For example, she is disappointed in Dorothy Richardson's representation of Miriam Henderson's consciousness in The Tunnel because "we should perceive in the helter-skelter of flying fragments some unity, significance, or design," but instead "sensations, impressions, ideas and emotions glance off her,
unrelated and unquestioned" (CW, pp. 121-22). She also has reservations about Proust since "the mind cannot be content with holding sensation after sensation passively to itself; something must be done with them; their abundance must be shaped" (II: 83). As suggested in Chapter II, Virginia Woolf's "luminous halo" passage was a "manifesto" which she did not, perhaps even could not, follow in practice, nor could she even follow it to the extent of praising the efforts of Miss Richardson or Proust that to her mind failed to show sufficient artistic selection. Both Mrs. Wharton and Mrs. Woolf gave full credit to the shaping powers of the imagination.

The fact that this selection must include both the inner life and outer facts is easily seen in a brief review of both critics' informal histories of the modern novel. Mrs. Wharton, as discussed above, says modern fiction began when first, "the 'action' of the novel was transferred from the street to the soul," secondly, when the protagonists became recognizable human beings, and thirdly and most importantly, when dramatic action was drawn "as much from the relation of . . . characters to their houses, streets, towns, professions, inherited habits and opinions, as from their fortuitous contacts with each other" (WF, pp. 3-5). She credits Balzac and Stendhal with the first systematic use of this combination of soul and street, inner truth and outer circumstance--"with the solitary exception of Defoe, when he wrote 'Moll Flanders'" (WF, p. 7). Mrs. Woolf also notes
Defoe as the pioneer of the novel in England ("Defoe," I: 63). He is an unconscious artist, dealing with facts, but facts so unerringly selected that they have enormous spiritual significance. "... he deals with the important and lasting side of things and not with the passing and trivial" (I: 67). His facts may be dull, but they add up to a balanced view of life. "Thus Defoe, by reiterating that nothing but a plain earthenware pot stands in the foreground, persuades us to see remote islands and the solitudes of the human soul" ("Robinson Crusoe," I: 74-75).

Mrs. Wharton later summarizes her history another way in The Writing of Fiction: she says that "the novel of psychology was born in France, the novel of manners in England, and that out of their union in the glorious brain of Balzac sprang that strange chameleon-creature, the modern novel..." (WF, p. 61). She then uses psychology and behavior as weights on either side of a scale to weigh individual novels. A novel must not simply be behavior: in fact the crucial moments "need not involve action in the sense of external events; they seldom have, since the scene of conflict was shifted from incident to character" (WF, p. 14); but on the other hand a novel must not be simply psychology, lest it become swamped in "the tedious 'stream of consciousness'" (WF, p. 145). There must be "some recognizable relation to a familiar social or moral standard" (WF, p. 14). Thus she formulates the standard for the English tradition: "... the true orientation of English fiction was away from the
fine-drawn analysis of Richardson, the desultory humours of
Sterne, in the direction of an ample and powerful novel of
manners. . . . good-humour was the atmosphere and irony the
flavour of this great school of observers, from Fielding to
George Eliot" (WF, p. 62).

Mrs. Woolf has a similar recognition of the English
bonhomie. "English fiction from Sterne to Meredith bears
witness to our natural delight in humour and comedy, in the
beauty of the earth, in the activities of the intellect, and
in the splendour of the body" ("Modern Fiction," II: 109-10).
But she singles out Sterne not as a digression from the
mainstream but as the first "modern" English novelist because
he switches concern from the outer to the inner, although
his primary concern remains the outer, "the things themselves"
Wharton's definition of modernity as the realization that
"the bounds of a personality are not reproducible by a sharp
black line, but that each of us flows imperceptibly into ad-
jacent people and things" (WF, p. 7) sounds very like Mrs.
Woolf's "poetry," that kind of perception Sterne achieved
which shifts from personal relations to the impersonal rela-
tions between people and things, in solitude ("The Narrow
Bridge of Art," II: 225), but their various opinions on key
English novels illuminates the difference.

Both Mrs. Wharton and Mrs. Woolf found in Jane Austen
a kind of perfection. Mrs. Wharton compliments "the impec-
cable Jane Austen" on her sense of proportion, that which

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
the greatest artists have (WF, pp. 106-07). She is, indeed, "the norm, the ideal" of the novel of character (WF, p. 128). Mrs. Woolf credits her with a perfection of form, particularly in Pride and Prejudice, that forced the English novel after her into a different direction ("The Novels of George Meredith," I: 231). Using Emma as example, Mrs. Woolf agrees with Wharton that "always the stress is laid upon character" ("Jane Austen," I: 148) in a triumphant combination of the inner and outer. "It has the permanent quality of literature. Think away the surface animation, the likeness to life, and there remains, to provide a deeper pleasure, an exquisite discrimination of human values." But Mrs. Woolf finds even more than that—"the more abstract art which, in the ballroom scene, so varies the emotions and proportions the parts that it is possible to enjoy it, as one enjoys poetry, for itself, and not as a link which carries the story this way and that" (I: 148). Mrs. Wharton stops with the study of character, satisfied. Mrs. Woolf goes on to discern burgeoning "poetry," particularly in Jane Austen's last novel Persuasion, and to forecast what Austen might have done had she lived longer.

She would have trusted less . . . to dialogue and more to reflection to give us a knowledge of her characters. Those marvellous little speeches . . . that shorthand, hit-or-miss method which contains chapters of analysis and psychology, would have become too crude to hold all that she now perceived of the complexity of human nature. She would have devised a method, clear and composed as ever, but deeper and more suggestive, for conveying not only what people say, but what they leave unsaid; not only what they are, but what life is." (I: 153)
Virginia Woolf found in both Sterne and Austen what matched her own interest in "poetry." She remarks that Austen "would have been the forerunner of Henry James and of Proust" (I: 153), and, suggests Guiguet, of Virginia Woolf herself.  

Mrs. Wharton saw Austen on "the very edge of a tidal wave of prudery" (WF, p. 62), and considers the Victorians primarily in terms of their refusal to see life "whole." Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Charlotte Bronte, Trollope and George Eliot ("perhaps born with the richest gifts of any English novelist since Thackeray," WF, pp. 63-64) remain below Balzac, Stendhal, and Tolstoy, although the English bon-homie gives them what might almost be called superior "good manners" (WF, pp. 64-65). Mrs. Wharton observed in a 1902 review of Leslie Stephen's biography of George Eliot that "the novelist of manners needs a clear eye and a normal range of vision to keep his picture in perspective; and the loss of perspective is the central defect of George Eliot's later books" ("George Eliot," p. 251). Geoffrey Walton comments that Mrs. Wharton's "Criticism of Fiction" anticipates Mrs. Woolf's comments on the immaturity of much nineteenth-century English fiction. Indeed Virginia Woolf seems to echo Edith Wharton with her distaste for Eliot's self-conscious didacticism ("George Eliot," I: 201-03). But Mrs.  

---

13 Guiguet, p. 165. Bernard Blackstone makes the astounding suggestion that "we feel that in The Waves Virginia Woolf succeeds in doing what Jane Austen did not live to do" (p. 185).

Woolf considered *Middlemarch* "the magnificent book which with all its imperfections is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people" (I: 201), and it is that phrase that Charles Du Bos quotes to sum up his friend Edith Wharton's and his own appreciation of Eliot's achievements.  

Both Mrs. Wharton and Mrs. Woolf isolate Dickens as a one-dimensional, but fascinating, story-teller. Wharton grudgingly admired his characters, which are unique in being living characters, having "visibility," though they are solely "dramatic," in the sense of living only in their story instead of, like Tolstoy's characters, living "a life overflowing the bounds of even the vast scene which their creator conceived for them" ("Visibility in Fiction," pp. 482-83). Mrs. Woolf also admired his extravagant fecundity in the creation of characters, but likewise decried the fact that they "exist not in detail," and require the reader to be creators ("David Copperfield," I: 193). The Diary records that she discerns vaguely "how the emphasis, the caricature of these innumerable scenes, forever forming character, descend from the stage. Literature—that is the shading, suggesting, as of Henry James, hardly used. All bold and coloured . . . not highly creative: not suggestive" (13 April 1939, pp. 301-02). Not, in short, "poetry."

It is that issue of "poetry" that separates the two critics on Emily Brontë. Brandishing the permanent value of living characters related rationally to general laws of the

---

universe, Mrs. Wharton finds *Wuthering Heights* concerned with a "houseful of madmen" (*Permanent Values in Fiction,* p. 604). Mrs. Woolf, on the contrary, thinks *Wuthering Heights* one of the great novels of the language because of its pervasive "poetry," a mood suffusing the entire book (*Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights,* I: 189-90, "Phases of Fiction," II: 95-96). Emily Brontë's, then, is "the rarest of all powers. She could free life from its dependence on facts; with a few touches indicate the spirit of a face so that it needs no body; by speaking of the moor make the wind blow and the thunder roar" (I: 190).

Mrs. Wharton, in short, looks for vivid novels of character and manners, so that her favorites emerge as *Emma* or *The Egoist* for character, *Le Père Goriot* or *Madame Bovary* for situation or drama, and *War and Peace,* *Vanity Fair,* or *L'Éducation Sentimentale,* for the rare triumphant amalgamations of character and situation (*WF,* pp. 146-47). Mrs. Woolf looks for "poetry," so that her favorites are *Tristram Shandy,* for the poetry of language, *War and Peace,* for that of situation, *Wuthering Heights* and *Moby Dick* for that of diffuse mood (*Phases of Fiction,* II: 93-96). But the two women shared a tremendous admiration (for different reasons) for a series of novels which, for each, represents the triumph of the modern novel, *À la recherche du temps perdu.* But before examining their highly significant views on Proust, let us examine three factors—to which each accorded varying degrees of assent—which make the contemporary novel significant—
ly different from what came before.

c. The Contemporary Scene

Mrs. Wharton and Mrs. Woolf both recognize a tendency toward formalization which distinguishes the modern novel from its predecessors. That tendency centers around the theory and practice of Henry James, which set forth an approach to the novel which must either be followed, or rebelled against.

As discussed above, Mrs. Wharton credits James with being one of the first theorizers of the novel, and ascribes to a simplified version of his theory of moral subject and appropriate form, with particular emphasis on the limited point of view. Her first public occasion to do so was her review of Percy Lubbock's 1920 edition of the letters of Henry James. It is interesting that it is a discussion of James's critical theory, which she says is much more accessible in the letters than in the abstruse prefaces, rather than a discussion of their friendship, represented in the edition (although she does not say so) by twenty-seven letters to herself. Her discussion of his emphasis on subject and the organic form growing out of it reads like an outline for The Writing of Fiction, written during the next several years. Then, as she would again in The Writing of Fiction and A

16 See The Letters of Henry James, ed. Percy Lubbock (New York: Scribner's, 1920), 2 vols. Millicent Bell says that those twenty-seven letters to Mrs. Wharton are "riddled with ellipses," thus maintaining her friends' discretion about her private life (pp. 9-10).
Backward Glance, she takes James to task for rigidifying his theory: "to turn the difficulty created by his growing reluctance to 'shift the consciousness' he invented the 'chorus' of unnaturally inquisitive and ubiquitous hangers on . . ." (p. 202), the Assinghams. Awed as Mrs. Wharton was by James's critical acumen, she seems always to have thought he but built "intellectual houses for the next generation to live in" (WF, p. 117). Her last word on James, Chapter VIII of A Backward Glance, seems almost condescending. Although she records a strong admiration for the early novels like Daisy Miller and The Portrait of a Lady, and even notes The Golden Bowl as a testament to a deepening of those powers that created them (BG, pp. 172, 174), she repeats her criticism of his "predestined design, and design, in his strict geometrical sense, is to me one of the least important things in fiction" (p. 190). She also charges that his Wings of the Dove and Golden Bowl omit the atmosphere of daily life, quite unconsciously (pp. 190-91).

But whatever Mrs. Wharton's ambivalences toward the work of a man who so awed her as a beginning writer and who became an intimate friend, she did feel that he had articulated the crucial principles of the novel and that she did owe him a clear literary debt, which has been examined exhaustively. Virginia Woolf's attitude toward James is less clear. An instructive parallel to Mrs. Wharton is her own review of Lubbock's edition of the letters (I: 277-85).

17 M. Bell, Part Two, "The Literary Relation."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
I am reminded of her comment on Goldsmith’s essays, that "if he thinks he thinks in the round. An idea at once dresses itself up in flesh and blood and becomes a human being" (I: 109). Mrs. Woolf visualizes James as a young man in Europe trying to decide where he should live—her realization of the idea that James is an observer so detached and rootless that his "perspective" is distorted. A certain asperity in the later letters suggests to her that "the effects of seclusion are not altogether benign" (I: 282). But, she seems to hasten to add, his contribution to literature has been incalculable, but her description of that contribution is vague at best: "something is overcome, something dark and dense glows in splendour, . . . as if before our eyes the crown of long-deferred completion and culmination swung slowly into place" (I: 283).

"Chapters," she says, "might be filled with comment and attempted analysis of this late and mighty flowering" (I: 283). They have indeed, but Virginia Woolf adds little to them. An excellent opportunity to do so would have been her review of Joseph Warren Beach’s *Method of Henry James* (TLS, 26 December 1918, p. 655), but she spends half of that article explaining that she is a "fickle Jacobean" because she feels the chill of his "vulgarity" in the last three novels, his "American love of old furniture."18 The other half commends his priestly devotion to art: "one had almost rather...

---

18 Cf. Diary, 12 Sept. 1921, pp. 38-39, calling The Wings of the Dove "very highly American . . . in the determination to be highly bred, and the slight obtuseness as to what high breeding is."
read what he meant to do than read what he actually did do." Then she briefly suggests as the "important side" his aesthetic design (presumably that very design that Edith Wharton so deplored): "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," that which, I presume, James called "the figure in the carpet." She does not explore James's method, or even evaluate Beach's attempt to do so. She recognizes that he has one: her 1920 review of Percy Lubbock's *Craft of Fiction* ("On Re-reading Novels," II: 122-30) seconds Lubbock's conclusion that "the only real scholar in the art" in a sense outdoes his predecessors, although her praise for his mastery is qualified by the observation that his, and Flaubert's, "maturity" is bought with a loss of "vigour and splendour" (II: 128). The fact that she reviewed *The Method of Henry James* and *The Craft of Fiction* holds her responsible for knowing in outline what James's technique meant, but, unlike Edith Wharton, she is not interested in it: she is concerned instead with his angle of vision, and she does not care for it.

"Phases of Fiction" (1927) is a convenient summary of her ambivalent attitude. James is discussed as a "psychologist" who has in *What Maisie Knew* lost the external world in his attempt "to find an equivalent for the processes of the mind" (II: 81). The indirect subtlety has "a fineness, a sweetness, which the more direct writers fail to give us"
(p. 82): it provides a new perspective on ordinary things as does illness or travel. But, "either through a feeling of timidity or prudery or through a lack of imaginative audacity, Henry James diminishes the interest and importance of his subject in order to bring about a symmetry which is dear to him," a wrestling of the subject matter that readers resent (p. 82). Further, we wish to "be free from the perpetual tutelage of the author's presence, his arrangements, his anxieties" (II: 83). She had made the same point earlier about *The Wings of the Dove*, where "instead of feeling the artist you merely feel the man who is posing the subject" (12 September 1921, p. 39), and about *The Golden Bowl*, which she thought had "a slight theme on which to spend so much ingenuity." 19

Once again it is clear that Edith Wharton looks for a moral subject worked into drama by the interaction of character and situation, and that Virginia Woolf looks for poetry, a balanced vision of reality itself—although it is clear that "subject" remains crucial for Mrs. Woolf as well. Perhaps it is because Henry James's novels were moving from drama to poetry, because his work is a transition between the traditional novel of manners loved by Edith Wharton and the explorations of consciousness and reality demanded by

See Ellen Douglass Leyburn, "Virginia Woolf's Judgment of Henry James," *MFS*, 5 (Summer 1959), 166-69, and Novak, esp. pp. 4-6, for the suggestion that Mrs. Woolf's artistic objections to James center on his dramatic plots, inimical to her lyrical intentions.
Virginia Woolf, that the novels got the wholehearted admiration of neither, perhaps not even their close attention.  

In addition to the tendency toward formalization of the novel led by Henry James, both Mrs. Wharton and Mrs. Woolf recognize a contrary tendency toward formlessness in the novel, led by the magnificent "Russians," known in England since the 1880's, but newly popular after the beginning of Constance Garnett's translation in 1912.

Edith Wharton finds in them, particularly Tolstoy, supreme examples of the character and situation she has always admired. Her concern with the Russians is first manifested rather cautiously in "The Criticism of Fiction" (1914), shortly after the initial appearance of Mrs. Garnett's work. It warns the writer not to be overwhelmed by their undisciplined "life," and to bear in mind that Tolstoy and Dostoevsky may have produced their effect in spite of "their seeming wastefulness of method" (though Tolstoy's, she says, is almost always for deliberate artistic purpose). She cautions that "vague bulk" (as of James's "loose baggy monsters")


21 Frierson, pp. xiii, 135-40; Hafley, pp. 11-12.
"may produce less impression of weight and solidity than a firmly outlined form," by which she means "the subject deeply pondered, discerned, and released from encumbering trivialities" (p. 230). By the time she wrote *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), she seems to have discarded her reservations. Tolstoy might be said to dominate the book. She offers him as an example of an author of complete vision, both steady and whole (p. 64); he is a master of the passage of time (pp. 96-98) and of proportion (p. 105). He has written a supreme novel of situation, "The Kreutzer Sonata" (p. 127) and two supreme amalgamations of character and situation, *Anna Karenina* (p. 135) and *War and Peace* (p. 146). A later essay terms him the master of character-drawing ("Visibility in Fiction," pp. 486-88). It is predictable that she should appreciate Tolstoy more than the less "rational" and "objective" Dostoevsky, but "Permanent Values in Fiction" indicates that she could enjoy *The Idiot* by concentrating on the effect of the abnormal people upon the normal (p. 604). In *The Writing of Fiction* she says his mind is not chaotic just because his subject matter is! (p. 15). Only once does she credit the Russians with an innovation:

... when the great Russians (who owe to French culture much more than is generally conceded) took over that neat thing, the French nouvelle, they gave it the additional dimension it most often lacked. In any really good subject one has only to probe deep enough to come to tears; and the Russians almost always dig to that depth. The result has been to give to the short story, as French and Russian art have combined to shape it, great closeness of texture with profundity of form. Instead of a loose web spread over the surface of life they have made
it, at its best, a shaft driven straight into the heart of human experience. (WF, pp. 35-36)

And that "innovation," it is clear, is only greater success in the traditional aim of probing a moral subject.

Virginia Woolf, in contrast, sees the Russians as a spiritual force altering the course of English literature. "A Minor Dostoevsky," a review of Constance Garnett's translation of The Gambler (TLS, 11 October 1917, p. 489), describes Dostoevsky's hyper-emotional scenic method in a second-rate work, where "every scene either ends or threatens to end with an attack of unconsciousness," with no central controlling purpose like Tolstoy's. She seems irritated by a method similar to the one she would follow in Jacob's Room:

Sometimes in these stories it seems as if from exhaustion he could not concentrate his mind sufficiently to exclude those waifs and strays of the imagination--people met in the street, porters, cabmen--who wander in and begin to talk and reveal their souls not that they are wanted, but because Dostoevsky knows all about them and is too tired to keep them to himself. (p. 489)

This susceptibility to every man's soul is something new.

In 1918 Mrs. Woolf charges in "On Re-reading Meredith" that a new study of Meredith by J. H. E. Crees is inadequate be-

22 Note a similar contrast between French and Russian methods in Virginia Woolf's "Essay in Criticism," written two years later:

... Men Without Women consists of short stories in the French rather than in the Russian manner. The great French masters, Mérimeé and Maupassant, made their stories as self-conscious and compact as possible... The Tchekov method is, of course, the very opposite of this. Everything is cloudy and vague, loosely trailing rather than tightly furled. (II: 256-57)
cause it fails to take into account the revolutionary Russian view that hit England after Meredith, "larger, saner, and much more profound than ours" (I: 233), penetrating the human heart to new depths. In "The Russian Point of View" (I: 238-46), first published in the first Common Reader (1925), she is openly irritated with Russian "soul" in Dostoevsky, who is obsessed with "this perplexed liquid, this cloudy, yeasty, precious stuff, the soul" (I: 244). He reveals "a new panorama of the human mind," "streaked, involved, inextricably confused," not arranged in scenes in the English manner (I: 243). The English reader finds such "soul" alien, antipathetic, because it lacks comedy. Furthermore, "it has slight connection with the intellect. It is confused, diffuse, tumultuous, incapable, it seems, of submitting to the control of logic or the discipline of poetry" (I: 242). Tolstoy remains for Mrs. Woolf "the greatest of all novelists" (I: 244) because he is dominated by "life" rather than "soul" (I: 245). But he finally chills us even as Dostoevsky cannot by questioning life after he has fully enjoyed it (I: 245-46). "Modern Fiction" (1919) had made the same basic point: because the Russians are, unlike the Edwardians, not "materialistic," they demand our attention, but they are ultimately too sad for the English temper (II: 109-10).

By 1923 the effect of Dostoevsky is clear. Her private answer to Bennett's charge that she had not created real characters in Jacob's Room is "the old post-Dostoievsky argument," "that character is dissipated into shreds now"
(Diary, 19 June 1923, p. 56). She and T. S. Eliot had pri-

vately, perhaps half-jokingly, said that Dostoevsky had been
"the ruin of English literature" (Diary, 26 September 1922,
p. 49). Her formal answer—this time not mentioning the
Russians, although "Modern Fiction" and the remarks in the
Diary make it clear how much they bear on the issues—is "Mr.
Bennett and Mrs. Brown," where "Mrs. Brown" is reduced to
the shreds of the author's private, and undependable, sen-
sibility. "Phases of Fiction" (1927) sums up her attitudes
toward Russian spirituality. She condemns Dostoevsky as a
psychologist presenting a "crude surface," under which "all
is chaos and complication" (II: 86), so that our only under-
standing of the violent characters when it is all over is
"so perhaps madmen act" (II: 88). "To brush aside civiliza-
tion and plunge into the depths of the soul is not really to
enrich" (II: 87). She exalts Tolstoy, however, as a supreme
poet of situation, achieving his beauty and intensity in a
way natural to the novel, that of having the characters ex-
press the "poetry" in their own words, immersed in the situ-

Thus both Mrs. Wharton and Mrs. Woolf are disquieted
by Dostoevsky's intense and formless explorations of abnor-
mal psychology, and both are completely won by Tolstoy's
wide-ranging portraits of life. Tolstoy is rich enough to
give each what she seeks—Mrs. Wharton, "situation" and
"character," and Mrs. Woolf, poetic vision of life itself.
The significant difference is that Mrs. Wharton sees a pro-
found supplement to the traditional quest for the deeply felt moral subject, while Mrs. Woolf sees a revolution in perspective, enlarged now to include the "soul," a concept that forever alters the English novel, and a concept that disturbs her.

That is the crux of the problem. In addition to the tendencies toward formalism and formlessness in the novel, illustrated by the preciosity of Henry James and the explosiveness of the Russians, both writers were confronted with dramatic changes in fundamental assumptions about man. Unlike Mrs. Wharton, Mrs. Woolf sees a fundamental change in the realities that the modern novelist has as his task to represent: "life itself" has changed. "Modern Fiction" (1919) registers her dissatisfaction with the "Edwardians" because they deal with the body, not the soul, and have left inadequate conventions for their successors, the "Georgians," to use. Hardy, Conrad, some Hudson offer a little help. Joyce and other Georgians try, but they are too centred in the self. The Russians offer some guidance, as exemplified in the "vague" and "inconclusive" pattern of emotions in Chekhov's "Gusev," but Mrs. Woolf comes to believe their sombreness too alien to the English temper. The issue is her new awareness of "the dark places of psychology," figured forth as the "luminous halo," the "shower of atoms," a vision of the world which simply will not fit into two and thirty chapters.

"Modern Fiction" points the way to Jacob's Room, con-
ceived and written shortly afterwards. It employs a fragmented method, trying to record the atoms as they fall, to explore the mystery of Jacob's personality, a feat performed quite deliberately but with some qualms. Arnold Bennett, perhaps still smarting from Mrs. Woolf's aspersions in "Modern Fiction," charged that it showed Virginia Woolf could not create character. Her answer, admittedly self-defense against a criticism that exacerbated her self-doubts and hurt deeply, was "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," her strongest assertion about the changed nature of the modern world. She puts forth the admittedly "debatable" point that "in or about December, 1910, human character changed" (I: 320), one of those slogans frequently quoted out of context as proof of Mrs. Woolf's radical stance. It is important to notice that the introduction is full of qualifications: Mr. Bennett, she is "well aware," has lured her into making "some very sweeping and some very vague assertions" (I: 320). The date is only "arbitrary," she says, for the change was not sudden or complete. Her proof is very vague indeed: the writings of Samuel Butler and George Bernard Shaw, and "the character of one's cook." "All human relations have shifted," apparently in the direction of equality, "between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children," leading to corresponding changes in "religion, conduct, politics, and literature" (I: 320-21). But, she says, enough of "analysing and abstracting" (although she has actually been rather comically concrete): she will turn to a simple story of "Mrs.
Brown" to show that the materialistic description of Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy is utterly inadequate to capture that worthy woman who is in fact "life itself." She also makes the point that not even she herself can do it, although, as noted in Chapter II, her attempt is sometimes taken to be her best effort.

What Virginia Woolf protests is the Edwardian neglect of the inner life. Perhaps it is because their accumulations of facts and their reforming attitude offend her aesthetic sensibilities; but it is also because she was acutely conscious that the age was changing, that attention had shifted from the outer to the inner. That, for Virginia Woolf, is "modern," whether in the works of Laurence Sterne ("The Sentimental Journey," I: 97-99) or James Joyce ("Modern Fiction," II: 106-07). "An Essay in Criticism" declares as one of her critical assumptions that "moderns make us aware of what we feel subconsciously; they are truer to their own experience. . ." (II: 253). Her insistence in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" that human beings are not readily understandable, that man is not a rational entity, is often associated with William James,23 Freud,24 Bergson, at least Bergson as filtered through Proust,25 and Joyce,26 but such influences

23 Allen, pp. 3-4; Humphrey, pp. 1-14; Richter, pp. 9-10, 20-22.
26 Edel, esp. pp. 190-91.
(as the critics who trace them are the first to recognize) are impossible to pinpoint. The idea that consciousness is not logical, but a "luminous halo" of sensations, was "in the air," the dominant view of a generation: it has been persuasively argued, particularly by Jean Guiguet, that Virginia Woolf here speaks for an entire generation determined to discover man as a totality, on all levels, and, most importantly, in all his mystery. Robert Humphrey generalizes about the "stream-of-consciousness" writers:

... these writers were influenced by the broader concepts of a "new psychology" and a "new philosophy" -- a nebulous label for all postbehavioristic and non-positivistic thinking, including any philosophy of psychology which emphasized man's inner mental and emotional life (e.g., Gestalt psychology, psychoanalytical psychology, Bergsonian ideas of durée and the elan vital, religious mysticism, much symbolic logic, Christian existentialism, etc.). It is this background which led to the great difference between Zola's subject matter and Joyce's; between Balzac's and Dorothy Richardson's. Yet as novelists all of these writers were concerned with the problem of characterization... the stream-of-consciousness novelists, were, like the naturalists, trying to depict life accurately; but unlike the naturalists, the life they were concerned with was the individual's psychic life.27

Mrs. Wharton was concerned with the inner life as well: she dates the beginning of the novel at that point in French fiction when "the 'action' of the novel was transferred from the street to the soul" (WF, p. 3), but is careful to add that "each of us flows imperceptibly into adjac-

---


28 Humphrey, pp. 8-9.
cent people and things" (p. 7), so that conclusions on the inner life are to be drawn from the interaction of characters with other characters, and with their environment. She analyzes her characters, assuming rather confidently that "in the world of normal men life is conducted, at least in its decisive moments, on fairly coherent and selective lines" (WF, p. 13). She is clearly a rationalist. Robert Morss Lovett places her:

Mrs. Wharton belongs with the English novelists who have relied upon conscious intelligence as opposed to sentiment and instinct, with Jane Austen, George Eliot, George Meredith, and Henry James, rather than with Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, and Thomas Hardy. Among her present contemporaries she continues to represent that school. She has been little affected by the resurgence of the unconscious through the teachings of Freud. She gives her characters sharp, clear, consistent outlines, as opposed to the mysticism and dissociation which is so marked a feature in the characters of Mr. D. H. Lawrence, Miss May Sinclair, and Mrs. Virginia Woolf.29

Percy Lubbock suggests that Walter Berry had an undue influence over Mrs. Wharton's intellectual life, and "she was to be left high and dry, for many a long year to come, upon the established rationalism of his day."30 Not attracted by intellectual speculation at all, she took no interest in the philosophical discoveries of her own day, not even the American ones to which she had direct access. As Lubbock puts it, "the story of her intellectual adventures, as told by herself, contains no mention of the name of William James."31 If she is to be linked with any philosophical inquiry at

---

29 Lovett, p. 67.  30 Lubbock, Portrait, p. 49.
31 Ibid., p. 44.
all, it is, as discussed above, to the New Humanists, concerned more with re-establishing reason as a guide to behavior than plumbing its subconscious springs. She did not, to my knowledge, read Freud. Her only reference to Bergson is, tellingly, an anecdote about a dinner party. She recounts in *A Backward Glance* how she asks M. Bergson, who is rather uninterested, why she has no memory for poetry.

"... his reply was distinctly disappointing, "*Mais c'est précisément parce que vous êtes éblouie"* ("It's just because you are dazzled"), he answered quietly... It was only afterward that I saw he had really said all there was to say: that the gift of precision in ecstasy (the best definition I can find for poetry) is probably almost as rare in the appreciator as in the creator... (p. 170)

This formulation of classicism seems to be Mrs. Wharton's sole legacy from her distinguished contemporary.

Despite her theoretical position that the modern novel is a "chameleon-creature" capable of infinite changes, Mrs. Wharton has little tolerance for experiments. "The Criticism of Fiction" (1914) states her basic assumption about them: "to imagine that form can ever be dispensed with is like saying that wine can be drunk without something to drink it from" (p. 230). She clearly stands with James on the issue of art as a formal organization of life, assuming that the experimenters are "naturalistic" in wanting to record life just as it is. The *Writing of Fiction* (1925)

---

32 See Askew, esp. pp. 155-57; Nevius, Ch. XII, "A Question of Limits"; and Pitlick, Ch. I.

33 See Pitlick, p. 1, for the suggestion that "precision in ecstasy" epitomizes Mrs. Wharton's life and art.

34 Hoffman, pp. 1-7.
represents stream-of-consciousness writers as under the delusion that they are doing something new, when in fact they are only warming up the nineteenth century French tranche de vie and adding some mental reactions, fancying that "unsorted abundance" of reactions is a subject worth doing (p. 12). The present tendency toward anarchy in fiction comes, she says, from the distrust of technique and the fear of being unoriginal: "one is almost tempted to say that in certain schools formlessness is now regarded as the first condition of form" (p. 14). Most contemporary writers, in the inevitable reaction against arbitrary plot, either become swamped in consciousness, or preoccupied with trivial details, neglecting what I called "drama" in Chapter I, the appropriate interaction of character and situation. "... the incident, insignificant in itself, must illustrate some general law, and turn on some deep movement of the soul. If the novelist wants to hang his drama on a button, let it at least be one of Lear's" (p. 146).

Two of Mrs. Wharton's last critical articles prove that she retained her early belief of 1914 that the experimental novelists neglected form entirely, and not out of any belief in a "new psychology" or "new philosophy," but rather out of artistic sloth. "Tendencies in Modern Fiction" (1934) mentions no names, but charges that stream-of-consciousness fiction is a trend "chiefly toward the amorphous and the agglutinative," discarding character, action, indeed, any kind of discrimination, because "it is easier to note the confused
drift of subconscious sensation than to single out the conscious thoughts and deliberate actions which are the key to character, and to the author's reason for depicting that character" (p. 434). "Permanent Values in Fiction" (1934) mentions several names, "Mr. Joyce and Mrs. Woolf" among them, as contraverting the very definition of the novel, once known to be "a work of fiction containing a good story about well-drawn characters." Following a rather ominous suggestion that "practical interests," a base commercialism, is behind the neglect of traditional procedures, she implies that modern writers let their characters "follow unhindered the devious ways of experience" (p. 603). Younger novelists also wrongly imagine that "abnormal or highly specialized characters offer a richer field than the normal and current varieties" (p. 604).

The two essays are contemptuous. Avoiding any reference to specific texts, the arguments sound merely querulous. Leon Edel's conclusion to The Psychological Novel, 1900-1950, an excellent study first envisioned and sketched out in 1928 when the experiments were in full swing and when a sensibility molded by Henry James was still likely to be shocked by Woolf and Joyce, is in effect an intelligent refutation of Mrs. Wharton's shrill objections--based on a sound appreciation of her own Jamesian theoretical values! Edel there criticizes readers who dislike the subjects of these

35 Edel, Ch. XI, "The Image and the Mirror," esp. pp. 210-15. Subsequent references in this paragraph will be identified by page number within the text.
new novels, suggesting that they withdraw, if they must, as they would from an unpleasant drawing-room; who say that the old forms are enough ("so much an appeal for turning the novel into something rigid and static that it can only be dismissed as puerile," p. 211); and who say that psychological novels are "morbid" (since even the traditional novel deals at times with morbidity, which, by the way, often sharpens artistic vision). Quoting Henry James's optimistic note that "till the world is an unpeopled void there will be an image in the mirror" (p. 213), Edel asserts that "art thrives best on the variousness of life and on a search for new forms and new techniques" (p. 214). It is to be wished that Mrs. Wharton had read A Portrait of the Artist, Ulysses, Mrs. Dalloway, even The Waves, with some recognition of "the collaborative nature of novel-reading" described by Edel (p. 210), for there she might have discovered that the abundance was sorted, after all, even if not on the familiar "fairly coherent and selective lines."

In addition to the broad philosophical change from certainty to uncertainty, the outer to the inner, the focus on "the dark places of psychology," Virginia Woolf's critical theory took general account of certain sociological changes. Most broadly, she recognized social and political changes that prevented writers from having the smug unconsciousness of their privileged position that Scott and Austen had. "The Leaning Tower" (II: 162-81), read in 1940 to the Workers' Educational Association, divides English writers into

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
three groups—those until 1914, blessed with material prosperity and corresponding artistic abundance, so secure in the class system that they were unconscious of it, and oblivious to unsettling things like wars of the Empire; those between 1914 and 1925, represented by Desmond McCarthy (surely epitomizing the "Bloomsbury Group"), still "aristocrats" and concerned with aesthetic emotions and personal relations; and those between 1925 and 1939 whose "tower," or upbringing and education, is tilted due to enormous social changes, represented by the war, so that they are now acutely self-conscious, angry, and desirous of nothing more than unity. It is impossible not to be concerned with politics now, she says (a prophetic stance on the eve of World War II). Had it been published when he wrote in 1942 Mark Schorer might well have used this essay as his text in "The Chronicle of Doubt," devoted to the "literature of terror" evoked from Virginia Woolf and her contemporaries by the horrors of the war instead of her poignant, but more peculiarly personal, suicide note.

More specifically, Virginia Woolf was concerned with the social changes operating on women writers. A Room of One's Own (1928) insists that to write a woman must have a room of her own and £500 a year, as well as the university education currently denied her. When free, a woman must write like a poet, examining things in themselves.  

36 On Mrs. Woolf's feminism see J. B. Batchelor, "Feminism in Virginia Woolf," from English, 17 (Spring
Edith Wharton was just as aware of social change. She grew up in Old New York very near the top of a social hierarchy she lived to see crumble. Her early novels, notably *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), and *The Custom of the Country* (1913), contain a great deal of criticism of her "set" and its values. But World War I, which Mrs. Wharton spent in active service to France, seems to have opened her eyes to the value of social tradition as a means of preserving order in the world. In 1919 she published *French Ways and Their Meaning* to serve as an introductory course in French culture to American soldiers abroad, which defines the good society by means of reverence, continuity, taste, and intellectual honesty—those ideals which led Mrs. Wharton to make her home in France.37 Louis Auchincloss remarks that "the picture that emerges, quite unintentionally, is of a nation chained to ancient forms and observances which could hardly have survived four years of trench warfare with the first military power of Europe.38 But, however slanted, the little book signals a change to conserva-

---

1968), rpt. *VW: 20th Century Views*, pp. 169-79. I agree with his contention that she is less interested in political feminism than in her private "consciousness of what it is to be a woman, both as a member of society and as an individual and artist" (p. 179). See also Cynthia Ozick, "Mrs. Virginia Woolf," *Commentary*, 56 (August 1973), 33-44, for the idea that Woolf was a "classical" feminist, seeking not liberation but "access to a unitary culture" (p. 43).

37 For a good discussion of those ideals and their application to the "republic of the spirit" sought throughout her fiction, see Nevius, Ch. V, pp. 78-98.

tism. "When I was young," she would write in A Backward Glance, "it used to seem to me that the group in which I grew up was like an empty vessel into which no new wine would ever again be poured. Now I see that one of its uses lay in preserving a few drops of an old vintage too rare to be savoured by a youthful palate; and I should like to atone for my unappreciativeness by trying to revive that faint fragrance" (p. 5). After the war such novels as The Age of Innocence and Hudson River Bracketed lovingly delineate the old ways. 39

Edith Wharton, then, was as aware as Virginia Woolf of social change and the horrors of war (although I can find no evidence of a parallel concern with her "womanhood" in a world of men, a situation she apparently relished). But she looked to the old forms to retrieve certainty, while Virginia Woolf looked to "poetry," the attempt to overcome the fragmented self by looking outward at things in themselves, reality. This fundamental difference is neatly illustrated by their reactions to their great contemporary, Marcel Proust.

d. Proust

Mrs. Wharton's championship of Proust in Part V of The Writing of Fiction reminds me of John Ruskin's defense of Turner: neither, I think, fully appreciates the revolu-

39 The Buccaneers, a novel left unfinished at her death, might, however, have shown new understanding of the younger generation. See Lyde, pp. 17-20; and Edmund Wilson, "Justice to Edith Wharton," from The Wound and the Bow (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1947), rpt. WV: 20th Century Views, pp. 30-31.
tionary elements of his subject because the works rest on a solid "classical" foundation. At least in the early volumes of À la recherche du temps perdu Proust's care is such that Mrs. Wharton can admire the careful selection and consequent form. Since initial publication of "Du côté de chez Swann" she feels that "the conception of the art of fiction, as it had taken shape during the previous half-century, has been unsettled by a series of experiments, each one too promptly heralded as the final and only way of novel-writing" (WF, p. 153). An unexpected result, she observes, is to "transfer Proust, who ten or twelve years ago seemed to many an almost unintelligible innovator, back to his rightful place in the great line of classic tradition" (p. 153). "All his newest and most arresting effects have been arrived at through the old way of selection and design" (pp. 154-55). The radical effect was due to "his desultory manner and parenthetical syntax, and chiefly because of the shifting of emphasis resulting from his extremely personal sense of values" (p. 155). He scrutinizes consciousness, but he develops it into novelistic drama.

No one else has carried as far the analysis of half-conscious states of mind, obscure associations of thought and gelatinous fluctuations of mood; but long and closely as he dwells on them he never loses himself in the submarine jungle in which his lantern gropes. Though he arrives at his object in so round-about a way, that object is always to report the conscious, purposive conduct of his characters. (pp. 155-56)

He fulfills the basic requirement of fiction: his characters live. His extraordinary brooding and planning (quickly dis-
timated from mechanical "plot") imbue his narrative with "the same feeling of impending fatality as the first bars of the Fifth Symphony," "the footfall of Destiny" (p. 161). He had "a peculiar duality of vision": he lost himself in each episode, but kept "his hands on the main threads of the design" (p. 165). Her only criticism is occasional moral lapses, due perhaps to his lack of courage, a personal charge against this extraordinary writer which she hastens to withdraw (pp. 171-78).

It is amazing that Mrs. Wharton could have read the "Overture" to Du côté de chez Swann without commenting on its uses of time, given Bergsonian expansion and contraction, and point of view, the extraordinary narrator. Like Sophy Viner, Mrs. Wharton concentrates in these twenty-seven pages of The Writing of Fiction on the "story," the characters, which, even if encompassing "those depths of soul beyond the soul's own guessing" (p. 169), like the figures of Shakespeare and Tolstoy, hardly begin to touch upon the "remoter imaginative issues" connected with Proust's epic treatment of time and memory. But she asks that a novel be "a work of fiction containing a good story about well-drawn characters," and she extracts that from amidst the "inmost tremors, waverings, and contradictions" of Proust's narrative (p. 155).

Nine years later Mrs. Wharton was asked by Saturday Review to write a piece on Proust. She was on holiday in Scotland, without books, but she consented to write her recollections under the assumption that "after all, what con-
stitutes the ultimate proof of creative genius but the de-
gree to which it penetrates and becomes a part of the intel-
ligence on which it acts?" ("A Reconsideration of Proust," p. 233). She writes that her opinions are largely unchanged. "I thought then, and I think now, that his intellectual speculations hampered his genius as a story-teller, and that the mist of Bergsonian metaphysics, which now and then thick-
ens to a fog, not only impedes the progress of his tale but frequently blurs the vivid faces of his protagonists" (p. 233). But she claims to have changed her mind about one thing, that he is an innovator, although in fact she repeats the observation made in The Writing of Fiction. "Indeed, it is truer to say that he ends the long and magnificent line of nineteenth-century novelists, than that he opens a new era" (p. 234). For his real claim to greatness, she repeats, is his living characters. Unfortunately he has had no real influence because "the only thing that interested him was the drama of the soul. The outward incidents he recorded, however brutal, and often repellent, concerned him only as manifestations of the inner life; and nothing interests the modern novelist and his readers less than the inner life" (p. 234).

Virginia Woolf began reading Proust in the original French in 1922, when four of the volumes had appeared. 40 Her most extended comment on Proust is in "Phases of Fiction" (1927) (II: 83-89, 96-102). Edith Wharton had attributed a

---

40 See Beja, p. 121; Hafley, note 20, p. 174.
double vision to Proust because he is absorbed in the characters' fates and at the same time controls the design of their destinies. Virginia Woolf also ascribes "double vision" to Proust as a psychologist, supreme analyzer of emotions with "the detachment of a scientist" (II: 84), and as a poet, who suddenly takes off in "a flight of imagery . . . as if the mind, having carried its powers as far as possible in analysis, suddenly rose in the air and from a station high up gave us a different view of the same object in terms of metaphor" (II: 85). Like Mrs. Wharton she commends his characters, but (just as in her comments on Jane Austen) she goes beyond lifelike characters to recognize their relationship with life itself, "thoughts, dreams, knowledge." She explains the "double vision" more fully:

It is as though there were two faces to every situation; one full in the light so that it can be described as accurately and examined as minutely as possible; the other half in shadow so that it can be described only in a moment of faith and vision by the use of metaphor. The longer the novelist pores over the analysis, the more he becomes conscious of something that forever escapes. (II: 97)

The other side of Mrs. Wharton's conception of double vision is dramatic design born of long brooding; the other side of Mrs. Woolf's is a synthesis, or an ineffable poetic vision of reality--precisely the goals each set for herself in two novels that exemplify their theoretical values: The Reef and The Waves.

e. The Reef and The Waves

Both Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf believed that
criticism could improve the novel. The Writing of Fiction and "The Narrow Bridge of Art" present a program, or a plan for an "intellectual house" in which each chose to live. The best examples of those structures are Wharton's The Reef, a Jamesian drama, and Woolf's The Waves, a Bergsonian poem. Both are intended to represent life in terms of characters so figured forth that "right relations" (Wharton) or sane perspective (Woolf) carry a moral statement to the responsive reader. The "personal equation" of the first, the "life itself" of the second are basically similar. But the two novels remain a study in contrast. The Reef is a "well-made novel," representing a completed dramatic action; The Waves is an expressionistic novel, representing an evocative psychic study. 41 There is a bridge between them, and that is "point of view" as the means of conveying an impression of life, a technique first made explicit by James, and a concern which naturally leads to a study of consciousness itself, requiring poetry to sound the depths. 42 There is, in fact, movement within the two novels toward the same goal, the reliable narrator, a fact which suggests a norm in the novel, a hypothesis borne out by examining subsequent more successful efforts of the two theorists. 43 But that bridge,


43 The term "reliable narrator" and persuasive argu-
and the subsequent goal, are to be described only after an exploration of the differences between the dramatic and the poetic novels, and an attempt to understand why Mrs. Woolf made the changes she did in the conventional theory of which she was so aware.

1. Point of View: The Inner Plus the Outer

Both Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf recommend a synthesis of "inner" and "outer," but to rather different ends. To Edith Wharton "inner" means behavioristic psychology, the analysis of motives and their consequent manifestation in action, or behavior. The conflicts between the individual and his environment are carried on, she believes, "on fairly coherent and selective lines" (WF, p. 13). There is no proof beyond the general claims made in A Backward Glance that her books started with compelling imaginary but lifelike characters virtually dictating dialogue to her, but one surmises that The Reef was born of Mrs. Wharton's strong sense of Anna Leath's profound shock and pain at the discovery of her suitor's "infidelity," and that composition of the book meant the selection of incidents to dramatize it: initial presentation of a casual, almost meaningless encounter of Darrow and Sophy, Anna's enormous expectations of perfection, assemblage of all the principals at Givré, a virtual paradise, and their expulsions from it. Mrs. Wharton has a

ments that it is desirable in the novel are found in Wayne C. Booth's Rhetoric of Fiction, esp. Part II, "The Author's Voice in Fiction."
firm grasp upon the inner lives of Anna and Darrow: she herself unrolls them in reveries which, as discussed above, are skillful manipulations of what Mrs. Wharton considered the two main technical problems of the novel, time and point of view. In Chapters 1 and 8, for example, Darrow's and Anna's reveries fill in background information on their former relationship and their future hopes, thus avoiding a strict chronological narrative; and they also provide the attitude of each lover toward himself and the other, thus presenting a double "point of view" on the impending meeting. The reveries are certainly conducted on "coherent and selective lines": no one would mistake the ordered paragraphs for the "stream" of their "consciousness." And what they think is figured forth in action: in Chapter 1 Darrow ponders his humiliation, and the issue is not only the humiliation itself, but whether or not he boards the boat to return to London. In Chapter 8 Anna's "latent animation" causes her to break into a run to meet her stepson Owen.

To Virginia Woolf "inner" means much more than conscious thought that serves as motive for behavior. It means "depth psychology," if a name can be put to something so amorphous as her attempt to plumb the mysteries of the mind opened up in the early twentieth century. Of Mrs. Wharton's "fairly coherent and selective lines" Mrs. Woolf—steeped in the atmosphere of Freud, Bergson, and Post-Impressionistic painting—might well ask whether life is like this. "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged" with
plot, comedy, tragedy, love interest, or catastrophe "in the accepted style" of Anna, Darrow, and Sophy ("Modern Fiction," II: 106). Mrs. Woolf's initial attempt to render the "flickerings of that innermost flame" (II: 107) in novel form was Jacob's Room, but she came to doubt that catching the atoms as they fall captured the "human heart." "The Narrow Bridge of Art" subsequently outlined a definite form for both the heart, the inner, and the shower of atoms, the outer. There is no need to speculate on the genesis of The Waves. Far from starting with characters as one surmises The Reef did, it began with an ineffable vision, "a fin passing far out," something which is "not oneself but something in the universe that one's left with" (Diary, 30 September 1926, p. 100), the "life itself" of "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," the chimerical "other" of "An Unwritten Novel." Composition of the book meant a painstaking attempt to match words to that vision. Mrs. Woolf must discover the truth about it, an effort which results in abstract interludes and soliloquies which, as discussed above, are an attempt at a "play-poem," a manipulation of time and point of view: a saturation of the moment, and a presentation of consciousness itself, belonging to anybody, and nobody. The soliloquies are every bit as managed as Mrs. Wharton's reveries: no one should mistake them for the "stream" of anyone's consciousness since they are highly stylized, almost rigid. Unlike Mrs. Wharton's reveries, however, they are not motives for action: they explore what it feels like to experience the "outer,"
and lead toward an awareness of perception itself. Bernard's "black arrows of sensation" are never shot.

It is obvious that the "inner" of both Wharton and Woolf is inextricably connected to the "outer" by means of the "point of view." Wharton's "descriptive passages" are not gratuitous background, but "depict only what the intelligence concerned would have noticed, and always in terms within the register of that intelligence" (WF, p. 85). Anna's perception of Givré governs the author's description of it:

Now, as it lay before her in the autumn mildness, its mistress was surprised at her own insensibility. She had been trying to see the house through the eyes of an old friend who, the next morning, would be driving up to it for the first time; and in so doing she seemed to be opening her own eyes upon it after a long interval of blindness. (p. 85)

Givré, then, is much like the settings at the Théâtre Français where "the number of objects on the stage--chair, tables, even to a glass of water on a table--should be limited to the actual requirements of the drama: the chairs must be sat in, the table carry some object necessary to the action, the glass of water or decanter of wine be a part of the drama" (WF, p. 83). Furthermore, Givré (as well as the other settings) in a sense defines the characters themselves, since "each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things" (WF, p. 7). Anna is in a sense the reticences of West fifty-fifth Street, then the contrived beauty of Givré; Darrow is the smooth, sometimes deceitful American diplomatic service lacking, perhaps intentionally, a specific setting in the novel; and, sadly enough, Sophy is, to some degree,
the vulgarity of Mrs. Murrett's questionable establishment.

Virginia Woolf in "Modern Fiction" objected to the "materialists" who describe not the spirit but the body, and in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" to the "Edwardians," the same group, who "have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things" (I: 332). Perhaps it would be well to clear Mrs. Wharton of the suspicion of being an "Edwardian" materialist herself. She is clearly not, for the simple reason that Mrs. Woolf's main complaint is that their concern with material things is a means to an extraliterary end. "For they leave one with so strange a feeling of incompleteness and dissatisfaction. In order to complete them it seems necessary to do something—to join a society, or, more desperately, to write a cheque" (I: 326). They are not interested in the character or the book for itself, but in "something outside" (I: 327). But Mrs. Wharton nowhere suggests that there is any other end to literature than terminal pleasure from seeing completed what is incomplete in nature (WP, p. 107).

And indeed Mrs. Woolf did not suggest that Mrs. Wharton was among the Edwardians. Her sole comment on the older writer that I have found heads "American Fiction," a 1925 essay (II: 111-21) which dismisses the "distinguished names" of James, Hergesheimer, and Wharton from the lists of American fiction because "the English tourist in American literature wants above all things something different from what he has at home," and "they do not give us anything that we have
It is interesting that in "The New Novel" Henry James explicitly distinguishes his friend Mrs. Wharton from two of the Edwardians, Wells and Bennett, whom he criticizes in a manner resembling Mrs. Woolf's for saturation in material details, on the grounds of her superior selection, and consequent form. He links her, however, with Galsworthy, seeing both as "remaining essentially votaries of selection and intention and being embodiments thereby, in each case, of some state over and above that simple state of possession of much evidence" held by Wells and Bennett. Q. D. Leavis, as if to repair that slight, distinguishes Mrs. Wharton firmly from Galsworthy by means of her "combination of sustained anthropological interest with literary ability . . . hitherto unknown to fiction except in The Bostonians." Edwin Muir discusses Bennett, Wells, Galsworthy and Dreiser as ersatz historians in a way that definitively separates Edith Wharton, with her

Mrs. Woolf's conception of American literature was vague. Cf. "A Real American" (review of Free and Other Stories and Twelve Men, by Theodore Dreiser, TLS, 21 August 1919; rpt. CW, pp. 135-37), which admits (and then proceeds to prove) that "American literature is still terribly apt to excite the snobbish elements in an English critic." Her idea of America ("gross, benevolent, and prolific") seems straight out of Walt Whitman. See Pippett for a letter to Vita Sackville-West in America which proves that Woolf at least half-seriously thought of America as primitive (pp. 310-11).


Ibid., pp. 208-09. 47 Q. D. Leavis, p. 79.
insistence on the "soul" as well as "the street," from them. 48

Mrs. Wharton's characters, then, provide the point of view on reality, and that reality in turn helps define them---both processes operating, in contrast to the Edwardians, in spiritual interests. The Paris hotel room, the Théâtre Français, Givré are given subjective coloring by the viewer and the action, but they have an objective quality that goes unquestioned: the outer is distinct from the inner. They do not, it is true, have the particularity of detail that a novel of manners, primarily concerned with social and cultural contrasts, might have, such as Mrs. Wharton's earlier House of Mirth, depicting a decadent society. Henry James called The Reef "unrelated and unreferred save in the most superficial way to its milieu and background," though "an exquisite instinct . . . absolutely prescribed a vague and elegant French colonnade or gallery, with a French river dimly gleaming through, as the harmonious fond you required" (letter, p. 149). But that is another issue: a vague fond versus the particular picture of society at which James thought Mrs. Wharton might excel if she were "tethered in native pastures": "your only drawback is not having the homeliness and the inevitability and the happy limitation and the affluent poverty, of a Country of your Own (comme moi, par exemple!)" (letter, p. 150). Vague fond though it might

be, the "outer" exists in the novel, for the purpose of illuminating the soul.

Mrs. Woolf's "Narrow Bridge of Art" implicitly criticizes books like The Reef as too "psychological":

The psychological novelist has been too prone to limit psychology to the psychology of personal intercourse; we long sometimes to escape from the incessant, the remorseless analysis of falling into love and falling out of love, of what Tom feels for Judith and Judith does or does not altogether feel for Tom /or "Anna" and "Darrow"/. We long for some more impersonal relationship. We long for ideas, for dreams, for imaginations, for poetry. (II: 225)

Mrs. Woolf clearly wants to overcome the "limited point of view" on reality since it is a private perspective, "the damned egotistical self." Jacob's Room was meant to show just how limited and arbitrary a narrator's perception is. Thus a bare reality forms the matrix for the narrative voice in The Waves in two ways. First, it appears in what Mrs. Woolf thought pure form in the "interludes," "the world seen without a self." The house in those prose poems is a collection of objects seen for themselves in their naked colors and shapes, things existing in relation to no one, as opposed to Givré, seen only through Mrs. Wharton's characters' eyes. Secondly, the outer world also appears as filtered through the consciousness of each character in the soliloquies, but not for the purpose of showing, like Mrs. Wharton does, that the same thing never happens to any two people, but to expose the unity underlying what might at first seem peculiar and unique modes of perception.

The first section begins with what each character

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
sees: "'I see a ring,' said Bernard, 'hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light'" (p. 6), and with this hanging, uncertain thing that nevertheless rounds out and encloses, Bernard introduces his own major symbol. What he and the other characters see serves to characterize them. Most instructive are those occasions when the characters look at the same thing (such as Bernard's version of each character's view of the willow tree, pp. 213-17) or experience the same event (particularly the death of Percival, Section 5). Mrs. Woolf's use of various modes of perception is quite sophisticated, but the basic point to be made here is that her "outer" is not a simple matter of organic setting, limited to what the characters see and what, in turn, they are, but an objectification of perception itself that is in a sense more concrete than Mrs. Wharton's "fond," but which at the same time renounces those "more substantial vegetables that grow on the ground" (II: 227) retained in Mrs. Wharton's choice of a vague, but identifiable, milieu. Jean Guiguet expresses the problem in terms of a "circumstantial context" which remains in the novel, to be sure, but abstracted to the point where facts and events become "epitomes, recomposed by the novelist outside space and time." The advantage is "a perfectly homogeneous universe";
the disadvantage is "the constant risk of lapsing into the artificial and the arbitrary." Just as Jacob's Room offered "atoms" which amounted to "epitomes" which could be pieced into a chronicle (Section 1 standing for Jacob's childhood, Section 2 for growing up in Scarborough, Section 3 for Cambridge, and so forth), so The Waves offers particular events that suggest whole phases of life (Section 1, school activities, Section 2, boys' and girls' preparatory schools, Section 3, the university, or, beginning life in the world, and so forth). Bernard's "black arrows of sensation" or Neville's "death among the apple trees" are representative, non-particularized, essential experiences that are not incidents in a chain, but isolated phenomena that simply recur, with ever-expanding significance. Bernard walks "bang into the pillar-box" at no particular time on no particular street. Such "action" is an objectification of feeling, comparable to T. S. Eliot's "objective correlative," rather than a "real" event, like Darrow running into Sophy. Both R. L. Chambers (pp. 12-17) and Guiguet (pp. 285-86) compare Mrs. Woolf's use of language to Eliot's poetic concept.
The question of whether *The Waves* is all dramatized character, or all poetic authorial omniscience, proposed in Chapter II, is settled for this reader with the realization that the interludes, spoken by no "character" and separated from the text by spaces and distinguished by italics, and the dialogue, attributed in turn to six different "characters" by the use of name tags and "said," are all in one highly stylized voice: the narrator has unprecedented control over all these statements, theoretically coming from seven different directions.

Nevertheless "character" remains the crux of the novel for both Mrs. Wharton and Mrs. Woolf. Mrs. Wharton said repeatedly that the test of the novel is that its characters live, which means primarily that they behave in the unpredictable fashion of real human beings rather than as puppets, or mouthpieces, yet at the same time be "so typical that each connotes a whole section of the social background" (*WF*, p. 83). One can only say that the author of *The Reef* has found three recognizable, yet not mechanical, types in Anna, Darrow, and Sophy, whom she explicates for us by showing them act and react. She writes in the third person: the dramatic scenes, as well as the all-important reveries and flashbacks, are organized and directed by the author herself. Darrow's crucial revery in Chapter 26, for example, shows her guiding hand:

53 The best discussions of the narrative voice are J. W. Graham, "Point of View in *The Waves*," and Richter, Ch. IX, "The Voice of Subjectivity," *pp. 129-48.*
After she had left him, Darrow continued to sit motionless, staring back into their past. Hitherto it had lingered on the edge of his mind in a vague pink blur, like one of the little rose-leaf clouds that a setting sun drops from its disk. Now it was a huge looming darkness, through which his eyes vainly strained. The whole episode was still obscure to him, save where here and there, as they talked, some phrase or gesture or intonation of the girl's had lit up a little spot in the night. (p. 260)

Darrow may be confused about the significance of the affair, but Mrs. Wharton is not, and, much like Henry James in The Ambassadors, she guides the presentation of his developing perceptions. Because the subject, that which decides all questions of technique, is the effect on Anna (as well as Sophy) of Darrow's initial obtuseness about his own emotions and his own effect on others, Mrs. Wharton alternates the limited point of view between Darrow and Anna to dramatize at least two of the many possible ways of seeing this "reef," until, as I have suggested above, Darrow in Chapter 26 climbs atop the reef to proclaim the philosophy of the book, a message of compromise and limitation found throughout her work, that "life's just a perpetual piecing together of broken bits" (p. 313), and Anna is sent out to see the world as it is.

All the characters in The Reef except the two principals, Darrow and Anna, are seen from the outside except insofar as they reveal themselves directly in dialogue. There are limitations to our insight into Darrow and Anna as well, as compared to the "characters" in The Waves, because we are

simply privileged to see into their shaped and organized conscious thoughts. The assumption is that their thoughts and actions explain themselves when presented aright by an omniscient narrator.

Virginia Woolf played with this notion of omniscience in *Jacob's Room*, where the narrator's knowledge varied from the omniscient to the almost comically limited, and where "dramatic revelations" become rather undependable glimpses of varying scope. I suggested when discussing that novel that Virginia Woolf's theory, which emphasizes balanced "perspective" rather than any technique of point of view, does not require consistency in point of view, and that to criticize her on that score, as do Grabo and Hafley, is to miss her point, made emphatically in "An Unwritten Novel," that the novelist is obsessed with speculation about characters to escape from the confining self. The most satisfactory parts of that novel for this reader proved to be those cosmic sweeps where the narrator simply seized the omniscience she was elsewhere too timid to take, and it is precisely that poetic detachment that "The Narrow Bridge of Art" isolates as the task of the novel of the future. After Virginia Woolf confronted that post-Dostoevsky situation where character was in "shreds" she began to lose her interest in the kind of character represented by Mrs. Wharton's Anna and Darrow, the kind seen from the outside. *Orlando: a Biography* was of course contrived around Vita Sackville-West, to whom it was dedicated. *To the Lighthouse* grew from a vision of Mrs.
Woolf's father droning poetry in a boat (her only book to start from a definite vision of a particular character). But even those two works concern modes of perception, characterization from the inside out, rather than individual characterizations of "living human beings." The Waves probably has autobiographical implications that Leonard Woolf excised from A Writer's Diary. But, certain autobiographical intentions notwithstanding, the germ of this novel was a vision, "mystical" feelings with which Mrs. Woolf had to come to terms (Diary, 7 November 1928).

The "process" that she traced involves "people," but not the lifelike people Edith Wharton limned, complete with names and things to say. Mrs. Woolf was proud not of having plumbed the depths of a particular personality, but of giving "in a very few strokes the essentials of a person's character. It should be done boldly, almost as caricature" (Diary, 9 April 1930, p. 153). Thus Bernard, Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny, and Rhoda enter speaking single lines in a rather stilted, uniform style. Each associates himself with a small complex of images: Bernard with rings and phrases, Neville with globes and a loved one, Louis with "the chained beast stamping," Susan with slabs of pure color and the hard knotted things of the earth, Jinny with crimson and gold,

55 See Diary, 14 May 1925, p. 75. Temple summarizes the unusual genesis of To the Lighthouse (pp. 93-94).

56 Guiguet complains that Woolf's omissions make it hard to understand the human associations of The Waves, especially the death of Virginia's brother Thoby (pp. 92-93). See also Pippett, p. 53.
and Rhoda with ships, flowers, and "the grove." Each image cluster is associated with a certain attitude toward reality: Bernard's effort, Neville's longing, Louis's rational control, Susan's possessive maternal love, Jinny's sensual love, and Rhoda's solitary terror. Each "character" has a special relationship with the others: Bernard, for example, tries to melt Susan's hardness with his words, resists Neville's efforts to reduce him to but one thing, envies the "authenticity" of the solitaries Louis and Rhoda, and seeks out Jinny for comfort during his metaphysical anguish at Percival's death. Neville resents Bernard's many-faceted imitative personality, longs for Louis's ability to "seek perfection in the sand," envies Jinny's bodily grace, disparages Louis's and Rhoda's constant questioning of life, knows that he can never live Susan's natural cycles, and so forth.

Each, except for Bernard, is, like "The Narrow Bridge of Art" calls for, a moulded block, a pure way of perceiving: Neville, the isolated intellectual; Louis, the man of action, a Prometheus figure transmitting culture over the earth; Susan, the earth mother beloved by poets; Jinny, the sensualist who feels with her body, and never sees what is not there; and Rhoda, the fragmented fearful personality, the suicide.

In the available Diary material Mrs. Woolf identifies herself explicitly with only Rhoda (17 March 1930, p. 153), but she does suggest that the whole might be called "Autobiography," (28 May 1929, p. 140), and tentatively titled the first draft "The Life of Anybody," among other things, suggesting that
these pure essences of characters, these blocks, might to­
gether form a whole, or, as Bernard expresses it, "'the
body of the complete human being whom we have failed to be,
but at the same time, cannot forget'" (p. 238). As noted
above, most critics see that these "characters" form some kind
of whole, whether a pattern, a gestalt, or a single person,
even Virginia Woolf herself. It does not really matter how
the pattern is described: the point, made by both form and
content, is that underneath the many is a unity (even if it
be a Bergsonian unity of flux itself), that the reality as
expressed by the interludes and the consciousness as ex­
pressed by the soliloquies, the outer and the inner, are
really one: the waves are a sea.

The technique of showing the development of and the
discovery of that unity is the growth of Bernard from one
voice among six to the stature of reliable narrator, who not
only "sums up" the lives of the six, but who also incorpo­
rates in his own speech the vision of the "world seen with­
out a self," the very reality of the interludes. The waves
exist throughout the interludes; the characters use the im­
agery of the waves; and finally Bernard comes to embody them
himself. It is with the waves rising within him that he de­
fies death.

It is a curious fact, then, that both The Reef and

57 Richter provides an appendix diagramming Bernard
as a composite of all six characters, making a complete an­
drogyrous personality in both the mental and the physical
realms (pp. 248-49).
The Waves develop a reliable spokesman after an initial show of impartiality or objectivity on the part of the implied author. The use of the double point of view by Mrs. Wharton in The Reef suggests that there are two, perhaps more, ways to view the central situation, but I believe that by the end of Chapter 26 and Darrow's realization of his responsibility he comes to present Mrs. Wharton's own solution, a realistic stoicism. The use of impersonal interludes and six voices (uniform in style, to be sure, but distinguished by names and image clusters) by Virginia Woolf in The Waves suggests that there are pure modes of perception (the reason, the emotions, the senses, etc.). But with the emergence of Bernard as the spokesman for the members of the group, then his virtual embodiment of them in his summing-up, Mrs. Woolf, like Mrs. Wharton, is presenting her own wisdom, a brand of defiance toward what might be considered a "reef" among the waves, death.

2. Time: The Drama and the Poetry

But on first reading the points of view of The Reef and The Waves seem fundamentally different, for the former tells a story, the latter describes feelings. The living characters of The Reef interact with the situation, and there are a series of actions, and reactions. The more abstract characters of The Waves react to things, and there are a series of images. Thus the two books differ radically in the matter of time, the first having sequential time, the second having what might be called "radial" time. The difference
is between "crucial moments" and "the moment," or, narrative and symbol.

A comparison of two chapters of The Reef, 23 and 24 (pp. 231-47), and a section of The Waves, 4 (pp. 92-126), the books' respective climaxes, illustrates the difference. At the turning-point of The Reef, Chapter 23, Anna is in her sitting-room on the morning of Darrow's last day at Givré, feeling a blissful security marred only by a half-formed unspoken doubt about Darrow's attitude toward Sophy. Then Sophy enters, powdered and upset: she wants to go away, and Anna is puzzled that the girl should tell her before telling her fiancé Owen. It is because of her duty toward Effie, Sophy explains. Owen enters: the news seems to substantiate hidden fears of his own, and he charges that Darrow can explain. The chapter closes on Sophy's audible distress. Anna confronts her own hidden fears as Owen recounts how he has seen Sophy and Darrow meeting. Darrow enters, presenting an effective contrast to Owen's boyish discomposure, but Anna must now test him. She will ask him to explain the situation: should he look at Sophy, she will know there is nothing between them; should he not, she will know there is. She asks; he looks at Anna herself; her heart drops, then so does the curtain.

After this "crucial moment" Anna "knows" something, though the particulars of the dread truth emerge only later, and the rest of the book is the "working out" of this central situation. Compare Section 4 of The Waves, which is far
more complicated. It begins with an interlude describing full hard sunlight on the regular waves, the setting for the individual songs of the birds, almost involuntarily expressing themselves, who come together over a snail, then for a moment join in song. Then "there is a rock." Subsequently "whatever the light touched became dowered with a fanatical existence" (p. 94), and the things in the house become mere shapes and colours to the highly sensitized observer, until they "took on mass and edge" and acquire a recognizable identity again (p. 94).

The following section follows the plan set forth in the interlude. Bernard, coming into London on the early train, begins with a long monologue on the general life, a conscious attempt to remove the film of ego from his perceptions of reality (pp. 94-101). He looks forward to a farewell dinner for Percival, who is leaving for India, because he is "impatient of solitude" (p. 100) and wants to be among his friends, who breed words and phrases in him. In the restaurant itself, Neville has arrived early "in order to taste every moment of anticipation" before his beloved Percival arrives (p. 101). Each bird sings, in effect, as he takes his place and describes the entrances of the others. Neville sees Louis's "strange mixture of assurance and timidity" (p. 102); Louis in turn sees Susan's manner of the "wild beast," "a certainty which is alarming" (p. 102) and Rhoda's equally disconcerting uncertainty (pp. 102-03); Susan sees Jinny's ordering presence based upon a beauty
that mocks Susan's own worn demeanor; Rhoda's being is scattered by her perception of Neville's misery (his descriptions of which have punctuated the others' statements). Then Percival arrives, and Bernard describes the consequent order--using, significantly, the image of the birds cracking the snail-shell, got directly from the preceding interlude (p. 105). The six come together. They speak in the past tense for the first time in the book as they replay the events that have happened so far. Each describes what has affected him most--Neville, the man with his throat cut; Bernard, Elvedon, etc., in a discussion using logical words like "but," "then," and "however," suggesting a coherent narrative but actually only noting emotional transitions. The six are not telling a story, but are exploring a moment of common feeling, which Bernard says is bigger than the word "love."

'We have come together . . . to make one thing, not enduring--for, what endures?--but seen by many eyes simultaneously. There is a red carnation in that vase. A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven-sided flower . . . a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution.' (p. 108)

But just as the birds had hit a rock and dispersed, the characters fall back, apart, and try to describe what is peculiar to themselves. Louis lives throughout time, and must engage in "antics" to get the approval of all but Susan, Percival, and Rhoda (pp. 108-09); Jinny dazzles the others, making them believe that the body is all (pp. 109-10); Neville is like a hound following the scent (pp. 110-11); Rhoda does not have such a unifying quest (pp. 111-12); Susan is "debased and hidebound by the bestial and beautiful
passion of maternity" (p. 113); Bernard--significantly--speaks last, for he is not distinct and "pure," but, rather, is "nothing" alone. "For there is nothing to lay hold of. I am made and remade continually. Different people draw different words from me" (p. 114). Then Rhoda, the most sensitive to sense perceptions, calls their attention to what the interlude called "the fanatical existence" of things, and they become aware of the restaurant, the world outside, and India, the larger world. It is Percival and his mission that makes them conscious of the inadequacy of this individuality they have been articulating (p. 117), and they work toward another moment of unity (almost a primitive ritual, observed by the solitaries Louis and Rhoda apart, p. 120), described in terms of a circle, or even a globe.

"'Let us hold it for one moment,' said Jinny; 'love, hatred, by whatever name we call it, this globe whose walls are made of Percival, of youth and beauty, and something so deep sunk within us that we shall perhaps never make this moment out of one man again'" (p. 124). But Percival leaves. And though "we have proved . . . that we can add to the treasury of moments" (p. 125), moments end.

The two excerpts illustrate the contrasting "drama" and "poetry." Chapters 23 and 24 of The Reef simply present a sequence of crucial moments, wherein Anna learns something dimly suspected about the true situation between two other characters. It is in the past tense: it has already happened, and the author is making the most dramatic recreation
possible of the unfolding events. She tells us what Anna fears, then confirms, for dramatic suspense. This might be termed the technique of "dramatic revelation." In The Waves, on the other hand, we find something much more complex. It also presents moments, but they are not "crucial" in the sense of dramatic junctures. Indeed Bernard seeks the loss of particularity in his "impossible desires to embrace the whole world with the arms of understanding--impossible to those who act" (p. 97). "'And, what is this moment of time, this particular day in which I have found myself caught? The growl of traffic might be any uproar--forest trees or the roar of wild beasts. Time has whizzed back an inch or two on its heel; our short progress has been cancelled" (pp. 96-97). The "moment" can yield feeling, represented by the carnation (p. 108), but not knowledge. Bernard says "'There is no stability in this world. Who is to say what meaning there is in anything? Who is to foretell the flight of a word? It is a balloon that sails over treetops. To speak of knowledge is futile. All is experiment and adventure'" (p. 100). The interludes and the round-robin "conversations" are in the past tense, but the bulk of the soliloquies (because they are, after all, dialogue stretched to include the conventional functions of narrative) are in the present tense, in an attempt to create the illusion that we experience perception just as the speakers do, that we share their discovery. This might be called "technique as discovery," to borrow Mark Schorer's term: it has often
been noticed that Virginia Woolf's creative process is exploratory. Mrs. Wharton's last page is latent on her first, and the intervening windings become clear with her dramatic revelations; Mrs. Woolf's first page sets forth a basic version of the vision, which succeeding pages develop and clarify.

Mrs. Wharton's "crucial moment" is an illumination of the basic conflict between a character and his environment: one moment in time leads to another. Her images function to define and clarify emotion, to dramatize it.

Owen turned back to Anna. "Now do you say that nothing's happened?"

Under the influence of his agitation Anna felt a vague tightening of the heart. She seemed to herself like some one in a dark room about whom unseen presences are groping. (p. 238)

The narrative, responsible for depicting the passage of time and the concomitant changes in the characters, is of course the logical place for the analytical images. But there are comparatively few images in Chapters 23 and 24, identifiable as the climax and turning point of the book, where dialogue thus dominates to give the climax the dramatic immediacy it deserves (WF, p. 73). Mrs. Woolf's "moment," on the other hand, is not a bead on a string with other beads, but more

58 That Woolf discovers what she is doing while she does it is substantiated in the Diary account of the composition of The Waves, discussed in Ch. II. The observation has been made by Bennett, p. 142; Francis, p. 143; and Goldman, "A Critical Dialogue," p. 400.

59 Beja observes that all Woolf's novels until Between the Acts follow a pattern set by Mrs. Dalloway, a series of epiphanies brought together in a climactic summing up (p. 146).
or less stands alone as a moment of vision that is fleeting, but is also, Virginia Woolf certainly hopes, capable of being eternized by art. Rather than being held in reserve for dramatic high points, the dialogue embraces all narrative functions. It changes from the register of climaxes to a means of grasping reality at once. Mrs. Woolf wanted to saturate every moment in *The Waves*, the way of poetry, and her version of "drama," as presented in "The Narrow Bridge of Art," is a synthetic mode of creating character in blocks, giving their essentials in a few strokes, designed to achieve maximum emotional effect in the reader. Her images function to evoke as much emotion as possible. The organization is not logical at all, but, rather, associational. The best example is that "conversation" among the six at the restaurant, where the use of logical transition words temporarily disguises the fact that only a common feeling unites the speakers. Louis says, "We have tried to accentuate differences. From the desire to be separate we have laid stress upon our faults, and what is particular to us. But there is a chain whirling round, round, in a steel-blue circle beneath" (p. 117). That circle reminds of innumerable other references to circles (Louis, pp. 122, 124), globes (Jinny, p. 124), rings (Louis, p. 109, Bernard, p. 113), and other symbols of order, like the carnation (p. 108), or unity within the group of six, and operates not so much to describe their relationship as to evoke the appropriate response to such wholeness.
I persist in calling Mrs. Wharton's form "drama" because it is now obvious that it is, broadly speaking, an imitation of an action, while it is arguable that Mrs. Woolf's form is "poetry" because it is based, in contrast, on a pattern of ever-expanding images. Ralph Freedman sees it as a pre-eminent example of the "lyrical novel," which does not move from one event to another, but rather expounds on the significance of the images presented (although that expounding can, of course, proceed, like in some lyrical poems, in narrative form.) A novel that is not a "dramatic action" is, understandably, sometimes challenged as being no novel at all. A classic article by William Troy, for instance, charges that symbols are "spatial," while prose narrative is by its nature (for reasons he thinks too profound to be readily analyzed) temporal:

The objection to the lyrical method in narrative is that it renders impossible the peculiar kind of interest which the latter is designed to supply. By the lyrical method is meant the substitution of a group of symbols for the orderly working-out of a motive or a set of motives which has constituted the immemorial pattern of narrative art. Perhaps the simplest definition of symbols is that they are things used to stand for other things; and undoubtedly the most part of such a definition is the word "stand." Whatever operations of the imagination have gone on to produce them, symbols themselves become fixed, constant, and static.

Dean Doner answers Troy by asserting that Virginia Woolf substitutes language for scene as the means of achieving "intensity" and "verification." "In Mrs. Woolf's work, the heightened style is one of the things which creates the

---

60 Freedman, pp. 244-70. 61 Troy, p. 34.
value-world of the work. The degree of sensitivity to other people, to places, to things is a measure of the movement which in her novels constitutes the narrative. 62 Troy had already dismissed this heightened language as a Sargasso Sea of literary images rather than direct reactions to experience, 63 but whatever its real value, it is clear that language itself is the crux of The Waves: Bernard is obsessed with phrases, sequences, although he at the same time distrusts them. He wishes for a new language, "some little language such as lovers use," but brings the novel to its close not with the howls and cries he thinks he wants, but with the poetic detachment, the heightened language, of the interludes.

The two books, then, represent two radically different concepts of form. Mrs. Wharton really had nothing new to contribute to the subject in theory, nor, in The Reef, in practice. Mrs. Woolf wanted so badly to dissociate herself from the dramatic curve of traditional novels, "the old deliberate business," especially as formulated by Lubbock, that she contrived a theory of emotional form, analogous to painting, to do so, and wrote a "play-poem" sometimes denied the status of "novel" at all. She sought something "radial" rather than "linear." Mrs. Woolf's friend, Jacques Raverat, the painter, had charged that the visual artist could achieve a "simultaneity" that the writer could get only by "some graphic expedient such as placing the word in the middle of


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Quentin Bell quotes and discusses her reply, written during the composition of *Mrs. Dalloway*:

"I rather think you've broached some of the problems of the writers too, who are trying to catch and consolidate and consummate (whatever the word is for making literature) those splashes of yours." Indeed it was precisely the task of the writer—that is to say her task—to go beyond the "formal railway line of sentence" and to disregard the "falsity of the past (by which I mean Bennett, Galsworthy and so on)." The literary artist has to realize that "people don't and never did feel or think or dream for a second in that way; but all over the place, in your way." In other words she is claiming for herself the ability, or at least the intention, to see events out of time, to apprehend processes of thought and feeling as though they were pictorial shapes.

Her reason for doing so, whatever relationship her ideas bear to Fry's and Bell's, surely relate to the notion of point of view. More or less taken for granted until Henry James formulated the principles, it focuses attention on consciousness itself. Leon Edel phrases it this way: "once we are within a given mind we can obviously have only the inner vision, the point of view of that particular mind. In studying the problems of his fixed and varying centers of consciousness, Henry James was preparing the way for those who would follow and carry this technique to its logical conclusion: to record the action of the mind itself." And that can be done only by poetry, he goes on to say, because the attempt to reproduce consciousness requires all the devices of prosody, exploiting the resources of the lan-

---

64 Q. Bell, II: 106. 65 Ibid., pp. 106-07. 66 Edel, p. 57.
guage in the belief that it is the writer's task to make the word fit the thought, to match the language of the mind and if necessary to invent a language that will render it, an almost direct echo of Mrs. Woolf's injunction in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" to match words to visions. What I am suggesting is that the kind of emphasis Edith Wharton put on the limited point of view led Virginia Woolf to scrutinize its use in Jacob's Room and "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," and decide that telling a story about Mrs. Brown, or Jacob (or Anna and Darrow) is an artificial thing in a time when man is revealed to be much more complex than his conscious thoughts and purposive actions. Furthermore, I am suggesting that the kind of emphasis Edith Wharton put on the presentation of "crucial moments" led Virginia Woolf to scrutinize their use in "Modern Fiction" and decide that the "luminous halo" describes our real experience better than such "gig-lamps." In short, Mrs. Woolf tried to take "drama"--the notion of coherent structure built on knowledge about the world--out of the novel, and fill it instead with the poetry of perception itself.

Mrs. Woolf's attempt to realize the program in The Waves is interesting, indeed, even if somewhat monotonous, as she herself recognized, especially when one realizes that the attempt breaks down in Bernard's summing up, where, as discussed above, Bernard regains the powers of the omniscient narrator and, with his new power over the symbolic essences

67 Ibid., p. 188.
of the other five characters, he reinstates chronological narrative. In short, he transforms the poem into a dramatic poem, putting the "circumstantial context," as Guiguet calls it, into chronological order. J. W. Graham's fine study of the point of view in this novel, which uses the initial drafts in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, shows that Mrs. Woolf began the novel with a first-person narrator puzzling about the characters, very much like the narrator of Jacob's Room. Extensive experimentation led to the use of the six stylized voices and the bardic narrator of the interludes. But the summing up, says Graham, reverts to that initial first-person attitude,68 which is comparable to the conventional dramatic point of view used by Mrs. Wharton. Even within The Waves, then, Mrs. Woolf retreats somewhat from the impersonal poetic voice and the radial moments to a more conventional use of point of view and time. The retreat suggests that there is an identifiable norm for the novel, a hypothesis borne out by an examination of the two writers' subsequent works, particularly The Age of Innocence and Between the Acts, which move toward each other from the opposite poles of drama and poetry.

CHAPTER IV

A CHANGE IN VIEWPOINT: THE AGE OF INNOCENCE
AND BETWEEN THE ACTS

Edith Wharton wrote The Reef (1912) near the end of her most continuously productive period; Virginia Woolf, similarly, wrote The Waves (1931) at the end of her most intensely productive period. Each book was followed by a period of great difficulty causing each woman to re-evaluate the standards illustrated so clearly in The Reef and The Waves, thus making possible two works which I consider to be their finest, The Age of Innocence (1920) and Between the Acts (1941), significantly different from those theoretical works examined above, and, even more importantly, significantly alike in their widening of vision from the plight of the individual to the plight of society itself.

Edith Wharton published no fiction until she was twenty-nine ("Mrs. Manstey's View," 1891), no novel until The Valley of Decision (1902), a panorama of eighteenth-century Italy more historical than fictional.¹ Her first characteristic novel was The House of Mirth (1905), a study of decadent New York society of the early twentieth century

¹ In fact, Mrs. Wharton described it in BG as "not, in my sense, a novel at all, but only a romantic chronicle..." (p. 205). A good discussion of this book is in Nevius, Ch. III, "The Valley of Decision," pp. 37-52.
by means of its destruction of Lily Bart—a well-written
book notable from our point of view for its double structure.
The first half is sharply drawn scenes; the second half is a
conventional picaresque, showing Lily's progress downwards
by means of the places she is forced to live. ²

Mrs. Wharton moved to France in 1906, and there fol­
lowed a period of personal turmoil culminating in her divorce
in 1913, but a period of great artistic success, what Milli­
cent Bell calls "the most brilliant span of Edith Wharton's
entire career." ³ Whether she accomplished Ethan Frome, her
most widely admired tale, The Reef, her most Jamesian ef­
fort, and The Custom of the Country, often cited as a pio­
neering social satire, in spite of her personal problems,
or, as Edmund Wilson suggests, because of them, is an open
question. ⁴ In any case it was a period of frantic activity:
"the pendulum-woman," as Henry James called her because for
a time she crossed the Atlantic every year (BG, p. 177),
managed to publish a novel, a volume of short stories, or a
travel book every year except 1906. The Reef is the penul­
timate volume in the series that ended when World War I broke

² Mrs. Wharton explains her intentions in BG, p. 207.
On the narrative structure, see Irving Howe, "A Reading of
The House of Mirth," from his introduction to The House of
Mirth (1905; rpt. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1962);
rpt. EW: 20th Century Views, pp. 119-24; and R. W. B. Lewis,
introduction to The House of Mirth (1905; rpt. Boston:
Houghton-Mifflin, 1963), vi, xii-xx.

³ M. Bell, p. 323.

⁴ See Wilson, "Justice," in EW: 20th Century Views,
79-80; Nevius, pp. 148-59; Walton, Ch. 6, "Comedy in Society."
out in 1914.

Virginia Woolf began writing reviews for the TLS in 1905, but, like Edith Wharton, got a late start publishing fiction. Her first novel, The Voyage Out, was the product of seven years labor, and was not published until 1915.\(^5\) Like most of her books, its composition and publication provoked enormous mental strain. The following fifteen years seem to have been a constant struggle against madness, but were (like Edith Wharton's years of difficulty) a period of intense creative activity. It includes her most radical experiments, notably Monday or Tuesday (1921), a collection of short stories providing the mode for Jacob's Room and subsequent novels written in reaction against "Edwardian" materialism; her best-known critical work, collected in The Common Reader (1925); and, most importantly, the three novels usually cited as her most important contribution to twentieth-century literature, Mrs. Dalloway (1925), To the Lighthouse (1927), and The Waves (1931). It was during this period that Mrs. Woolf realized that she must work on fiction and criticism simultaneously to relieve the mental strain of writing only one.\(^6\) During the three-year gestation period of The Waves, then, she wrote a variety of kinds of works: To the Lighthouse, an elegy to her parents, Orlando, a free-wheeling

\(^5\) See Q. Bell, who describes in Vol. I, Chs. 6, 7, 8, and 9, Virginia's seemingly interminable work on Melymbrosia (punctuated by spells of madness), which became The Voyage Out.

\(^6\) Q. Bell, II: 87, 98.
"biography," A Room of One's Own, an argument for the material freedom of woman artists, and several critical essays--an unparalleled burst of creative activity followed by great letdown.7

Both Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf, then, were beached, so to speak, for about a decade after writing The Reef and The Waves. Edith Wharton spent the war years in active duty to France, publishing fewer books, and those either directly relating to the war (Fighting France, 1915, The Marne, 1918, French Ways and their Meaning, 1919) or consciously reacting against it (Summer, 1917, a warm version of Ethan Frome written as an escape from the horrors of war but, by its dark spirit, demonstrably affected by it).8 As discussed above, the war caused Edith Wharton to re-examine her roots and decide that the traditional society in which she had grown up, and which she had stressed the weakness of, if not actually satirized, in pre-war novels like The House of Mirth, The Fruit of the Tree, The Reef, and Custom of the Country, was actually an enormously valuable ordering force. Her memoirs, A Backward Glance (1933), end in 1918, for after that the world became unrecognizable to her. The Age of Innocence (1920) was the first in a long line of more broadly focussed nostalgic novels.

7 Ibid., II, Ch. 7 ff.
8 See BG, Ch. XIII, "The War." Nevius discusses this period pp. 160-73. Xingu and Other Stories (1916) was a collection of stories mostly written before the war ("Coming Home" being a notable exception) (pp. 160-62).
Virginia Woolf finished *The Waves* with great "intensity and intoxication" (Diary, p. 165), but spent the next decade reacting against its poetic method and at the same time searching desperately for its certainty of purpose. Her next novel was *The Years*, the writing of which caused unparalleled agony. The important aspect of the struggle was her urge to convey facts, subsumed into "poetry" in *The Waves* and now clamoring for expression. During this decade her (comparatively fewer) publications lean heavily toward "fact": *Letter to a Young Poet* (1932), a brief plea for tradition and objectification of the individual poetic talent; *The Common Reader: Second Series* (1932), a second collection of essays; *Flush* (1933) and *Roger Fry* (1940), two biographies, one playful and one painfully serious; and *Three Guineas* (1938), her most aggressive feminist pamphlet. Her struggle to stretch form to accommodate the fact as well as the vision was accompanied by a growing horror at the approach of the second World War, so that the Diary of the latter part of this decade is a moving explanation of her suicide, on the eve of another siege of madness, in 1941.

Between the Acts, published posthumously, reflects but surmounts these problems. Like *The Age of Innocence*, it combines the technical skills won in earlier novels with a new

---

9 See Diary, 2 Nov. 1932--31 Dec. 1936, pp. 183-264. See also Q. Bell, II, Chapters 7, 8, and 9, esp. pp. 192-96.

10 Pippett, Ch. XX, summarizes very well these horrors and Mrs. Woolf's valiant spirit toward them as shown in the Diary entries (pp. 351-68).
vision achieved in a period of pain, and serves as the culmi-
nation of a distinguished career.

The Reef and The Waves, then, come at the crest of
creative activity, and are followed by a dark period of re-
evaluation. The results, The Age of Innocence and Between
the Acts, offer interesting parallels in the use of point of
view, the passage of time, and total meaning.

a. The Reef to The Age of Innocence: the
Expansion of Drama

The Reef (1912) was closely followed by The Custom of
the Country (1913), a chronicle novel of the career of Un-
dine Spragg, surely an extreme example of the "new woman"
popular in the novels of the time. It is as if Edith Wharton
were writing the antithesis to The Reef: she deals with the
rise of an obtuse and coarse, even if beautiful, woman, rather
than the "fall" of an exquisitely "fine" one. The method is
the conventional picaresque, recounting a series of adven-
tures in a series of places, rather than the Jamesian seeing
round a central situation, so that the point of view is the
traditional omniscient one rather than two complementary
limited viewpoints, and the incidents are not so dramatically
"crucial." James criticized Mrs. Wharton for not making
more of a promising central situation, the contrast between
Undine and the aristocratic French family into which she
marries; but he, says Wharton, had "long since lost all in-
terest in the chronicle-novel" (BG, p. 183). Actually the
loosening of form reflects the broadening of focus to the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
entire range of Mrs. Wharton's knowledge about society. The novel covers several levels of New York society, European watering places, the Faubourg St. Germaine, French provincial society, and the crass nouveau riche settings of Elmer Moffatt, all for the purpose of exposing the heroine's moral shortcomings.

The only novel Mrs. Wharton wrote during the war years was *Summer* (1917), often regarded as a companion piece to *Ethan Frome* (1911) since it deals with the same ravaged folk of New England. But, just as *Custom of the Country* shows a switch from the tight scenic methods of *The Reef* to a looser form, so *Summer* shows a loosening of structure from its partner *Ethan Frome*, published a year before *The Reef*. Mrs. Wharton's introduction to *Ethan Frome* had explained the reason for the narrator, who recounts Ethan's story as he himself learned it from a series of chroniclers who only partially understand it themselves. He is more than an observer: he is a "sympathizing intermediary" between simple characters and more sophisticated readers. He alone "has scope enough to see it all, to resolve it back into simplicity."¹¹ *Summer* foregoes such technical devices: Mrs. Wharton, or the implied author, simply recounts the story of Charity Royall (primarily from her angle of vision), her lover, and her guardian, explicating these characters given no resources for self-analysis. Like Undine Spragg, Charity is

¹¹ Introduction to *Ethan Frome*, in *An Edith Wharton Reader*, pp. 214-16.
driven by forces beyond her comprehension, and the author elucidates the entire scene, which here includes "the mountain," one of Edith Wharton's rare attempts to represent the subconscious springs of behavior.  

After _The Reef_, in short, Edith Wharton relinquished formal exercises in the "limited point of view" in order to say more about the world than her central characters could say for her. Then, her effort in _The Age of Innocence_ was to recreate the New York of the 1870's, too ambitious an effort to allow the setting to be restricted to what the characters could actually see, the moments to be limited to the dramatically "crucial."

The subject of _The Age of Innocence_ is ostensibly Jamesian: the hero, an American innocent, gradually falls in love with a woman of European experience, thereby altering forever his moral vision, though he does "the real, the right thing" by living a life of domestic and civic virtue. The triangle, Newland—May—Ellen, reminds us of the quartet of Anna—Darrow—Sophy—Owen in _The Reef_, reminiscent, as discussed above, of the complicated interrelationships of

---

12 Nevius, pp. 170-71.

13 M. Bell says that after _Summer_ Mrs. Wharton "was increasingly preoccupied with the satirical display of personalities incapable of self-understanding, like Undine Spragg. As a writer she enjoyed the sound of her own voice; her own presence is an essential element in the pattern of her fiction" (p. 294).

14 The edition used is _The Age of Innocence_, with an introduction by R. W. B. Lewis (1920; rpt. New York: Scribner's, 1970). Quotations will be identified by page number parenthetically within the text.
Maggie, Mr. Verver, the Prince, and Charlotte in James's The Golden Bowl. But unlike The Reef, and even less like its Jamesian progenitor, the central subject of The Age of Innocence is not the characters' complementary consciousnesses of a situation, but the entire social situation itself. The Age of Innocence has, in Millicent Bell's phrase, "the outward rather than the inward gaze."  

The novel opens at a production of Faust at the old-fashioned Academy of Music, an event which gives Mrs. Wharton an opportunity to characterize the society which frequents it as conservative and formalistic, but vulnerable to change. "The attack," the placement of a story by its opening, is accomplished brilliantly: the "stage" is set (in this case a literal one carrying the performance of a story of great passion while a real audience looks on and gossips rather casually) for the entrance of the main character, Newland Archer, who will in fact find himself pitted against the assembled group in his own dramatic love story. But in the beginning he is of their number. His pleasure in contemplating May Welland, the lovely girl to whom he is about to become engaged, is disturbed by the sight of a dark lady with "what was then called a 'Josephine look'" (p. 9), who quickly draws the attention of Lawrence Lefferts, ruling authority on "form," and Sillerton Jackson, that on "family." The latter announces the verdict: "'I didn't think the Mingotts would have tried it on'" (p. 11).

---

15 M. Bell, p. 296.
Newland agrees that the young lady, Ellen Olenska, has offended against "'Taste,' that far-off divinity of whom 'Form' was the mere visible representative and viceregent" (p. 15), and is thus influenced to urge May to announce their engagement that very evening, the first in a series of ironic acts whereby he immures himself within this glittering group, the limitations of which he only gradually perceives. A second encounter with Ellen, who is disturbingly irreverent about the social pantheon, again jars his New York-bred tastes, but later at dinner with Sillerton Jackson he defends her for the first time, with the startling premise that "'Women ought to be free—as free as we are,' . . . making a discovery of which he was too irritated to measure the terrific consequences" (p. 42). In Chapter VI Newland drops into an armchair near the fire and thinks over the system soon to link him to the factitiously innocent May Welland, "a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs," where all the marriages he knows of are "held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other" (p. 45). Ellen's mere presence has caused Newland to question the conventions, and, from this point on, Mrs. Wharton drops her ironic tone toward the young man. Chapter 6 is divided between this crucial revery and the dinner at which society—led by Lawrence Lefferts, trying to screen his own infidelities—"cuts" Ellen by refusing to attend the Lovell Mingotts' dinner for her. The juxtaposition
suggests that Newland, although at this point he acts out of loyalty for the clan into which he will marry, has cast his lot with Ellen, and both will suffer censure.

Having recognized her true distinction at the dinner preferred as a "lesson" to society by the ethereal van der Luydens, the pinnacle of the pyramid of society, Newland obeys her unconventional summons to visit her the next afternoon. In Chapter 9 he arrives at her eccentric little house in the strange district of "people who wrote" and, amidst recollections of his day spent in the inexorable tribal customs of engagement, confronts the charm of Ellen's "foreignness" for the first time. In Chapter 10 Archer is fully struck by May's comparative conventionality, and the coils of circumstance are in place about his neck. He closes them irrevocably in the climactic conversation of Chapter 12, where, in discussing the unsavory divorce proceedings with Ellen in his capacity of family counsel, Newland assumes, because she does not deny them, that she is guilty of her husband's charges of adultery, and advises her to drop divorce proceedings to avoid "unpleasant" talk. As a further irony, Newland, in suspicious reaction to Ellen's friendship with shady financier Julius Beaufort, urges May to marry him sooner, and it is May's telegram of acceptance that cuts short the conversation in Chapter 18 wherein Newland might have overturned Ellen's contention that their nevertheless flourishing attraction must be stifled, since he himself has taught her the paramount value of domestic stability and honor.
Book Two opens at Newland and May's wedding, "'How like a first night at the Opera!'" to the doomed bridegroom (p. 180). The wedding journey (ironically beginning in the Patroon's Cottage at the van der Luyden's Skuyterkliff, the scene of the tryst with Ellen interrupted by Julius Beaufort) is epitomized in Chapter 20 by the couple's visit to Newland's mother's friends in London six months after the wedding, and May's inability to appreciate the French tutor, the enigmatic M. Rivière, who has preserved his "moral freedom, what we call in French one's quant à soi" (p. 200), and who represents to the lonely Archer the life of the mind he must cultivate on the margins of his inexorably dull marriage. Chapter 21 takes place on a summer day in Newport a year and a half after the wedding. It presents two still pictures beautifully objectifying the forces pulling Archer in two directions: May, poised with "the same Diana-like aloofness as when she had entered the Beaufort ballroom on the night of her engagement" shooting an arrow with "nymph-like ease" (pp. 210-11); Ellen looking out to sea from a pagoda-house on the end of a pier (p. 215). Archer must decide just what is "real." "That vision of the past was a dream, and the reality was what awaited him in the house on the bank overhead: . . . was May sitting under the shameless Olympians and glowing with secret hopes . . ." (p. 215). But his return to the Welland house, "one of the houses in which one always knew exactly what is happening at a given hour" (p. 215), shows that his vision has irrevocably changed:
"... now it was the Welland house, and the life he was expected to lead in it, that had become unreal and irrelevant, and the brief scene on the shore, when he had stood irresolute, halfway down the bank, was as close to him as the blood in his veins" (pp. 217-18). In Chapter 22 Newland's passion has reawakened, redoubled, and the rest of the novel is his attempt to find freedom.

Just as Book One had three decisive conversations between Ellen and Archer (Chapters 12, 15, and 18), so Book Two has three: Chapters 23 and 24 in Boston, where she promises not to return to her husband, as the family has been urging without Archer's knowledge, if he will keep his distance; Chapter 29 in the carriage, where Ellen, who has "looked at the Gorgon," rejects the possibility of, by describing the realities of, a liaison, which seems to necessitate cheap European watering-places; and Chapter 31 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where an argument of almost metaphysical ingenuity results in what seems the only decision: she will "come to him" once, then, in theory, return to Europe and her blackguardly husband. Chapter 32 echoes Chapter 1: with Faust as background once again, Archer determines to work free of the once-coveted May, but May forestalls his announce-

ment with the news that Ellen is returning to Europe. The reason becomes clear only after the tribal function masking her expulsion, where Archer realizes for the first time that everyone, including his wife, assumes that he and Ellen are "lovers in the extreme sense peculiar to 'foreign' vocabu-
laries" (p. 335): May is pregnant, and, as she tells him with her eyes "wet with victory," she told Ellen the afternoon of the visit to the Museum, before she was sure.

Chapter 34 takes place twenty-six years later: May is dead, and Archer is going to Europe with his son Dallas (the baby in question in the preceding chapter) before the boy marries one of "Beaufort's bastards," the charming girl who fulfills Larry Lefferts' dire prophecy (p. 338). Archer has lived honourably ("After all, there was good in the old ways"), but he has missed "the flower of life," symbolized by his memory of Ellen (p. 347). His son Dallas, spontaneous and open, will never live in the "deaf-and-dumb asylum" he watched his parents endure (p. 356), but neither can he understand the fine shades of feeling that they perceived in each other, and that prevent Newland now from going up to see Ellen, "the fear lest that last shadow of reality should lose its edge" (p. 361).

The cast of characters of The Age of Innocence is much larger than that of The Reef: a whole society is represented by well-drawn minor characters like Lefferts, Jackson, Mrs. Manson Mingott, the Beauforts, the van der Luydens, and Newland's mother and sister, as well as marginal comic figures such as the Marchioness Manson, Dr. Carver, and the blowsy Blenker girl. There are a few minor characters "so typical that each connotes a whole section of the social background" (WF, p. 83): Ned Winsatt representing the literary man manqué, M. Rivière the continental aesthete--characters who
like Miss Painter and Mrs. McTarvie-Birch of The Reef function to suggest whole milieus not otherwise described. But most of the characters in The Age of Innocence are individuals, not types, and may, indeed, be modelled on real people of Mrs. Wharton's acquaintance, and which, when invoked in assembly as at the Opera, the Archers' wedding, or at Ellen's farewell dinner, form an astonishingly realistic crowd.  

Newland is represented at the beginning as the ideal product of this society, convention itself. The "point of view" is not his, strictly speaking, for Chapter 1 opens with an ironic portrait of the opera crowd before he arrives. Once there, however, his is the angle of vision on the assembly: his attention directs ours, although what he sees is subject to Mrs. Wharton's scrutiny, ever keener than his own:

When Newland Archer opened the door at the back of the club box the curtain had just gone up on the garden scene. . . . /The prima donna/ sang, of course, "M'ama!" and not "He loves me," since an unalterable and unquestioned law of the musical world required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences. This seemed as natural to Newland Archer as all the other conventions on which his life was moulded: such as the duty of using two silver-backed brushes with his monogram in blue enamel to part his hair, and of never appearing in society without a flower (preferably a gardenia) in his buttonhole. (pp. 4-5)

But we are not, as in The Reef, restricted to seeing

---

16 See R. B. Dooley, "A Footnote to Edith Wharton," AL, 26 (March 1954), 78-85, for some suggestions (August Belmont as Julius Beaufort, Mrs. Paran Stevens as Mrs. Lemuel Struthers, Mary Mason Jones as Mrs. Manson Mingott).
what Newland can see himself. Frequently Mrs. Wharton de-
scribes the richly appointed settings of the novel in far
more detail than a languid young gentleman would likely be
actually conscious of:

... his eyes returned to the stage.
No expense had been spared on the setting, which was
acknowledged to be very beautiful even by people who
shared his acquaintance with the Opera houses of
Paris and Vienna. The foreground, to the footlights,
was covered with emerald green cloth. In the middle
distance symmetrical mounds of woolly green moss
bounded by croquet hoops formed the base of shrubs
shaped like orange-trees but studded with large pink
and red roses. Gigantic pansies, considerably larger
than the roses, and closely resembling the floral
penwipers made by female parishioners for fashionable
clergymen, sprang from the moss beneath the rose-
trees; and here and there a daisy grafted on a rose-
branch flowered with a luxuriance prophetic of Mr.
Luther Burbank's far-off prodigies. (p. 6)

When the character serving as our angle of vision lingers
"in the library hung with Spanish leather and furnished with
buhl and malachite" (p. 22), the setting is surely not one
that, like the Théâtre Français, is limited to the dramati-
cally essential (WF, p. 83). Much later, in A Backward
Glance (1933), Mrs. Wharton would restate that dramatic
rule, cited as a rule of thumb for the novelist in The Writ-
ing of Fiction, as a fault in Henry James's later works:

The characters in "The Wings of the Dove" and "The
Golden Bowl" seem isolated in a Crookes tube for our
inspection: his stage was cleared like that of the
Théâtre Français in the good old days when no chair
or table was introduced that was not relevant to the
action (a good rule for the stage, but an unneces-
sary embarrassment to fiction). (pp. 190-91)

The Age of Innocence, written a few years before The Writing
of Fiction recommended Jamesian relevance of setting, shows
that Mrs. Wharton had already in practice disposed with this

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
"embarrassment." Her attention shifts easily from the study of perception of the world to the world itself.

But of course setting still serves to define character. R. W. B. Lewis speaks admiringly of Mrs. Wharton's "exploitation of place as a basic fictional resource" learned from James. Even more than The Reef this later novel uses rooms, houses, scenic backgrounds to pinpoint character since "each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things" (WF, p. 7). A brilliant example is Ellen's little house, where her skillful decoration first makes visible to Archer her "foreign" charm:

The atmosphere of the room was so different from any he had ever breathed that self-consciousness vanished in the sense of adventure. He had been before in drawing rooms hung with red damask, with pictures "of the Italian school"; what struck him was the way in which Medora Manson's shabby hired house, with its blighted background of pampas grass and Rogers statuettes, had, by a turn of the hand, and the skilful use of a few properties, been transformed into something intimate, "foreign," subtly suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiments. He tried to analyze the trick, to find a clue to it in the way the chairs and tables were grouped, in the fact that only two Jacqueminit roses (of which nobody ever bought less than a dozen) had been placed in the slender vase at his elbow, and in the vague pervading perfume that was . . . like the scent of some far-off bazaar . . . .

His mind wandered away to the question of what May's drawing room would look like. . . . (pp. 71-72)

Settings also objectify ways of life: the New York brownstones are hereditary rectitude; Newport is ritualistic holiday-making; Paris is "the life of art and study and pleasure." And settings dramatize for the reader as well. Lewis particularly admires Newland's pursuit of Ellen from Newport to

17 Introduction, The Age of Innocence, xi.
the Blenkers' farm to sweltering Boston, and finally the semi-public paddle steamer as symbolic of their effort to find a private place where real communication is possible. The crux of the problem is dramatized by the fact that Ellen and Newland have no "place" for their love affair. Newland says "I want . . . to get away with you into a world where . . . . we shall be simply two human beings who love each other. . . ." She answers, "Where is that country? . . . I know so many who've tried to find it; and, believe me, they all got out by mistake at wayside stations: at places like Boulogne, or Pisa, or Monte Carlo--and it wasn't at all different from the old world they'd left, but only smaller and dingier and more promiscuous" (p. 290).

But settings are not limited to what the characters perceive, "only what the intelligence concerned would have noticed, and always in terms within the register of that intelligence" (WF, p. 85), as they were in The Reef. The obvious point is that Mrs. Wharton, as she had in The Custom of the Country and Summer, reverted to the use of the traditional omniscient narrator after The Reef, although in The Writing of Fiction (1925), possibly because of the recent publication of James's theory in Lubbock's edition of his letters (1920) and Lubbock's Craft of Fiction (1921), Mrs. Wharton's attention turned once more to the virtues of the limited point of view. Her own managerial method in this broad picture of manners is often contrasted with James's

18 Ibid., xi-xiv.
attempt to present the consciousness of, for example, Strether himself in *The Ambassadors*.  

Viola Hopkins identifies the voice we hear in *The Age of Innocence* as "that of a knowing, sympathetic but critical, spectator-member" of the society in question, who deals in visible gestures and habits as expressions of the inner life. Like a seventeenth-century Dutch painter Mrs. Wharton records the minutest details to compose a carefully wrought design. But such minutiae are not universally admired. Louis Auchincloss thinks "the presence of 'things' clogs even the best of Mrs. Wharton's writing. . . . Even in her moment of greatest emotional strain, when she looks at her watch she looks at 'a little gold-faced watch on an enameled chain'" (see p. 233). But I would suggest that such particularity, certainly improbable in the record of a perturbed character's consciousness, is part of an almost scientific approach to the documentation of the milieu. Mrs. Wharton assumes the attitude of an archaeologist. It is not coincidental that Ellen's and Archer's last tryst is held in the room with the "Cesnola antiquities" of the Metropolitan Museum, which, Archer supposes, will someday be a

---

19 See J. W. Beach, *Twentieth Century Novel*, pp. 294-303 ("Everything is rendered through the consciousness of Newland Archer, but nothing is made of his consciousness," p. 302). See also Auchincloss, *Edith Wharton*, p. 31; M. Bell, p. 296; and Hoffman, pp. 12, 17.  

20 Hopkins, pp. 351-53.  

His mind, as always when they first met, was wholly absorbed in the delicious details that made her herself and no other. Presently he rose and approached the case before which she stood. Its glass shelves were crowded with small broken objects—hardly recognizable domestic utensils, ornaments and personal trifles—made of glass, of clay, of discolored bronze and other time-blurred substances.

"It seems cruel," she said, "that after a while nothing matters . . . any more than these little things, that used to be necessary and important to forgotten people, and now have to be guessed at under a magnifying glass and labeled: 'Use unknown.'"

"Yes; but meanwhile—"

"Ah, meanwhile—"

As she stood there . . . it seemed incredible that this pure harmony of line and color should ever suffer the stupid law of change. (pp. 309-10)

Vernon Parrington objects to the countless allusions to particular styles: "... the easy way in which she assumes that the reader will understand her casual reference to Sir Charles's endeavor to revive a 'sincere' furniture, puts one to scrambling to recall that Eastlakeism was the polite counterpart, in the Seventies, of the robust rebellions of William Morris against a dowdy Victorianism." But the effort to document the taste of her characters might well be ascribed to a worthier motive than snobbery. This is Mrs. Wharton's attempt to revive the "faint fragrance" of old New York, a Proustean remembrance of things past, which, says Louis Auchincloss, critics do not always recognize as a traditional novelistic effort, habitual with the Victorians.

---


23 Auchincloss, Edith Wharton, p. 29.
Perhaps many of the allusions are obscure, but when they are caught, the emotional effect is undeniable. I am particularly fond of the scene at the end of Chapter 15, wherein the "inevitable" coming together in the Patroon's Cottage had been foiled by the untimely appearance of Julius Beaufort, and Archer turns to the consolations of his study and a new box of books from London, containing (along with a volume of Spencer, a collection of Daudet, and "a novel called Middle-march, as to which there had lately been interesting things said in the reviews") The House of Life.

He took it up, and found himself plunged in an atmosphere unlike any he had ever breathed in books; so warm, so rich, and yet so ineffably tender, that it gave a new and haunting beauty to the most elementary of human passions. All through the night he pursued through those enchanted pages the vision of a woman who had the face of Ellen Olenska; but when he woke the next morning, and looked out at the brownstone houses across the street, and thought of his desk in Mr. Letterblair's office, and the family pew in Grace Church, his hour in the park of Skuytercliff became as far outside the pale of probability as the visions of the night. (pp. 139-40)

The invocation, by means of that box of books, of the dusky mystery of Jane Morris, the pre-Raphaelites, and their medieval dreams, and their juxtaposition to the brown houses, desks, and pews of Old New York is a masterly use of the "things" peculiar to an era to illuminate the soul. Perhaps Newland's study, with its "dark embossed paper, Eastlake bookcases and 'sincere' armchairs and tables" (p. 205) might have a comparable emotional value for the furniture enthusiast.

The "point of view," then, is Mrs. Wharton's own, and
it takes as its province the thoughts of Newland Archer and the facts of his world. As in The Reef, the unfolding events are presented "dramatically," in deftly managed scenes marked by climactic dialogue. But Mrs. Wharton has broadened the effort of The Reef to dramatize narrative in reveries and flashbacks, keeping the present scene firmly in hand. She does not avoid omniscient narration to set the stage for those scenes. In Chapter 4, for example, the visit to Granny Mingott is prefaced by a two-page description of her outrageously located house and her enormously bloated body (pp. 27-29). It is, it is true, tied to Newland's amused recollections of the outspoken ancestress ("A visit to Mrs. Manson Mingott was always an amusing episode to the young man," p. 27) but the point is not his version of Granny Mingott but the exposition of facts about her. Chapter 5 begins with a three-page introduction explaining the roles in New York society of Sillerton Jackson and Mrs. Archer, and placing them in the great Mingott-Manson dichotomy (pp. 33-35). Chapter 33 opens with a conversation between Mrs. Archer and Mrs. Welland, occasioning a description of the standard formal dinner, and the triumph May had scored in organizing this one for Ellen, that takes place before he arrives (pp. 327-28). There is, then, a great deal more exposition than in The Reef, where such violations of the point of view were not allowed, and a corresponding increase in narrative complexity.

There is, for instance, a sophisticated set of scenic
echoes. John J. Murphy divides the book into six structural units, in Book I, Chapters 1-10, 11-12, 13-18, in Book II, Chapters 19-22, 23-25, and 26-34, the first balancing the sixth, the second balancing the fifth, and the third balancing the fourth. Faust is performed in both the first and the sixth, for example, but, ironically, Newland's feelings toward the two women in the Mingott box have reversed. Two dinners in the first and sixth units publicly proclaim Ellen's acceptance by society, then her expulsion. Two meetings with May in either section, the first in Central Park, the second in his stuffy study, convince Archer of her impenetrable conventionality. The repetitions often function to remind and chasten. May is delighted that their wedding night will be spent in the Patroon's Cottage, for Ellen had told her "it's the only house she's seen in America that she could imagine being perfectly happy in" (p. 190). In Chapter 34 Archer has just returned from an official reception at the Metropolitan Museum. "'Why, this used to be one of the old Cesnola rooms,' he heard someone say; and instantly everything about him vanished, and he was sitting alone on a hard leather divan against a radiator, while a slight figure in a long sealskin cloak moved away down the meagerly-fitted vistas of the old Museum" (p. 344).


25 These examples are from Murphy, pp. 2-3. His point is that the parallel structure is satiric: "Archer's life beats against the mold in which he encases himself..." (p. 1).
The web of associations is not confined to subject matter, places and things. Mrs. Wharton studs the more prominent narrative with at least two image patterns of almost Jamesian subtlety. The first characterizes the society in anthropological terms, with the obvious implication that it is a basically primitive society, though moribund rather than nascent. The social structure is described in terms of "a small and slippery pyramid, in which, as yet, hardly a fissure had been made or a foothold gained" (p. 49), at the top of which can be described the spectral van der Luydens, as if "rather gruesomely preserved in the airless atmosphere of a perfectly irreproachable existence, as bodies caught in glaciers keep for years a rosy life-in-death" (p. 53), and who reign with "a kind of viceregal rigidity, mouthpieces of some remote ancestral authority which fate compelled them to wield" (p. 55). The ritual visits to his prospective bride's family, rolling "from one tribal doorstep to another," make Archer feel as though he had been "shown off like a wild animal cunningly trapped" (p. 69). His wedding is "a rite that seemed to belong to the dawn of history" (p. 179). The farewell dinner for Ellen is a chilling example of tribal solidarity. "There were certain things that had to be done . . . ; and one of these, in the old New York code, was the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe" (p. 334). The second charac-

— 26 Particularly useful on these image patterns are Hopkins, pp. 354-57, and Pitlick, pp. 353-57.
terizes Newland's relation to that society in terms of space: the aforementioned pyramid, a vertical ranking with the Ar­chers at a point which "most people imagined . . . to be the very apex of the pyramid" but which was actually far below the van der Luydens, who were firmly linked to the French and British aristocracy (p. 49); then what surrounds it in horizontal relationship to it, both literal and geographi­cal, and figurative and intellectual.

"When I was a girl," Mrs. Archer used to say, "we knew everybody between the Battery and Canal Street; and only the people one knew had carriages. It was perfectly easy to place anyone then; now one can't tell, and I prefer not to try."

Only old Catherine Mingott, with her absence of moral prejudices and almost parvenu indifference to the subtler distinctions, might have bridged the abyss; but she had never opened a book or looked at a picture. . . . (pp. 102-03)

Archer himself suffers the agonies of alienation from his own tribe, and they are expressed in terms of precipices and abysses. His effort in Chapter 18 to persuade Ellen to ac­knowledge their feelings makes him feel "as though he had been struggling for hours up the face of a steep precipice" (p. 174). After their wedding May turns to him. "'Darling!' Archer said—and suddenly the same black abyss yawned before him and he felt himself sinking into it, deeper and deeper, while his voice rambled on smoothly and cheerfully. . . ." (p. 186). Meeting Ellen in Boston "he felt as if he were shouting at her across endless distances" (p. 230). The parallels in structure and the patterns in the language sug­gest a design, although Mrs. Wharton repeatedly said that she despised the Jamesian geometrical design as "one of the
least important things in fiction" (BG, p. 190). But of course form is an outgrowth of subject, and in this case, even more than The Reef, she exercised selection, and brooded long, to push the subject—an age of regularity—"to the last point of its exquisite powers of pattern-making" ("CF," p. 230).

Mrs. Wharton handles the presentation of time, like point of view, more broadly. In The Reef a chapter was a scene, and background information was disguised as reverie or flashback. A chapter closed with a "curtain," creating a highly managed and contrived atmosphere "of the psychologic Racinian unity, intensity and gracility" (letter, p. 149). In The Age of Innocence as well a chapter might be a single scene, or part of a scene (often prefaced by an essay on social customs or tribal history), such as Chapters 1 and 2 at the opera, Chapter 3 at the Beaufort ball, Chapter 4 at Mrs. Mingott's, and so forth. Or, on the other hand, it might cover separate but related events, as Chapter 6, Newland's reverie on marriage to May and, a few days later, the refusal of society to meet Ellen and Mrs. Archer's decision to see the van der Luydens; Chapter 10, Archer's walk with May in Central Park and, the next afternoon, the family's stir over Ellen's visit to Mrs. Struthers' Sunday night. Or, indeed, a chapter might capsule in a key event, or "crucial moment," a long stretch of time, such as Chapter 20, representing by an evening in London and flashbacks the entire wedding journey, and Chapter 21, representing by a summer afternoon that
somnolent routine which needs but the name of Ellen spoken to fall apart around Archer. These latter two chapters cover two years of marriage. But, after Chapters 22 through 25, which depict Archer's pursuit of Ellen from Newport to Boston and the consequent interview with M. Rivière, and with Chapter 26, and an introductory discourse on the inexorable ritual of opening "the season" in November (disguised, after they are presented, as the points habitually raised at Mrs. Archer's Thanksgiving dinner table, pp. 255-56), the action is no longer episodic, but sustained in a continuous movement toward the climactic interview and the decision by Archer to leave (Chapter 31), foiled by May, whose passionate generosity cannot extend to letting the father of her child go. It is in Chapter 34, an epilogue, that the focus on time widens to cover twenty-six years, although again, typically, Mrs. Wharton locates the panorama on specific conversations between Newland and Dallas, in Newland's library, "the room in which most of the real things of his life had happened" (p. 344), and in Paris, where he actually sees for the first time in many years "the life of art and study and pleasure" which has privately sustained him for years (p. 354).

The range achieved by the use of the omniscient point of view and elastic time scheme are most obviously exploited in such an epilogue. The Reef, ending as it did with Anna's horrified view of Mrs. McTarvie-Birch, a private vision of untold consequences, and the dramatic drop of the curtain,
is often criticized, as discussed above, as ambiguous and hence virtually meaningless. The method is defensible if Dar­row be regarded as Mrs. Wharton's spokesman at the last for the kind of stoicism that is really the only response to Anna's dilemma. But sensitive critics do call for the kind of epilogue that the method of The Age of Innocence, less bound by considerations of the limited point of view and the dramatic presentation of the crucial moment, naturally al­lows. This is not to say that the epilogue does away with all ambiguity: in fact, though occasional critics find a clear statement for individual freedom or for social soli­darity, most recognize the inherent ambiguity, that "there was good in the old ways," but "good in the new order too."27 I feel that the sense of loss predominates over the satis­faction in solidity: Archer has shrunk in spirit, not grown. "... Archer had found himself held fast by habit, by memo­ries, by a sudden startled shrinking from new things. . . . The worst of doing one's duty was that it apparently unfitted one for doing anything else" (p. 351).

Perhaps it was the appearance of Lubbock's edition of James's letters in 1920, and his simplified version of James's theoretical aims in The Craft of Fiction in 1921, that in-

27 Auchincloss, "Edith Wharton and Her New Yorks," thinks Wharton sides with society (p. 38), as do Hopkins, pp. 345-57, and Walton, Ch. 7, "Old New York." Nevius, Ch. 9, on the other hand, thinks "the indictment outweighs the defense" (p. 177). But stressing the ambiguity in the treatment are Louis O. Coxe, "What Edith Wharton Saw in In­nocence," New Republic, 27 June 1955; rpt. EW: 20th Century Views, pp. 155-61; Lyde, pp. 95-98; and Pitlick, Ch. VII.
fluenced Edith Wharton to recommend the Jamesian form of The Reef in her Writing of Fiction in 1925. And perhaps it was her own "sudden startled shrinking from new things" that led to her notable intolerance for the experiments of writers like Virginia Woolf, a writer who was, however, to move in a direction surprisingly similar to the panorama of The Age of Innocence in Between the Acts, published in 1941 after both of them were dead.

b. The Waves to Between the Acts: the Emergence of Fact

One can only surmise why Edith Wharton turned from the tight drama of The Reef to the sprawling chronicle of The Custom of the Country, but Virginia Woolf's turning away from the poetry of The Waves is well documented. She decides during the composition of The Years that "there must be contrast; one strata or layer can't be developed intensively, as I did I expect in The Waves [sic], without harm to the others" (Diary, 16 Oct. 1935, p. 248). But she has a desire to include everything that proves frustrating to effect: it is to be an "Essay-Novel," "to take in everything, sex, education, life etc.: and come, with the most powerful and agile leaps, like a chamois, across precipices from 1880 to here and now" (2 Nov. 1932, p. 183), an attempt to combine the fact of the early Night and Day (1919) with the vision of The Waves--"I want to give the whole of the present society--nothing less" (25 April 1933, p. 191), a daydream of inclusiveness. Furthermore, she retains her visionary
attitude toward form, and formulates schemes even more dif-
ficult than the "play-poem" idea. ". . . I have to some ex-
tent forced myself to break every mould and find a fresh form
of being, that is of expression, for everything I feel or
think. . . . Here in Here and Now [To be The Years] I am
breaking the mould made by The Waves" (27 July 1934, p. 213).
As with the content, the novelty of the form was inclusive-
ness. "The thing is to be venturous, bold, to take every
possible fence. One might introduce plays, poems, letters,
dialogues: conversation: argument. How to do that will be
one of the problems. I mean intellectual argument in the
form of art: I mean how to give ordinary waking Arnold Ben-
nett life the form of art?" (31 May 1933, p. 201). Finally
"a kind of form is, I hope, imposing itself, corresponding
to the dimensions of the human being; one should be able to
feel a wall made out of all the influences" (16 Oct. 1935,
p. 248). 28

In time the "Essay" was detached from the Novel, and
became a hypothetical speech read to "the London National
Society for Women's Service." Its introduction explains
that "we must understand a little of the past in order to
understand anything of the present. We cannot understand the
present if we isolate it from the past. . . . We must be-
come the people that we were two or three generations ago.

28 At least one critic takes this idea very seriously. See Richter, pp. 203-09.
Let us be our great grandmothers. This is indeed a significant goal for the writer who ten years before had announced that "in or about December, 1910, human character changed" (I: 320). But in reading a novel about the past "we must now and again shut our eyes to the detail, and try to realize the structure that is, the conviction which, though never explicitly stated is yet always there. . . . \With the Pargiters one is money; the other is love." The finished novel subsumes hard facts (though Mrs. Woolf herself felt that it "releases such a torrent of fact as I did not know I had in me," 19 Dec. 1932, p. 184) in a presentation of spots of time, reminding us of Jacob's Room, scenes from 1880, 1891, 1907, 1908, 1910, 1911, 1913, 1914, 1917, 1918, and finally, the Present Day, that are meant to suggest the fortunes of the Pargiter family, especially as represented by Eleanor, the unmarried eldest daughter.

The interludes of The Waves reappear as short descriptions of the weather, not in italics now, far less "poetic" and complex but serving a similar function of registering cyclic change in the natural setting. The point of view also reminds us of Jacob's Room, Mrs. Dalloway, and To the Lighthouse: the narrator moves from mind to mind at will. But,


30 Ibid., p. 146.

31 The edition used is The Years (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1937). Quotations will be identified by page number within the text.
as she had in the latter two books, Mrs. Woolf drops the coy self-consciousness of *Jacob's Room*, and nothing is made of the narrator's limitations. Around 1910 in the book it is noticeable that Mrs. Woolf maintains a single consistent point of view throughout a scene, sometimes through several, and uses logical transitions between scenes instead of the contiguities in place or time notable in *Mrs. Dalloway*. But the final long section, "the party," an odd section centering on a gathering of the now aged family that lasts until dawn, the narrator again switches around among three or four minds in the attempt to give the "submerged side" of all that had come before, to "enrich and stabilise" it (22 May 1934, p. 212).

Leonard Woolf thought he had to tell his wife that the book was a success to prevent her from committing suicide, though he actually thought it not very good. 32 Ironically it was a best-seller, especially in America. Mrs. Woolf was most pleased by a review by Ernest de Selincourt in the Observer which praised the method as presenting "the quality of infinity in all experience, in every detail of it." 33 But most critics see the form as fragmentary and unsatisfactory. 34

32 See Q. Bell, II: 196.

33 The review appeared 14 March 1937, p. 5, and is quoted at length by Haller, p. 158.

34 For example, see Beach, "Virginia Woolf"; Bennett, p. 59; Blackstone, Ch. XII, pp. 194-205; Johnstone, pp. 368-70; Schaefer, Ch. VII. The outstanding exception is Hafley, who thinks *The Years* Virginia Woolf's best novel (see esp. pp. 145-46).
The problem is exacerbated by the character of Eleanor, whose
dreamy inconsequence throughout the novel is represented per­
fectly by her falling asleep during the climactic party.
"If there is one thing that Mrs. Woolf loves more than
another," wrote a disgruntled Joseph Warren Beach after The
Years appeared, "it is unfinished sentences, fragmentary
conversations, questions unanswered and unformulated. These
correspond to lines of conduct vaguely projected and early
broken off." Mrs. Woolf visualized the book as "a curi­
ously uneven time sequence--a series of great balloons,
linked by straight narrow passages of narrative" (5 Jan.
1933, p. 187): balloons, separate enclosed entities, frag­
ments, an instructive parallel to the total saturation of
The Waves.

Between the Acts pops the theoretical balloons, and
regains the lost unity by traditional means. Unlike both
The Waves and The Years it does not begin with vast visions
of form. "Will another novel ever swim up? If so, how?
The only hint I have towards it is that it's to be dialogue:
and poetry: and prose; all quite distinct. No more long
closely written books" (6 August 1937, p. 275). She is
deeply tired.

... here am I sketching out a new book; only don't
please impose that huge burden on me again, I im­
plore. Let it be random and tentative: something I
can blow of a morning, to relieve myself of Roger:
don't, I implore, lay down a scheme; call in all the
cosmic immensities; and force my tired and diffident

35 Beach, "Virginia Woolf," p. 611.
brain to embrace another whole—all parts contributing—not yet awhile. But to amuse myself, let me note: Why not Poyntzet Hall: a centre: all literature discussed in connection with real little incongruous living humour; and anything that comes into my head; but "I" rejected: "We" substituted: to whom at the end there shall /sic/ be an invocation? "We" . . . the composed /sic/ of many different things . . . we all life, all art, all waifs and strays—a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole—the present state of my mind? And English country; and a scenic old house—and a terrace where nursemaids walk—and people passing—and a perpetual variety and change from intensity to prose, and facts—and notes; and—but eno'! (26 April 1938, pp. 279-80)

Wanting, as she did, "to float all preconceived theories" (p. 301), she wrote a "medley" (p. 298), which she thinks "an interesting attempt in a new method. I think it's more quintessential than the others" (p. 345). And thus even though Mrs. Woolf did not live to make the final revision of her manuscript, its random, fragmentary quality need not be taken as proof that it is in fact "unfinished."36

Between the Acts opens with an overture, describing the desultory conversation of gentle people "in the big room with the windows open to the garden," and the sounds outside, ............................................................

36 Gordan says the Between the Acts MS is in a state of greater disorder than any other MS of a Woolf novel in the Berg Collection (p. 78). James Southall Wilson, "Time and Virginia Woolf," Virginia Quarterly Review, 18 (Spring 1942), 267-76, thinks this "a completed novel but perhaps an unfinished work of art" (p. 273). Cf. Freedman, pp. 268-69, and Hafley, pp. 159-61. Naremore, however, relates the unfinished quality to Woolf's meaning ("orts and fragments"), pp. 219-39. His essay, by the way, is an excellent rebuttal to two major criticisms of this neglected novel, F. R. Leavis's savage "After To the Lighthouse," Scrutiny, 10 (January 1942), 295-98, accusing the novel of "extraordinary vacancy and pointlessness" (p. 295), and Friedman, pp. 207-08, commenting that "a unifying principle is nowhere to be found" (p. 208).
the cough of a cow, the chuckle of a bird. It places the characters very firmly in the present moment, Isa "like a swan swimming its way," "her body like a bolster in its faded dressing-gown" (p. 8); attracted to Mr. Haines, the "gentleman farmer" whose ravaged face hides mystery and passion; his "goose-faced" wife who will destroy the emotion that isolates them "as a thrush pecks the wings off a butterfly" (p. 9); and "the old man in the armchair--Mr. Oliver, of the Indian Civil Service, retired" (p. 7). But it also suggests their place in history. The lowly topic of conversation, the cesspool, will be built "on the Roman road. From an aeroplane, he Mr. Oliver said, you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars" (p. 7).

Then, as if the curtain of darkness had lifted, the narrator describes Pointz Hall on the next morning, a homely old house the Olivers have occupied for a hundred and twenty years. Mrs. Swithin, Mr. Oliver's sister, is within with her favorite reading, the Outline of History. Evelyn Haller suggests that H. G. Wells' epigraph, from Friedrich Ratzel, epitomizes Mrs. Woolf's own basic idea, "the conviction that all existence is one--a single conception sustained from be-

37 The text is Between the Acts (1941; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1953). Quotations will be identified parenthetically within the text.
ginning to end upon one identical law"—further evidence that Mrs. Woolf had ceased to believe modern human character essentially different from what came before. There follow three vignettes—of Mrs. Swithin, the garden and baby George's view of it, and Isa—very much in the mode of *Monday or Tuesday* (1921) and the novels immediately following: examinations of the modes of perception. Mrs. Swithin, the only character here with Bergsonian vision, "was given to increasing the bounds of the moment by flights into past or future" (p. 11). Nurses chat inconsequently in the garden, and George has the vision of the snail in "Kew Gardens" or one of the children in Section 1 of *The Waves*: "the flower blazed between the angles of the roots... it filled the caverns behind the eyes with light" (p. 12). His grandfather, Old Oliver, is "a roar and a hot breath and a stream of coarse grey hair" (p. 12). Isa examines her "rather heavy, yet handsome, face" in the three-sided mirror, and sees her love for Mr. Haines in her eyes, but in the surrounding objects her "other love; love for her husband, the stockbroker—'The father of my children,' she added, slipping into the cliché conveniently provided by fiction. Inner love was in the eyes; outer love on the dressing-table" (p. 14).

So Mrs. Swithin reads in the early morning; after breakfast George plays in the garden and old Bart frightens

---

him; Isa spies the boy, the nurses and the baby returning to the house, and then she orders the fish for lunch. There is, even in the little vignettes which introduce two of the major consciousnesses into which Mrs. Woolf permits us to see, Mrs. Swithin and Isa (for George is seen again only once, from the outside, when he runs to his mother during the interlude of the pageant), a sequence of events, a real "circumstantial context," as Guiguet calls it, that, in their ordinariness and continuity, remind us of Mrs. Dalloway. But in their organization into a sequence Mrs. Woolf does not exploit emotional associations (so prominent in Jacob's Room), or the simultaneity and contiguity so marked in Mrs. Dalloway. The events of the day unfold in sequence: there is a plot, the likes of which Mrs. Woolf had not written since Orlando (1928).

That plot might be summarized as 1) the overture, 2) morning, 3) before the pageant, 4) the pageant, and 5) after the pageant, comparable to a five-act play. I separate Section 2 from 3 because the oblique introduction of the pageant by way of Mrs. Swithin's ritualistic remarks changes the mode of the novel from explorations of moments to a more purposeful narrative. Section 3 begins when, almost by accident, Mrs. Swithin broaches the central subject of the novel, of which no one until then seems aware.

'I've been nailing the placard on the Barn,' she

said, giving him a little pat on the shoulder. The words were like the first peal of a chime of bells. As the first peals, you hear the second; as the second peals, you hear the third. So when Isa heard Mrs. Swithin say: 'I've been nailing the placard to the Barn,' she knew she would say next: 'For the pageant.' And he would say: 'Today? By Jupiter! I'd forgotten!' 'If it's fine,' Mrs. Swithin continued, 'they'll act on the terrace.' 'And if it's wet,' Bartholomew continued, 'in the Barn.' 'And which will it be?' Mrs. Swithin continued. 'Wet or fine?' Then, for the seventh time in succession, they both looked out of the window. (pp. 19-20)

The relentless meteorological speculation of To the Lighthouse has become a historical ritual, a performance. But this seventh time, at the present time, it has another dimension as well. Isa is reading the newspaper ("for her generation the newspaper was a book," p. 18). "The same chime followed the same chime, only this year beneath the chime she heard: 'The girl screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer'" (p. 20). The scene dramatizes the three characters' different views of the world. Mrs. Swithin has her faith, while Bart adheres to reason: she would pray for fine weather, he would "provide umbrellas." But they are perfectly complementary: "What she saw he didn't; what he saw she didn't—and so on, ad infinitum" (p. 22). Isa, on the contrary, is incomplete and searching for a remedy, like all her generation (p. 18).

While the young people decorate the barn the three have a rambling conversation starting with the luncheon fish, and proceeding by association to the sea, the geographical
history of the region, the skills of savages, the Pharaohs' dental problems: another indication that this day is but the latest moment in history. The very mention of the luncheon menu recalls when "there were rhododendrons in the Strand; and mammoths in Piccadilly" (p. 25), a time of vast nonhuman silences reminding us of the interludes in *The Waves*. As discussed above, even those interludes had human beings and human associations, but their mood was stark, still, and solitary. Here the silence is the dim, distant background, but it is always broken. The narrator describes the dining room, inhabited only by the spectral Candish arranging roses. Two pictures hang there, one of a gruff ancestor, "a talk producer," and a lady, not an identifiable person but "a picture" who "led the eye up, down, from the curve to the straight, through glades of greenery and shades of silver, dun, and rose into silence. The room was empty" (p. 30).

Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence. (p. 30)

In *The Waves* the silence was not broken, at least until Bernard's summing up; but here a door opens and five voices fill the room. "Utterly impossible was it, even in the heart of the country, to be alone? That was the shock. . . . There must be society" (p. 30).

Society means Mrs. Manresa, who simply drops in with a friend, William Dodge. She is a reincarnation of the Wife of Bath, or, even more basic than that, a "wild child of na-
ture," born in Tasmania, according to Wells a nineteenth-century English penal colony and long ago a haunt of Paleolithic man. She is a superb character, observed almost always from the outside, although she talks so much that her feelings are fully explored. Isa supplies an element of silence in the ensuing scene, as she observes William Dodge, an uncertain gentleman who is alien, homosexual. The conversation is interrupted by a short sequence about the fish pond, scene of romantic musings by the scullery maids (the cook wishes guests wouldn't give the girls scary ideas, p. 27), a primeval water world reinstating for a moment the "silence" of the interludes and the empty dining room (pp. 34-35). Then Giles Oliver, Isa's husband, arrives to complete the party. An unwilling stockbroker, he, like his wife Isa, has read the papers and is feeling impotent, enraged about threats of war. "He was the very type of all that Mrs. Manresa adored" (p. 37), but he frightens Dodge, because he loathes the intruder, and he frightens his wife, who loves and hates him, and who writes poetry in secret in an account book so he will not suspect. After eating they look at the view replete with history, corroborated as it were by Figgis's Guide Book (1833). But Giles, like Isa hearing overtones to the seven-times repeated conversation

---

40 See Haller, pp. 164-70. Miss Haller alone among the critics I have read emphasizes the parallels between Wells and Between the Acts in her very interesting section on this novel, pp. 159-79. The fact that an Edwardian materialist might have influenced this novel, a reversion by Mrs. Woolf to certain traditions, is interesting indeed.
about the pageant, is irritated at "old fogies who sat and looked at views over coffee and cream when the whole of Europe—over there—was bristling like. . . . He had no command of metaphor. . . . At any moment guns would rake that land into furrows. . . ." (p. 42).

It is beyond the lily pool, that place of primeval mystery, in a place "always shady; sun-flecked in summer, dark and damp in winter," a cradle of life, that Miss La Trobe, the third major consciousness of the novel, has located the dressing-room for the play. Like Mrs. Manresa, she is of mysterious origin (she reminds one Mrs. Bingham of the Tartars—"not that she had been to Russia," p. 45); like William Dodge, she is apparently homosexual. Like Giles, she is a 'man' of action: "she had a passion for getting things up" (p. 45), and "another play always lay behind the play she had just written" (p. 48). The characters suddenly become an "audience" ("'Our part,' said Bartholomew, 'is to be the audience. And a very important part too,'" p. 45) but with nothing yet to watch. Only old Mrs. Swithin has the power to heal the kind of alienation that seizes the characters: she takes William Dodge through the house, and her inconsequential remarks on its past ("'Here,' she said, 'yes, here,' she tapped the counterpane, 'I was born. In this bed,'" p. 53) and its future ("'The nursery,' said Mrs. Swithin. Words raised themselves and became symbolical. 'The cradle of our race,' she seemed to say," p. 54) express her belief that its existence gives hope to the human spirit.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
"'But we have other lives, I think, I hope,' she murmured, 'We live in others, Mr... We live in things'" (p. 53). 
"'You've healed me,'" he thinks, but does not say (p. 55).

The pageant is a masterly hodge-podge, or "mellay" (p. 68). Miss La Trobe has written an "anthology" of three periods of English literature, at least an evocation of those periods, and in the same way has dressed the villagers in whatever looks most real ("cardboard crowns, swords made of silver paper, turbans that were sixpenny dish cloths," p. 48). The narrator presents the total performance, however: the lines, the mistakes, the directions, the music manqué ("Chuff, chuff, chuff"), the queries and criticisms of the audience, as well as snatchés of remembered poetry the lines evoke. After a prologue representing the Chaucerian youth of England, Queen Elizabeth ("Eliza Clark, licensed to sell tobacco") introduces a marvelously complicated Elizabethan drama.

'There is a little blood in my arm,' Isabella repeated.
That was all she heard. There was such a medley of things going on, what with the beldame's deafness, the bawling of the youths, and the confusion of the plot that she could make nothing of it.
Did the plot matter? ... The plot was only there to beget emotion. There were only two emotions: love, and hate. There was no need to puzzle out the plot. Perhaps Miss La Trobe meant that when she cut this knot in the centre? (p. 67)

The old beldame dies. "Peace was the third emotion. Love. Hate. Peace. Three emotions made the ply of human life" (p. 68). But that peace is disrupted by the Interval, Miss La Trobe's "downfall," for "dispersed are we," but not to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
the condition they were in before the play began. Giles finds a certain relief from his tension by kicking a stone ("a barbaric stone; a pre-historic. Stone-kicking was a child's game," p. 72), and stomping a snake dying with a toad stuck in its throat ("birth the wrong way round—a monstrous inversion," p. 72); Isa and William Dodge reach an asexual accord. But, as William Dodge notes, Giles's and Isa's relations "were as people say in novels 'strained'" (p. 77), and they circle warily round each other.

With the resumption of the pageant the music is playing: "music wakes us. Music makes us see the hidden, join the broken" (p. 86). Personified reason holds sway on the stage and oversees Where there's a Will there's a Way, a hilarious Restoration comedy sustained, when in the middle the stage is left empty, by the cows ("the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment") who do what the faint and sweating artist had not managed, sustain the emotion (p. 99). The third section, introduced by Officer Budge and London street cries, is a play, "The Picnic Party. About 1860," glorifying missionaries and the Empire in what some in the audience consider an insulting travesty, and also, in the Officer's words, "'One, Sweet 'Ome'" (p. 120), a grand salute to the British parlor that includes Pointz Hall. Mrs. Swithin denies that there were "Victorians"—"only you and me and William dressed differently!" (p. 122). But then she is "one-making. Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves—all are one. If discordant, producing harmony—if
not to us, to a gigantic ear attached to a gigantic head" (p. 122).

But just as the interval had "dispersed" the audience after the first act, now Miss La Trobe loses the audience for a few terrifying moments. "This is death," she thinks, as her scheme to give them ten minutes of reality fails (p. 125). Then it rains, as if it is "all people's tears, weeping for all people." Nature again saves the day. Then a pantomime signifies "Civilization . . . in ruins; rebuilt . . . by human effort," in the words of a journalist (p. 126). After discordant music the audience is shocked by Miss La Trobe's most outrageous experiment: they are forced to look at themselves in mirrors, the Present, and only Mrs. Manresa, who powders her nose, keeps her self-possession. A voice, presumably that of Miss La Trobe, voices a "megaphontic, anonymous, loudspeaking affirmation," an explicit lesson:

O we're all the same. . . . Look at ourselves, ladies and gentlemen! Then at the wall; and ask how's this wall, the great wall, which we call, perhaps miscall, civilization, to be built by (here the mirrors flicked and flashed) ors, scraps, end [sic] fragments like ourselves? (pp. 130-31)

Music begins. Like Mrs. Swithin's remarks about the pageant, it is, joyfully, a sequence. "The tune began; the first note meant a second; the second a third" (p. 131). Then Reverend Streatfield, "an intolerable constriction, contraction, and reduction to simplified absurdity," gets up "in the livery of his servitude to the summing up" (p. 132), and reduces the complex message of the pageant to the idea that the "scraps, orts, and fragments" should unite and con-
tribute to the church lighting fund. The zoom of aeroplanes
interrupts his talk, the very planes Giles dreaded. The
audience leaves, puzzled ("I must say I like to feel sure if
I go to the theatre, that I've grasped the meaning... Or
was that, perhaps, what she meant?" p. 139).

The fifth "act" of the novel is the letdown following
the performance. Only old Bart understands that Miss La
Trope cannot want to be congratulated for such a wretched
performance of her work. Indeed she feels only momentary
glory. Like Lily in To the Lighthouse, she has had her
vision, but its embodiment was ludicrous. "If they had un-
derstood her meaning; if they had known their parts; if the
pearls had been real and the funds illimitable--it would
have been a better gift. Now it had gone to join the others"
(p. 145). Then suddenly as she looks at a tree "something
rose to the surface" (something like Mrs. Woolf's own "fin
passing far out").

'I should group them,' she murmured, 'here.' It
would be midnight; there would be two figures, half
concealed by a rock. The curtain would rise. What
would the first words be? The words escaped her.
(p. 146)

But she hears the words after a few sips of the drink she
needs (p. 147).

The family in Pointz Hall wonders what the play meant:
"each of course saw something different" (p. 148). Isa, as
from the first, is obsessed with the repetitiveness, and
murmurs twice "'This year, last year, next year, never . . .'
(pp. 149, 151). As always she is obsessed with the emotions
the pageant evoked in her: "Love and hate--how they tore her asunder! Surely it was time someone invented a new plot, or that the author came out from the bushes . . ." (p. 150). But, as the pageant taught, we are the same, and the change she longs for will not come. At the last Giles and Isa are left alone.

Isa let her sewing drop. The great hooded chairs had become enormous. And Giles too. And Isa too against the window. The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks.

Then the curtain rose. They spoke. (p. 152)

The novel seems notably "traditional" when read at the end of Virginia Woolf's canon (although the uninitiated reader might find its "medley" or "mellay" of genres revolutionary), for Mrs. Woolf has abandoned her private definitions of "poetry" and "drama" set forth in "The Narrow Bridge of Art" and uses them in the ordinary sense. The most notable aspect of the novel is their use on various levels. "Poetry," in the form of poems, pervades the novel, but only in "orts, scraps, and fragments." The characters constantly quote snatches of it that define and reinforce their mood. In the introductory scene the characters talk about the "cesspool" outside, but the frame of reference is expanded by mental stores of English poesy.

'I remember,' the old man interrupted, 'my mother. . . .'

Of his mother he remembered that she was very stout; kept her tea-caddy locked; yet had given him in that very room a copy of Byron. It was over sixty years ago, he told them, that his mother had given him the works of Byron in that very room. He paused.
'She walks in beauty like the night,' he quoted.
Then again:
'So we'll go no more a-roving by the light of the moon.'
Isa raised her head. The words made two rings, perfect rings, that floated them, herself and Haines, like two swans down stream. (p. 8)

Mrs. Woolf has used this device before: Jacob thought of "the moors and Byron;" Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus "fear no more the heat o' the sun;" Mrs. Ramsey reads her sonnet, and Mr. Ramsey chants Tennyson. But nowhere before has Mrs. Woolf so exploited poetry as the collective wisdom of the race. After lunch Bart wonders why the English are, as a race, "so incurious, irresponsible, and insensitive" to the visual arts. "'We haven't the words--we haven't the words,'" protests Mrs. Swithin. "'Thoughts without words,' her brother mused. 'Can that be?'" *The Waves* explores that sort of question, but here Mrs. Manresa, the enemy of speculation and silence, cuts it short. But she, as old Bart gallantly observes, "has her Shakespeare by heart," and the novel customarily uses snatches of poetry for the wording of thoughts (pp. 42-43). A perfect example is "between the acts" of the pageant, when Bart sits in the library wondering why his son is unhappy, and is interrupted by his ethereal sister Lucy. He says nothing--only murmurs a fragment of the poem she reminds him of, "'Swallow, my sister, O sister swallow...'") (p. 84)--but his mental quotations and the strains of disjointed music from without express the irritable dissatisfaction of old Bart the "separatist" quite successfully.

In addition to the actual scraps of poems, the rhythm
of poetry suffuses the entire book. During the composition of *To the Lighthouse* Mrs. Woolf had written Vita Sackville-West a "profound" definition of rhythm (characteristically obscure): "'a sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to get it; and in writing (such is my belief) one has to recapture this, and set this working (which has nothing apparently to do with words) and then, as it breaks and tumbles in the mind, it makes words to fit it.'"\(^{41}\) Near the end of writing *Between the Acts* she wrote in her Diary that the rhythm of its last chapter became "so obsessive that I heard it, perhaps used it, in every sentence I spoke" (17 Nov. 1940, p. 345). That mindless rhythm is a major element in the characterization of poetic Isa:

> She returned to her eyes in the looking-glass. 'In love,' she must be; since the presence of his body in the room last night could so affect her; since the words he said, handing her a teacup, handing her a tennis racquet, could so attach themselves to a certain spot in her; and thus lie between them like a wire, tingling, tangling, vibrating—she groped, in the depths of the looking-glass, for a word to fit the infinitely quick vibrations of the aeroplane propeller that she had seen once at dawn at Croydon. Faster, faster, it whizzed, whirred, buzzed, till all the flails became one flail and up soared the plane away and away. . . . 'Where we know not, where we go not, neither know nor care,' she hummed. (p. 15)

She does not find the precise word, and decides that her musings are not worth writing down. Josephine Schaefer com-

---

\(^{41}\) Quoted by Pippett, p. 225. Of course this is just a spur-of-the-minute definition. Mrs. Woolf adds "No doubt I shall think differently next year!" (p. 225). But it does suggest the quality of the poetic "rhythm" in *Between the Acts*, written a decade later.
plains that Isa's "mind does not come into sharper focus by means of verse; instead it luxuriates, becomes lax and vapid." But surely that dreamy vagueness is the point. Giles, a man of action and her opposite in this respect, has "no command of metaphor" (p. 42); Mrs. Manresa "can't put two words together" (p. 47). It is Isa, Bart, and Mrs. Swithin who "have the words," even if fragmentary and illogical, consisting more of dreamy rhythm than sharp meaning, to embody their feelings.

The "poetry," then, is identifiable as poetry in the ordinary sense. So also is the drama. Having been disguised in The Waves as interludes for sets, soliloquies for dialogue, and bold "caricatures" for conventional individual characters, it is here an actual play. From beginning to end it covers seventy-five pages, about half the book, but of course the actual lines cover only a fraction of that. For the point is the binding together of the community, and the audience and their reactions are as important as the play itself. On a practical level, the pageant is, in the words of Rev. Streatfield, to raise money for "the illumination of our dear old church" (p. 134). Then, as befits an annual

42 Schaefer, p. 188.

43 For a good discussion of the complex interaction between the pageant and the audience see Ann. Y. Wilkinson, "A Principle of Unity in Between the Acts," Criticism, 8 (Winter 1966); rpt. VW: 20th Century Views, pp. 145-54. See also Marilyn Zorn, "The Pageant in Between the Acts," MFS, 2 (Feb. 1956), 31-35, for the idea that it serves as a ritual releasing individuals in the audience from their "absorption in the ego and time" (p. 32).
community effort, it teaches the unity of men ("'We act different parts; but are the same,'" p. 134), with each other, and with all times. But there is a further point for the reader. Miss La Trobe is a visionary, someone who invests her whole self in "getting things up." Her vision of the next play (p. 146) reminds strongly of Virginia Woolf's vision leading to The Waves (Diary, p. 100), and I do believe a major point for the reader is the sheer entertainment of seeing Virginia Woolf make fun of that laborious process of executing such a vision. That it is not Miss La Trobe's talent and creative passion, but rather cows, or a thundershower, that rescues the effort is surely a questioning of the power of art to create a final, symmetrical order. And the pageant is very funny: not only because the three major "acts" are clever, but because the well-meaning villagers are bumbling, and the audience is a bit dull. Renée Watkins misses the exuberance of the parodies in Orlando. We get "a real sense of oppression, of imminent tragedy," she thinks, because all the sketches are dominated by "an old crone or horrifying matriarch" attempting vainly to thwart young love. I disagree: I find the tone quite as exuberant as Orlando. The sketches ARE about love, not war, and it is quite significant that no one can really understand them. Isa makes Virginia Woolf's

44 Naremore discusses the deliberate assymmetry of the structure, but not the humour of it (pp. 235-39).

constant point, that plots do not matter, but exist only to engender emotion. That these plots create or sustain love, hate, finally peace, is the important thing. "The gramophone was affirming in tones there was no denying, triumphant yet valedictory: Dispersed are we; who have come together. But, the gramophone asserted, let us retain whatever made that harmony" (pp. 136-37). Within the pageant, then, is an example of Virginia Woolf's "emotional form," where "form" is "emotion which you feel" rather than "form which you see" ("On Re-reading Novels," II: 126).

But Between the Acts has more than "emotional form." It has the second order, "art," that which Mrs. Woolf ascribes to works worthy of being read for the second time (II: 127). Or, more simply, it has "form" in the sense she used it in her Diary 16 August 1933, "the sense that one thing follows another rightly. This is partly logic" (p. 203). It has, in short, a plausible and logical sequence. Mrs. Woolf has re-instated "this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner" (Diary, 28 Nov. 1928, p. 136). As indicated in the summary above, the time sequence is measurable by the clock, and is almost continuous. The "spots of time" technique of Jacob's Room and The Years is gone. There are no chapters, for, as in Mrs. Dalloway, the effort is to give the reader a record of a particular day. But, unlike Mrs. Dalloway, the sequence is far more important than individual moments. The three vignettes centering on Mrs. Swithin, George, and Isa partake
of the "epiphany" technique, but once the pageant is announced, and particularly after Mrs. Manresa arrives, the "moment" is rarely given unusual expansion. Little is made of memory. Mrs. Dalloway incorporated what Mrs. Woolf called her "tunnelling process," whereby characters were given dimension by means of their memories, particularly Clarissa's and Peter's of their abortive romance one summer at Bourton (Diary, 15 Oct. 1923, p. 60). Between the Acts expands the present moment to include all of history by means of the characters' constant allusions and, of course, by the pageant, but the characters live more in the present than the past. Isa, it is true, remembers the first time she met Giles. "They had met first in Scotland fishing--she from one rock, he from another. Her line had got tangled; she had given over" (p. 38), an allusion that enriches her initial reference to him. (In the opening scene she muses that Haines's "snow-white breast was circled with a tangle of dirty duckweed; and she too, in her webbed feet was entangled, by her husband, the stockbroker" (p. 8).) Bart dreams of youth and India (pp. 16-17), Lucy remembers fishing with her brother as a child (p. 19) and Giles remembers being forced by his "furious" love for his wife into a life of inaction (p. 37). But such "memories" are conventional means of conveying background information and not a "tunnelling process," a basic design.

To do the job of defining the characters Mrs. Woolf

46 Shiv K. Kumar, "Memory in Virginia Woolf and Bergson," UKCR, 26 (Spring 1960), 235-39, substantiates this point.
has reinstated the "circumstantial context" abstracted almost out of recognition in *The Waves*. Still present is Virginia Woolf's characteristic attention to the inner life; the interior monologues here notably studded with "scraps, orts, and fragments" of poetry. But there is also considerable skill devoted to the depiction of the outer life. Composition of *The Years* taught her that "there's a good deal of gold—more than I'd thought— in externality" (19 Dec. 1932, pp. 184-85). Perhaps it is because of the fragmentary nature of the chronicle of the Pargiters, the brief looks into rooms, that the setting is not memorable. One remembers Mr. Pargiter's walrus paperweight, but that symbol is obstinately unresonant, as perhaps it was meant to be (see, e.g., p. 91). *Between the Acts* is set in Pointz Hall, "middle-sized," "homely" (p. 9), set oddly in a hollow rather than upon the hill (p. 12), but symbolic of the Victorian conception of home (p. 120). It is charming and irregular: someone started a wall, perhaps for an addition, but abandoned the effort (pp. 40-41), and the wall has its part in the pageant too as crumbling civilization (p. 126). The Barn has the aura of a church. Indeed "those who had been to Greece always said it reminded them of a temple. Those who had never been to Greece—the majority—admired it all the same" (p. 23). It is of course the setting for the tea during the interval. The house is described more realistically than any house in Virginia Woolf's fiction except Orlando's, or Vita Sackville-West's Knole, and the intention is much the same: the house
literally embodies the past, and its objects invoke it. Mrs. Swithin "heals" William Dodge by showing him the house and expressing her faith that "'We live in others, Mr. ... We live in things!'" (p. 53). The house and its contents objectify the present as well. Isa sees her inner love for Mr. Haines in her eyes, reflected in the looking-glass. "But outside, on the washstand, on the dressing-table, among the silver boxes" is her love for "'the father of my children.'" "Inner love was in the eyes; outer love on the dressing-table" (p. 14). It is the dressing-table, the cheap railway bookstall books in the library (p. 16), the pair of pictures, the snake choking on the toad, the tea during the interval, "like rust boiled in water, and the cake fly-blown" (p. 75), that give this novel more of what James would call "felt life" than any Virginia Woolf had ever written.

Benefitting enormously from this circumstantial context is the large cast of characters, frequently described from the outside. Mrs. Manresa, as mentioned above, is almost always seen from the outside, as befits a non-intellectual "wild child of nature" whose every impulse is given verbal or sensual expression, who takes her own nature for "'just human nature!'" (p. 74), and a "good sort" she seems to be, as Giles and Bart find, rather than an "old strumpet," as the jealous Isa sees her. But the other major characters, even Isa, Mrs. Swithin, and Miss La Trobe, whose inner lives are more fully developed and exposed, are often described from the outside as well. Isa's full figure, "like a bolster
in its faded dressing gown" (p. 8), or projected against "the dark roll of trousering in a shop window" (p. 15), or seen from behind as she leads William Dodge to the greenhouse ("she fairly filled the path, swaying slightly as she walked," p. 81), is far more convincing than Susan's squat figure in *The Waves* because it is seen by an omniscient narrator, and firmly planted in a particular place, at a particular time. Mrs. Swithin, "the old girl with a wisp of white hair flying" (p. 23), smiling "a ravishing girl's smile, as if the wind had warmed the wintry blue in her eyes to amber" (p. 55), and weighted down by her heavy gold cross, is similarly visible. And Miss La Trobe, with "her abrupt manner and stocky figure; her thick ankles and sturdy shoes; her rapid decisions barked out in guttural accents" (p. 48), hysterically pushing the pageant through by force of will ("Miss La Trobe leant against the tree, paralysed. . . . 'This is death,' she murmured, 'death,'" p. 99) is unforgettable. Guiguet, strangely, finds the physical details here a "short-hand" that is "only superficially, or rather parenthetically, characterological" because it is "focussed entirely on the feelings, in the broadest sense of the term, that these people experience for one another."\(^47\) That observation certainly applies to *The Waves*, where the seven "characters" are, until the summing-up, seen only through each others' eyes; but it is not, I think, true of *Between the Acts* where the "I" of soliloquy, extreme subjectivity, has been transmuted to

\(^{47}\) Guiguet, p. 366.
"we," and description no longer seems to issue from private perspectives. Indeed these characters seem to me more realistic, by which I mean that they are more carefully described from the outside, than any of Mrs. Woolf's characters except the company of The Voyage Out, a generally underrated novel which carries hints of Mrs. Woolf's experimental concerns but which is built on conventional lines.48

The Waves, quite understandably, exhausted Virginia Woolf's ingenuity on point of view. The "mind thinking," "life itself going on," the "'she'" that Mrs. Woolf feared bordered on the "arty, Liberty greenery yallery somehow" (Diary, 28 May 1929, p. 140) that became the unique narrative voice of The Waves was transformed, as we have seen, into an almost conventional narrator in Bernard's summing up. The Years reverts to that omniscient narrator of many of her previous books which sees where it will, in anyone's mind that appeals to it. The narrator of Between the Acts is not terribly different. Comment is often directed to Mrs. Woolf's own projection of the book, "'I' rejected: 'We' substituted. . . . we all life, all art, all waifs and strays--a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole--the present state of my mind?" (Diary, 26 April 1938, p. 279). Miss Watkins, for example, finds the most interesting parts of the book "a hypothetical group-consciousness, aware of the crucial thoughts and feelings each member is contributing to

48 On this neglected novel see Daiches, Virginia Woolf, Ch. 2, "The Early Novels, pp. 9-33; Hafley, pp. 15-26; and Naremore, Chs. 2 and 3, pp. 5-59.
the shared experience of the moment." But Mrs. Woolf has not done anything here that was not done in Monday or Tuesday, Jacob's Room, Mrs. Dalloway, or To the Lighthouse except enlarge the cast of characters enormously. The conversation after luncheon recalls the party ending Mrs. Dalloway or the dinner scene of To the Lighthouse, but the audience at the pageant is unprecedented. Many, many names, some faces, even some private thoughts contribute to the "medley" or "mellay" that is the pageant. The "we" is the community, the village, and Virginia Woolf has simply not thought in such a large unit before.

That this audience has been invited to react to a work of art and, with its noisy incomprehension, express Virginia Woolf's own rueful sense of having failed to communicate her visions, is suggested by the fact that Miss La Trobe has to spell the meaning out to them, after which the Rev. Mr. Streatfield ("their representative spokesman; their symbol; themselves; a butt, a clod..." p. 132) reduces it even further. The message, to put it more simply still, is that we are only fragments until we unite, that "I's" must become "we." Mrs. Woolf wrote less than a year before she died that "the writing 'I' has vanished. No audience. No echo. That's part of one's death" (Diary, 9 June 1940, p. 323). She was depressed about the desperate conditions (war would break out in August) that had dispersed the ordinary reading public. Only Giles and Isa, as representatives of

49 Watkins, p. 358.
the twentieth-century consciousness, are aware of the imminent threat of destruction to the little rural community; but—in the form of twelve planes in formation—it literally drowns out Mr. Streatfield's appeal to the audience, and the audience makes the connection. "I agree—\textit{says a nameless voice} things look worse than ever on the continent. And what's the channel, come to think of it, if they mean to invade us? The aeroplanes, I didn't like to say it, made one think" (p. 138). The audience considers the play a failure. Mr. Oliver pronounces it "too ambitious . . . Considering her means" (p. 148). Miss La Trobe herself considers the performance a failure, though "glory possessed her—for one moment," until she remembers that the "giving" of a vision is transitory (p. 145). Does the book, then, purvey a message of hopelessness?

Critics usually assume that it does.\textsuperscript{50} I believe, however, that both the dark side of the irony of the failed performance and the threat of war to a peaceful suburb are over-emphasized because Virginia Woolf committed suicide shortly after finishing the manuscript. A few critics see hope at the core of the book, and I do too.\textsuperscript{51} The title is a tangible reason. It refers to the central element in the


\textsuperscript{51} For example, Warren Beck, "For Virginia Woolf," from \textit{American Prefaces} (1942); rpt. in \textit{Forms of Modern Fiction}, pp. 229-39; Kelley, Ch. 8, pp. 225-50; and Pippett, p. 349.
plot, the pageant; it refers to the hiatus in communication between Giles and Isa, who apparently come together at the end; and, most broadly, it refers to England's political situation in 1939, between wars.52 Nothing on any of the three levels suggests that the next act will be the final one. First, Miss La Trobe has her vision of another play. Secondly, life imitates art, even if unconsciously, and Giles and Isa become as "statues against the sky" (Diary, p. 154, of the "characters" in The Waves) to live out that vision. "Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night" (p. 152). Thirdly, perhaps society, like Giles and Isa, must rend itself in another war before achieving peace. Everything in Between the Acts operates in the interest of continuity: the Oliver family, Pointz Hall, English literature, the community. "Dispersed are we; who have come together. But . . . let us retain whatever made that harmony." And that was the "effort," "personality," and "defiance" (Diary, p. 159) of Miss La Trobe, another artist like Bernard, and Virginia Woolf herself.

52 Bennett, p. 113. See also Guiguet for the three different titles of the work, Pointz Hall, The Pageant, and Between the Acts, as its three "levels" (p. 322).
c. The Age of Innocence and Between the Acts: the Spirit of the Age

Unlike The Reef and The Waves, The Age of Innocence and Between the Acts cannot be tied to any critical formulae or programs of their authors. The effort was greater than to write the finest novel possible: it was, one might speculate, to portray and thus preserve society itself. Edith Wharton's old New York had perished by 1920, and she wanted to "revive that faint fragrance" (BG, p. 5, referring, of course, to BG); Virginia Woolf's England was under siege, and she wanted to assemble "all life, all art, all waifs and strays—a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole—the present state of my mind? and English country. . ." (26 April 1938, p. 279).

Of course the two novels fit the broad critical considerations their authors always held. Character is at the center of both books. Mrs. Wharton's novels were always notable for sharply drawn characters (with the exception of Valley of Decision, which was—in the words of Mrs. Wharton condemning the current crop of novelists in 1934—"a sort of anthology of the author's ideas," "a literary hold-all" (Permanent Values in Fiction," p. 603). But none, with the possible exception of The House of Mirth and its Lily Bart, has characters with, in Wharton's term, such "visibility" as Newland Archer, Ellen Olenska, and the host of vivid minor characters. Mrs. Wharton's 1929 essay on the subject found the common denominator of the masters of visibility to be
"the patient intensity of attention which these great novelists concentrated on each of their imagined characters, in their intimate sense of the reality of what they described, and in some secret intuition that the barrier between themselves and their creatures was somehow thinner than the page of a book" ("Visibility in Fiction," p. 488), and I can isolate no better explanation for the fact that these characters live. Although Mrs. Woolf agreed with Mrs. Wharton that character is the very source of the novel ("I believe that all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite," "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," I: 324), her novels were not always notable for sharply drawn characters. Perhaps because, in the words of R. L. Chambers, "to her the eternal problem and exasperation was the line drawn, between place and place, between time and time, above all between person and person" her typical protagonist is vague, dreamy, and inconsequential: Rachel Vinrace, Mrs. Dalloway, Mrs. Ramsey, Eleanor Pargiter are examples. "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" made clear her belief that "character is dissipated into shreds now" (Diary, p. 56), and the succeeding novels, from Mrs. Dalloway to The Years (with the happy exception of Orlando, which, as a "biography," had a swift and lively story to tell), eschewed the sharp drawing of characters with physical details. Between the Acts has dreamy, musing characters in Isa and Mrs. Swithin, but they are fre-

53 Chambers, p. 7.
quently seen from the outside by a narrator with the detachment and wit of the narrator of *Orlando*, and they are but part of an entire community, a cast of characters I find comparable to Edith Wharton's. Both sets are built of a combination of the "inner" and the "outer," as were the characters of *The Reef* and *The Waves*, but attention has shifted in both cases from the inner to the outer, with consequent increase in what might be called "visibility," and "felt life."

Both Wharton and Woolf had emphasized the inner life in their critical theories. *The Reef* was a drama of the "soul," and a notable amount of the conflict took place there, and was dramatized as reflection, revery, and flashbacks. In *The Age of Innocence* those devices are still used, but they are not the means of moving the plot forward. There is an omniscient narrator who gives Newland's conscious thoughts but is clearly not limited by them. *The Waves* was, like *The Reef*, largely interior: it was, indeed, a poem of being, an exploration of what it feels like to experience reality itself. *The Years* tried to combine facts with this vision, but failed to achieve a viable whole due to the fragmentation of subject matter and technique. *Between the Acts* simply abandoned that theoretical struggle and, like *The Age of Innocence*, does not attempt to move forward by means of the evolution of the inner life. There is a similar omniscient narrator who is, from the first, authoritative on the consciousnesses of the characters. Unlike *The Waves* the explo-
ration is almost consistently limited to conscious thoughts, so that there is not really any question about this novel, as a whole, being a "stream-of-consciousness" novel. 54

Thus in both *The Age of Innocence* and *Between the Acts* the emphasis has shifted from the inner life and the inevitable concentration on the private point of view to the outer life—a shift which, somewhat paradoxically, contributes to the vivid characterization of the inner life. *The Reef* had a "harmonious fond," limited by what the characters perceived, which was a major device of characterization. I discussed above Edith Wharton's expanded use of place in *The Age of Innocence*, both within the world of the novel as a means to knowledge for the characters and as a means to fuller understanding by the reader. It is the lack of a place for an illicit liaison that convinces Newland for a time, and the reader too (perhaps only for a time), that it is out of the question. Mrs. Woolf's *Waves*, similarly, had, in the search for life itself, the thing in itself, eschewed the use of particular places: the interludes provide a vague fond indeed for the silent soliloquies. *The Years* was an attempt at externality, facts, but Abercorn Terrace still seems abstract. There is one excellent sequence: Kitty Lasswade

54 Friedman charges that *Between the Acts* uses stream-of-consciousness devices, such as juxtaposition of scenes, thematic images, variation in internal rhythm, and time on two levels (history and memory), but without consistency (pp. 207-08). It is my contention, however, that Woolf is no longer primarily interested in individual consciousness here.
takes the night train from London to her estate in the north, and the next morning finds complete happiness in solitude. There the train and the estate are very strongly felt (pp. 266-78). But the novel as a whole remains vague. *Between the Acts*, however, fully reinstates the "circumstantial context": the house and environs are richly detailed. Mrs. Woolf does not describe furniture, clothes, and books with the same particularity as Mrs. Wharton: one feels that the description of the library at Pointz Hall written by Mrs. Wharton would have provided titles for "the shuffle of shilling shockers" (p. 16), that her description of the dining room would have included the botanical name for "the splashed bowl of variegated roses" (p. 29). But Mrs. Woolf (especially in view of the rather ethereal vagueness of most of her earlier work) is particular indeed. We are told, for instance, of the bedroom where Mrs. Swithin was born that "the furniture was mid-Victorian, bought at Maples, perhaps, in the forties. The carpet was covered with small purple dots. And a white circle marked the place where the slop pail had stood by the washstand" (p. 53). The homely but interesting Pointz Hall is a very particular, very real embodiment of tradition for the characters (it even takes its part as "'Ome" in the Victorian act of the pageant) and as much a symbol of the continuing life of the English family as Mrs. Wharton's brownstones. I do not find that Mrs. Woolf exploits place to differentiate her characters: Isa's room, for example, is not expressive of her personality as Ellen's is of hers. But
the objects there objectify her feelings (the silver ornamental objects are public symbols of her marriage, p. 14), and, unlike Bernard's "pillar-box" or Neville's "apple tree," they are particular objects, realistically described.

The outer life is, in both novels, wider than the characters' consciousnesses. The point of view, then, is omniscient, although of course it must select what to convey. Mrs. Wharton almost consistently limits herself to Newland's angle of vision, but embellishes his insights with her own, from her vantage point as detached observer of a group whose manners she understands completely. In The Writing of Fiction she condemned "the slovenly habit of some novelists of tumbling in and out of their characters' minds, and then suddenly drawing back to scrutinize them from the outside as the avowed Showman holding his puppets' strings" (WF, p. 89). Of Virginia Woolf's novels only Jacob's Room, where the narrator openly discusses her difficulties, really merits such criticism (although I believe it irrelevant, as discussed in Chapter 2), but Between the Acts just as surely violates all theories valuing consistency in point of view by jumping from mind to mind, even if the Showman never speaks in (her) own voice. The artistic justification might be similar to Mrs. Wharton's reason for using the omniscient narrator only ostensibly limited to the protagonist: Mrs. Woolf is less interested in the individual consciousnesses than the entire group. The point of view in both novels is devoted to the community.
The sense of time in both novels is also correspondingly broader than the pair examined before. The Reef covers, by means of "crucial moments," ten days in Paris, a week at Givré, and a few more days in Paris. Memories of the past serve to round out the characters. The Age of Innocence, in contrast, covers a portion of a "season" in Book One, and two years of marriage in Book Two, and, by means of flashback and summary, twenty-six years in Chapter 34. In addition, the calendar time is given a much larger dimension by means of the constant historical imagery. Newland's wedding, for instance, lasts only a few hours but reaches back to "the dawn of history" (p. 179).

The same expansion is noticeable in Mrs. Woolf's pair of novels. The Waves covers the life-span of the six "characters," and Louis's Jungian memory filled with "chained beasts stamping" and women with red pitchers going to the Nile is an attempt to place them in the continuum of history. But the use of the "pure present" tense for the soliloquies is an attempt to make each a saturated moment, a narrowing and intensification of time to "now," at least until Bernard reinstates chronological time in his summing up. The interludes contribute to this sharp focus: they cover a single "day," epitomizing the cyclical nature of all experience. The Years uses "spots of time," like Jacob's Room, another way of trying to capture moments of vision. Between the Acts literally covers only one night and the next day, but much like The Age of Innocence--refers throughout to the
historical significance of what happens in the present. The very cesspool will be built on the Roman road. The omniscient narrators function in both these novels to place the characters and the action in history in a way that an individual consciousness like Louis does not successfully do.

It is interesting that the omniscient narrators of both books use works of art to expand the frame of reference. The Age of Innocence opens at the opera, Christine Nilsson singing Faust. Newland arrives late, as it is "the thing" to do, just as she sings "'He loves me—he loves me not—he loves me!'" (p. 4). Thus is introduced the major theme: love, and its doubts and difficulties. But it also dramatizes the inexorable conventions under which this "'exceptionally brilliant audience'" lives:

She sang, of course, "M'amal!" and not "He loves me," since an unalterable and unquestioned law of the musical world required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences. This seemed as natural to Newland Archer as all the other conventions on which his life was moulded. . . . (p. 5)

namely the aforementioned silver-backed brushes (perhaps like Isa's brushes that symbolize her public life, her marriage) and the gardenia in the button-hole. The opera is, in short, the community ritual, sanctified by repetition. Newland sees Ellen only at the Opera during the period when he is asked to handle her divorce (rather, prevent it) for the family, and must examine his principles for the first time (pp. 91, 93). His wedding, the quintessential community
ritual, reminds him of it:

"How like a first night at the Opera!" he thought, recognizing all the same faces in the same boxes (no, pews), and wondering if, when the Last Trump sounded, Mrs. Selfridge Merry would be there with the same towering ostrich feathers in her bonnet, and Mrs. Beaufort with the same diamond earrings and the same smile—and whether suitable proscenium seats were already prepared for them in another world. (pp. 180-81)

In Chapter 32 Newland attends the Opera again, "where Faust was being sung for the first time that winter," and is reminded of the scene two years before when he first saw Ellen, but, in his innocence, or ignorance, loved May (p. 318). He leaves with her—intending to tell her that he must leave her, "just as Marguerite fell into Faust's arms" (p. 322). The ending of Newland's story is scarcely less happy than Faust's.

Between the Acts centers on the pageant which, like New York's favorite operas, centers on love. The Elizabethan melodrama, "'about a false Duke; and a Princess disguised as a boy; then the long lost heir turns out to be the beggar, because of a mole on his cheek'" (p. 65), is unintelligible, but, as Isa reflects, the plot doesn't matter, only being there "to beget emotion," love, hate, peace. The Restoration comedy, 'Where there's a Will there's a Way,' featuring "'Lady Harpy Harraden, in love with Sir Spaniel Lilyliver. Deb, her maid. Flavinda, her niece, in love with Valentine. Sir Spaniel Lilyliver, in love with Flavinda," and so forth (p. 90), the moral of which is "the God of love is full of tricks" (p. 104), is likely to provoke only
laughter. The Victorian melodrama, featuring the coming together of one Edgar T. and Miss Eleanor Hardcastle, who discover their mutual ambition to spend "a lifetime in the African desert among the heathens" (p. 116) provokes a little anger among the audience, some of the members of which see it as an insulting travesty of religious sentiment until Officer Budge's obvious sincerity about "'Ome" mollifies them ("'Oh but it was beautiful,' Mrs. Lynn Jones protested. Home she meant; the lamplit room; the ruby curtains; and Papa reading aloud," p. 121). Renée Watkins gets from these sketches "a real sense of oppression, of imminent tragedy," and of course the fragmented mirror images of the audience do indeed alarm and depress them (except of course for the unself-conscious "wild child of nature"). But I find in the audience, as in the pageant itself, what Mrs. Woolf called a "mellay" or "medley": it is their range of emotions that is striking: love, hate, peace, and all points in between.

It might be suggested, then, that Mrs. Wharton uses Faust as an ordering force, as a stylized, ritualized image of Newland Archer's own tortured love relations and the social gaze that follows them. He acts in his own drama: his social set is the audience, as he realizes during the farewell dinner for Ellen (p. 335). A brilliant example of Mrs. Wharton's sense of the interaction of life and art is in Chapter 13, the scene from The Shaughraun, where the depart-

---

55 Watkins, p. 366.
ing lover kisses the end of his beloved's velvet ribbon as she, unaware, looks into the fire (p. 114). It reminds Newland of his last visit to Ellen, and their mutual recognition of the dim associations is their first subtle declaration of love (p. 118). Mrs. Woolf, on the other hand, uses the pageant as a deliberately disordered expression of the disorder in the world, where we are but "scraps, orts, and fragments" desperately yearning for unity but attaining it only when something—even cows, or rain—sustains the emotion. Unlike Faust, improbable as the performance might be, and The Shaugraun, despite "the hackneyed sentiments and claptrap situations" (p. 114), the pageant is a hodgepodge, a confusing melange only dimly understood by the actors, perhaps less so by the audience—an ironic fate for the event to raise funds for the illumination of the church. But like Mrs. Wharton's theatricals the pageant is actually less important in the novel than the reactions of the audience to it: again, it is the community that is the center, the unresponsive audience in Mrs. Wharton's novel concerned only with doing "the right thing," the puzzled audience in Mrs. Woolf's, concerned only with trying to understand what is going on, both in the play and across the channel. A brilliant example of Mrs. Woolf's sense of the interaction of life and art, comparable to Mrs. Wharton's use of The Shaugraun, is Miss La Trobe's vision of a new play—only a vision—which Giles and Isa (despite Isa's heartfelt wish that someone invent a new plot, or that the author come out
of the bushes, p. 150) proceed to act out, as if Miss La Trobe were God.

In both novels, then, certain individuals are distinguished from the "audience," their social set, as the actors, and it is their fate with which the novels close. It is interesting that both are somewhat ambiguous. Newland watches Ellen's apartment window until the "man-servant . . . drew up the awnings, and closed the shutters" (p. 361); Isa and Giles bare their enmity and love as they find themselves alone for the first time that day, and "then the curtain rose. They spoke" (p. 152). It is not unequivocally clear whether Newland has salvaged his life from ruin by avoiding a liaison, or whether it has withered away; nor is it unequivocally clear whether Giles and Isa are doomed (remember those planes overhead during the pageant) or whether they will add another life to "the cradle of our race." Both novels have been the subject of both interpretations. But both novels have an epilogue, and employ some rather blatant telling, as opposed to showing, to get their (admittedly) ambiguous points across.

Edith Wharton's Reef is, as discussed in Chapter 1, often criticized for the ambiguity of its ending. If it is true, as I suggested there, that George Darrow came to speak Mrs. Wharton's own philosophy, she might well have written a final chapter from his limited point of view to answer the

56 See notes 27, 50, and 51.
question of what Anna decided to do, and to evaluate it: he could, as reliable narrator, have provided a summing up. The Custom of the Country and Summer had conventional omniscient narrators, probably because Mrs. Wharton was dealing with characters not subtle enough to understand themselves. The Age of Innocence similarly disposes of the central character by means of Chapter 34, the epilogue, which ranges through twenty-six years, and balances Newland's accomplishments, likened to a single brick in the well-built wall of the present day (p. 346), against the missed "flower of life," which, as symbolized by Ellen, now seems "so unattainable and improbable that to have repined would have been like despairing because one had not drawn the first prize in a lottery" (p. 347) and, we learn, so fragile that Newland cannot risk actually seeing her ("she had doubtless had other and more tangible companionship" than the memory of him, p. 359). One might say that the curtain has fallen for Archer, but it rises for Dallas and Fanny Beaufort (ironically, Ellen's protegee), and the implication is that life will go on, the "actors" no longer enduring a "deaf-and-dumb asylum" of hidden emotions, but regretfully no longer capable of the subtlest shades of feeling. Such is the cost of the loss of innocence.

Perhaps because she learned a lesson from ending Jacob's Room with a pair of boots, Virginia Woolf was more devoted to the summing up from Mrs. Dalloway onward. The Beja describes the pattern of all Mrs. Woolf's

---

57 Beja describes the pattern of all Mrs. Woolf's
Waves has a stunning one. The Years seems to try for the same effect with "Present Day," the long party scene, which gives the poetic underside of all that went before (Diary, p. 212). Eleanor ends the novel by asking "'And now?" in a dawn of "extraordinary beauty, simplicity and peace" (p. 435). Like both the preceding novels, Between the Acts has an ending that looks forward: When "THE waves broke upon the shore" (the italics linking the final line with the interludes and the impersonal narrator, implying that Bernard has died) Bernard rides forward to meet what we might suppose is the true reality; Eleanor will continue, in her quizzical way, to live; and Giles and Isa, who speak for the first time this long day, are just beginning to really live, to "act" for themselves. We are told that they will fight, embrace, then sleep, and that out of this "heart of darkness" perhaps new life will come. The same future might be inferred for civilization itself. As in The Age of Innocence, the implication is that life will go on, even though we are for the moment "dispersed" in acts of war.

Both Mrs. Wharton and Mrs. Woolf, then, manifested a belief in civilization at a time when each had serious reason to doubt whether it would continue, at least along acceptably rational lines. Both did so in a novel with conventional structure. That Mrs. Wharton did so is not sur-

novels after Jacob's Room as a series of epiphanies ending with a climactic moment of vision (see pp. 146-47). He excepts Between the Acts from the pattern, but I disagree.
prising, but that Mrs. Woolf did so, after a long career of breaking moulds, of trying to find new forms to match her wordless visions, is quite significant for the theorist of the novel. I cannot ascribe her reversal to personal fatigue, for the same sort of reaction is recognizable in many twentieth-century novelists. Robert Humphrey finds that the extreme concentration on consciousness in Richardson's Pilgrimage, Joyce's Ulysses, Mrs. Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, and, at the extreme, The Waves and Finnegans Wake, led to what he calls a "subtle retrenchment" in Faulkner's novels: that concentration "was subsumed by something basic in the nature of fiction: the need for surface action and external reality to make whole reality as man knows it, for man, as Joyce has illustrated, is only half-aspiring." 58 Virginia Woolf reacted against The Waves with The Years, but came around to the successful combination of inner and outer and a completely successful treatment of time only with Between the Acts— which has a linear plot, sharply observed characters, an omniscient point of view, and sequential time, plus of course the inquiry into particular consciousnesses and the sensitive observation of moments that dominated previous novels but here fit into, and infinitely enrich, the conventional structure. It is astonishing that the author of Monday or Tuesday, Jacob's Room, and The Waves should end her career with a novel that is, in its theme and technique, comparable

to another novel by a novelist as conventional as Edith Wharton. Perhaps it proves Mrs. Wharton's contention that "true originality consists not in a new manner but in a new vision" (WF, p. 18).
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: THE PUBLIC TRANSACTION

The similarities between Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence* and Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* are not set forth for the purpose of trying to deny the distinctions between the traditional and experimental novels, for the fact remains that the two writers produced very different kinds of books. Edith Wharton was essentially conservative, but Virginia Woolf, although her critical theory rested on solid traditional assumptions, experimented throughout her career to "break the moulds," and find words to match her personal vision. The ways in which the two writers are alike in their regard for tradition, and the ways in which they differ—those points which this paper has worked to establish—can be summarized in a way hopefully more interesting than mere repetition: by examining *Hudson River Bracketed*, with its sequel *The Gods Arrive*, and *Orlando*, books published about the same time which describe the development of an artist, and his ultimate achievement of the goals that the criticism and practice of each novelist should have taught us to expect.

Both writers used the theme of the artist frequently. The first story in Mrs. Wharton's first collection, *The
Greater Inclination (1899), "The Muse's Tragedy," her first long tale, The Touchstone (1900), and her last completed novels, Hudson River Bracketed (1929) and The Gods Arrive (1932), as well as many works in between, especially short stories, deal with artists, particularly their frustrations, showing that she, like her friend Henry James, was preoccupied with the theme.\(^1\) Virginia Woolf's first novel The Voyage Out (1915) features Terence Hewet, a young man whose ambition to write a novel about Silence is often identified with Virginia Woolf's own subsequent experiments. Night and Day (1919) polarizes the characters by means of their responses to the heroine's grandfather, the great poet Richard Alardyce. To the Lighthouse (1927), with Lily Briscoe's painting, The Waves (1931), with Bernard's quasi-novel in the form of the summing up, and Between the Acts (1941), with Miss La Trobe's pageant, actually use works of art as structural devices. But Mrs. Wharton's Hudson River Bracketed and Mrs. Woolf's Orlando are bildungsromans, or life-novels, having as their main intention the depiction of the literary artist's development from callow youth to mature artist, so that these novels are a convenient summary of their authors' ideas on form and function.

Mrs. Wharton published Hudson River Bracketed in 1929.\(^2\)

\(^1\) Askew, pp. 110-11.

It seems to be the product of long work, meant to comprise her accumulated knowledge about literature and life, and Mrs. Wharton listed it as one of her favorites among her own work. But the novel is seldom discussed by Mrs. Wharton's critics, and even then usually held in low esteem. It is sometimes admired, however, for the character of Vance Weston (named for "Advance," his birthplace, a stepping-stone for his prosperous real estate agent father) who matures from a midwestern hick who equates stability with stagnation to a cosmopolitan novelist who recognizes the ineluctable necessity of Continuity, the past as discovered first in rural New York, then Europe. He is indeed an active and passionate contrast to the string of dilletante heroes through Mrs. Wharton's work, as exemplified by George Darrow and Newland Archer—and it is perhaps not accidental that he appeared after the death of Walter Berry, very probably those pale gentlemen's prototype. The subject, always the central concern in Mrs. Wharton's critical theory, is the hero's artistic development in several milieux, and his discovery of

---

3 Nevius, pp. 219-20. Two good articles, by Buchan and Tuttleton, previously cited, discuss this novel and its sequel as literary criticism, and cite many parallels to both The Writing of Fiction and A Backward Glance.

4 See for instance Lyde, p. 173; Nevius, pp. 219-37; and Walton, Chapter 9, "The Writer and the Community."

5 Auchincloss, Afterword, pp. 408-11. Auchincloss thinks Vance Weston is like Thomas Wolfe, who seems to have verified Mrs. Wharton's intuition about the American literary scene by publishing his first novel the same year Hudson River Bracketed was published.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
the right personal and literary course.

That subject is presented by lifelike characters in organic settings. The novel opens on Vance at nineteen in Euphoria, Illinois, a town so broadly satirized that it is said to come from Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* rather than from life. Vance wants to be a writer, most of all a poet, but is still enough under the influence of his environment, where work pays, to associate the literary vocation with newspaper work (p. 24). The shock of seeing his lecherous Grandpa Scrimser meeting his former girlfriend Floss Delaney (plus germs from the swamp his father is trying to promote as real estate) sends him into fever and suicidal gloom, resulting in "One Day," a passionately felt fictional account of the discovery. "... it seemed to him that at last he had found out a way of reconciling his soul to its experiences. He would set them down just as they had befallen him in all their cruel veracity, but as if he were relating the tragedy of somebody else" (p. 28).

To recuperate he is sent to Paul's Landing, New York, humble home of his cousins the Tracys. Euphoria had been totally devoted to Progress, but Paul's Landing is old, and surprisingly unashamed. The new sights inspire Vance to resume writing poetry, but while initial ideas pour from him, he cannot finish a poem because he lacks experience (p. 41). Then, at the Willows, the hundred-year-old ancestral home of

---

6 Ibid., pp. 411-12; Nevius, pp. 220-21.
the Spears, rich cousins for whom the Tracys act as caretakers while they reside at nearby Eaglewood, with the famous view of the Hudson, Vance discovers the Past: he realizes that he has never even seen an old house before (p. 43). In the library, carefully preserved in the state ancestress Elinor Lorburn left it, Vance discovers true Poetry, in the form of Coleridge's "Kublha Khan," and a muse to explain it to him (although in a rather cocky and supercilious way), Halo Spear. Vance seizes the experiences she offers him: the afternoon in the library ("the least little fragment of fact was enough for him to transform into a palace of dreams," p. 57) and the dawn picnic on Thundertop mountain, where her criticisms of his verse reveal to him the "abysses of error into which he might drop unawares at any moment" (p. 81). But the idyll ends: through enthusiasm and thoughtlessness Vance is suspected of irresponsibility by the Spears and by Mrs. Tracy, and he sets out for New York to make his way as a writer.

Starving, Vance submits his poetry to George Frenside, the literary adviser to the "highbrow" review The Hour who frequents the Spears' Eaglewood. That worthy man, in whom, like Walter Berry, "the critical faculty outweighed all others" (cf. BG, pp. 114-19) and who, integrity intact, "lingered on the outskirts of success" (p. 60), dissuades Vance from seeking newspaper work ("'There's only one way. Buckle down and write,'" p. 129) and working at poetry ("'poetry, my son, is not a halfway thing,'" p. 130). The advice
voices Vance's innermost convictions:

He could not imagine putting down on paper anything that had not risen slowly to the verge of his consciousness, that had not to be fished for and hauled up with infinite precautions from some secret pool of being as to which he knew nothing yet but the occasional leap, deep down in it, of something alive but invisible. . . . (p. 131)

Counselled to turn to the short story or the essay, Vance suddenly remembers "One Day," and sends it to Frenside, who publishes it in the moribund Hour.

Three years later Book IV opens on Halo Spear, now married to Lewis Tarrant, the dilettante who has bought The Hour and proposes to set literary fashion. (Here is that Walter Berry-figure, now a villain.) He has just unearthed "One Day," and is trying to corroborate his opinion that it should be republished by talking it over with his wife and Frenside. It impresses Halo with its "harsh directness," but Frenside, echoing Mrs. Wharton's disapproval of autobiographical fiction, sees it as only embryonic fiction: "This is the early morning 'slice-of-life'; out of the boy's own experience, most likely" (p. 143) (cf. WF, pp. 77-80).

But Tarrant's enthusiasm leads to a job on The Hour for Vance, exiled in Euphoria. He comes to New York, impetuously marries Laura Lou Tracy, his now-beautiful cousin, and dedicates himself to art.

He is armed with a new story, "The Unclaimed," which,

7 Mrs. Wharton's criticism always emphasizes "brooding," sometimes defining "genius" by it. See "Visibility in Fiction," pp. 486-88.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
as Halo reflects, even Frenside (or Wharton) would like for its impersonality and objectivity. It is a war story. "'How did he know . . . how did he know?' she murmured to herself. And the fact that he did know seemed warrant of future achievement" (p. 172). "As to experience, intellectual and moral," Mrs. Wharton writes in _The Writing of Fiction_, "the creative imagination can make a little go a long way, provided it remains long enough in the mind and is sufficiently brooded upon" (p. 21). But Vance's way is not smooth. His wife, who so inspires him, is "capable of apprehending only the earthly bounds out of which her beauty had lifted him" (p. 195). _The Hour_, which quickly puts him in economic bondage, is determined to be "new," and the editors complain that his article on Coleridge is far too traditional, and that his pledged essays and novels are far too slow in coming. Mrs. Wharton characteristically embodies his problems in dramatic situations. For example, Vance feels joyously free one Saturday morning when a snowstorm has created a winter paradise, but a day teaching Laura Lou the beauties of the scene leaves her very ill, and his work suffers. His dream, as always, has the effects of irresponsibility. "He was frightened to think how completely, when Beauty called, that celestial Beauty which haunted earth and sky, and the deeps of his soul, he forgot everything else, and rushed after the voice unheeding" (p. 226). He wants to write _Loot_, a study of life in New York, not to satirize it, but "to take apart the works of the machine, and find out what all
those people behind the splendid house fronts signified in the general scheme of things" (p. 233), but, as always, he lacks the necessary experience, and even the freedom to get it.

He finds that he cannot simply follow the literary currents in which he finds himself. Though he knows he can imitate popular novels like Price of Meat and Egg Omelette (Mrs. Wharton shows no mercy in her choice of names and titles), his deepest instincts will not allow it.

These brilliant verbal gymnastics—or the staccato enumeration of a series of physical aspects and sensations—they all left him with the sense of an immense emptiness underneath, just where, in his own vision of the world, the deep forces stirred and wove men's fate. . . . "No, life's not like that, people are not like that. The real stuff is way down, not on the surface." When he got hold of Faust at the Willows, and came to the part about the mysterious Mothers, moving in subterranean depths among the primal forms of life, he shouted out: "That's it—the fellows that write those books are all Motherless!" And Laura Lou, hurrying down duster in hand, rushed in exclaiming: "Oh, Vanny, I thought there were burglars!" (p. 245) (cf. WF, pp. 8-14)

He decides to turn to what he has experienced, the lure of the past. He will try to capture the essence of Elinor Lorburn, the old maid who died reading Coleridge as if in compensation for a disappointing life, to analyze "the mysterious substitution of one value for another in a soul which had somehow found peace" (pp. 246-47). Again he runs into the problem of paucity of experience, until Halo, separated from the assinine Tarrant, becomes his muse again to illuminate her heritage for him. He is trying to capture the sense of continuity in "a different rhythm, a different time
beat: a movement without jerks and breaks, flowing down from ever so far off in the hills, bearing ships to the sea. . ." (p. 263).

A year later we learn that Instead, the result, is one of those rare books that is both a critical and popular success. Vance is part of the literary world again, but finds that he is disturbed by its countless fads. As Mrs. Wharton does in "A Cycle of Reviewing," for instance, Vance must fight those who propose conflicting new principles for writing fiction (p. 282). Frenside affirms that the post-war welter is bad for the artist, and advises the drifting Weston to turn from the romantic "emanations" of Instead to real life, and enrich it with the quality of his mind.

"Well, now take hold of life as it lies around you; you remember Goethe: 'Wherever you take hold of it, it's interesting'? So it is--but only in proportion as you are. There's the catch. The artist has got to feed his offspring out of his own tissue. Enrich that, day and night--perpetually. . . . Manners are your true material, after all." (p. 287) (Cf. WF, pp. 23-29)

We recall how Mrs. Wharton turned from The Valley of Decision to The House of Mirth. Halo agrees that "for the novelist, fantasy was a sterile bloom, after all" (p. 301). But Vance has some firm convictions about the novel from the experience of writing Instead: Wharton gives him her own words to say at a cocktail party of uninitiated literati. Vance marvels that people ask him if he knows how his books are going to end. "Then these people had never heard that footfall of Destiny which, for Vance, seemed to ring out in
the first page of all the great novels, as compelling as the knock of Macbeth's gates, as secret as the opening measures of the Fifth Symphony?" (p. 305) (Cf. WF, pp. 160-66). Gratz Blemer, materialistic fellow novelist, scoffs at his notions of "organic form," "something so treelike, so preordained" (p. 305) (cf., e.g., "The Criticism of Fiction," p. 230).

But Loot proves a deadend, which Vance enjoys tearing up in front of Lewis Tarrant. The novel ends with Vance at work on Magic, a book that is "simpler, nearer to his own experience."

It was to be about a fellow like himself, about two or three people whose spiritual lives were starved as his own had been. He sat for a long time penetrating his mind with the strange hard beauty created by that bit of crooked apple bough against a little square of sky. Such ordinary material to make magic out of--and that should be his theme. (p. 370)

He seems to have the quality of mind to produce a valuable novel at this point. Laura Lou dies, Halo offers herself to him, but Vance remains detached. "... he wondered if at crucial moments the same veil of unreality would always fall between himself and the soul nearest him, if the creator of imaginary beings must always feel alone among the real ones" (p. 407).

But his trouble is only beginning. Louis Auchincloss says of The Gods Arrive that it, "like so many sequels, should never have been written," and I will not summarize.

---

this novel that is read even less often than *Hudson River Bracketed*. Suffice it to say that Vance absconds to Europe with Halo, who as his mistress unwillingly becomes the same kind of repressive force his wife Laura Lou had been. The novel shows Vance moving from place to place trying to find personal freedom and artistic certitude. He writes *A Puritan in Spain*, a superficial costume-drama. Then he begins *Colossus*, a direct reaction against the stream-of-consciousness novels in vogue in Paris. His musings about it reflect Mrs. Wharton's opinions in *The Writing of Fiction* and later essays, and are worth quoting at length.

When they said that fiction, as the art of narrative and the portrayal of social groups, had reached its climax, and could produce no more (citing Raphael and Ingres as analogous instances in painting)—that unless the arts were renewed they were doomed, and that in fiction the only hope of renewal was in the exploration of the subliminal, his robust instinct told him that the surface of life was rich enough to feed the creator's imagination. 

But what was the alternative they proposed? A microscopic analysis of the minute in man, as if the highest imaginative art consisted in decomposing him into his constituent atoms. And at that Vance instantly rebelled. The new technique might be right, but their application of it substituted pathology for invention. Man was man by virtue of the integration of his atoms, not of their dispersal. The fishers in the turbid stream-of-consciousness had reduced their fictitious characters to a bundle of loosely tied instincts and habits, borne along blindly on the current of existence. Why not reverse the process, reduce the universe to its component dust, and set man whole and dominant above the ruins? It was that average man whom Vance wanted to depict in his weakness and his power. 

(pp. 112-13)

Although Vance embodies there all that has made him, includ-
ing a descent to the Mothers (p. 380), the novel fails.\footnote{Tuttleton, p. 346, calls it a prose \textit{Leaves of Grass.}} Mrs. Wharton signifies her displeasure with the scheme by having the fine intelligences of Tolby and Savignac criticize its lack of proportion (pp. 97-98) (cf. \textit{WF}, p. 105, which uses the same example of Maeterlinck's \textit{BEE}); by having Halo, even though faced with losing Vance, courageously declare it not free from "other influences," "echoes" (p. 336), and by having Vance himself realize at length that \textit{Colossus} "was not his own book . . . but a kind of hybrid monster made out of the crossings of his own imaginings with those imposed on him by the literary fashions and influences of the day" (p. 386). Vance ends, after a disastrous, not altogether convincing, affair with Floss Delaney, and a breakdown in the North Woods following the death of his old Grandma Scrimser where he realizes the value, with the help of St. Augustine, of her dying words, "Maybe we haven't made enough of pain," by accepting his responsibility to Halo, and, presumably, assuming the mantle of artistic maturity. If he follows the advice of Frenside and Goethe, Grandma Scrimser and St. Augustine, he will write of real life, that which he knows, and not avoid the pain. He must "turn to his own task with the fixed resolve to see life only through his own eyes" (\textit{WF}, p. 22). He will perhaps write a book like \textit{Ethan Frome} or \textit{The Custom of the Country}.

\textit{Hudson River Bracketed} and \textit{The Gods Arrive} are solemn
books. Orlando, Virginia Woolf's parallel production published in 1928, is a charming enemy to such solemnity. It is subtitled "A Biography," a signal that here, as she does so often, Mrs. Woolf stretches the form of the novel to include other genres. We find Orlando as a noble youth of sixteen in his family home, in the sixteenth century. "His fathers had been noble since they had been at all" (p. 9). Our point of view is a pompous "biographer" whose certainty ("for there could be no doubt about his sex," p. 9) and whose intolerance ("and so . . . began that riot and confusion of the passions and emotions which every good biographer detests," p. 11) are to frustrate him enormously. The novel opens with the youth "in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters" (p. 9), seemingly destined for a life of action, the stuff of which Captain Marryat writes ("The Captain's Death Bed," I: 173-80). But, just as Virginia Woolf's novels typically abandon action for revery, Orlando is soon at his desk, bewildering his biographer by writing, fluently. He is pouring out "AEthelbert: A Tragedy in Five Acts," abstract and bombastic, but damned when he happens to look out of the window directly at the nature he is describing. "Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another. Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy; bring them together and they tear each other to pieces" (p. 11). And so he goes outside to nature.

ture itself, epitomized by his beloved oak tree, "the earth's spine," "something which he could attach his floating heart to" (p. 13), which becomes indeed the skeleton of the whole novel. His reveries are cut short by a trumpet announcing amorous old Queen Elizabeth, who "smelt like a cupboard in which furs are kept in camphor" (p. 15). Orlando's glimpse of an unknown stranger sitting at the servants' dinner table is actually more important to his future, however, than the fact that Elizabeth takes him off to court:

... a rather fat, rather shabby man, whose ruff was a thought dirty, and whose clothes were of hodden brown. He held a pen in his hand, but he was not writing. He seemed in the act of rolling some thought up and down... 'Tell me,' he /Orlando/ wanted to say, 'everything in the whole world'--for he had the wildest, most absurd, extravagant ideas about poets and poetry--but how speak to a man who does not see you?..

Life at court for a time distracts the thoughtful boy. He meets Sasha, a Russian girl of androgynous charms, who appeals to all his senses (p. 26). Their romance spans the Great Frost, and changes Orlando from "sulky stripling" to "a nobleman, full of grace and manly courtesy" (p. 29). They are to elope the night of the thaw, but she betrays him.

The consequences are awkward for the biographer, pledged "to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth" (p. 46). It is clear to the reader by this time, of course, that the "truth" presented so far is the truth of the imagination alone: the biographer is not actually a "truth-teller," like Defoe. The description of the Great Frost, perhaps Virginia Woolf's most cele-
brated passage, for instance, had been clearly hyperbole. The Thames, frozen to twenty fathoms, displays London life caught unawares, immortalizing "the old bumboat woman, who was carrying her fruit to market on the Surrey side . . . for all the world as if she were about to serve a customer, though a certain blueness about the lips hinted the truth" (p. 25). And now Orlando suffers from his rejected suit by sleeping/dying for a week, after which he awakens to the seventeenth century, obsessed with death and Sir Thomas Browne (illustrating the inevitable turning inward described by Mrs. Woolf in "The Elizabethan Lumber Room," I: 46-53, and "Notes on an Elizabethan Play," I: 54-61). He is afflicted with the love of literature, and, since "it was the fatal nature of this disease to substitute a phantom for reality" (p. 52), his vast house is as nothing to him, and he sits scribbling. He had written "before he was turned twenty-five, some forty-seven plays, histories, romances, poems; some in prose, some in verse; some in French, some in Italian; all romantic, and all long" (p. 54). They mostly concern "some mythological personage at a crisis of his career." "The Oak Tree" was "the only monosyllabic title among the lot" (p. 54). After months of feverish writing Orlando determines to communicate with the glorious race of published writers, represented in his mind by that unknown ponderer of Queen Bess's time (pp. 56-57), and so invites the famous writer Nick Greene to visit. Orlando is astonished to find that he belittles heroes Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jon-
son, Browne, Donne, and mourns for the Greeks (p. 62). As for poetry, that sacred calling, "Orlando only gathered that it was harder to sell than prose, and though the lines were shorter took longer in the writing" (p. 61). Nevertheless the youth is fascinated by this coarse pragmatic man, but crushed by the satire that follows hard upon his visit, "A Visit to a Nobleman in the Country," which all but identifies Orlando, even "introducing, with scarcely any disguise, passages from that aristocratic tragedy, the Death of Hercules, which he [Greene] found as he expected, wordy and bombastic in the extreme" (p. 67). Orlando renounces "love and ambition, women and poets," burns all his work except "The Oak Tree," and absorbs himself in elk-hounds and rosebushes (p. 68). Suddenly realizing the value of his house, he amuses himself by furnishing it lavishly. 11 He also keeps working on "The Oak Tree," but now, at the beginning of the eighteenth century,  

... he had changed his style amazingly. His floridity was chastened; his abundance curbed; the age of prose was congealing those warm fountains. The very landscape outside was less stuck about with garlands and the briars themselves were less thorned and intricate. (p. 79) 

But Orlando is driven from his sanctuary by a hare-like and amorous duchess and becomes, in Chapter 3, Ambassador to Turkey. Work on "The Oak Tree" continues there, but here the biographer must deal with a record so damaged by

---

11 Naremore cites the catalogue of purchases on pp. 76-77 of Orlando as the only direct parody of Vita Sackville-West's Knole and the Sackvilles, upon which this "new biography" is loosely based (pp. 206-08).
fire that "often it has been necessary to speculate, to surmise, and even to use the imagination" (p. 84). The most astonishing event of Orlando's career takes place: amid swirls of rumour, especially about a marriage to one Rosina Pepita, he changes into a woman, and must flee. "She" returns to England in Chapter 4 to fight for her inheritance. It is now the eighteenth century, and London, dominated by the dome of St. Paul's, which first appears to Orlando to be the pate of that unknown poet, is graceful and orderly. Actually androgynous, as Mrs. Woolf thinks great writers must be (cf. A Room of One's Own, pp. 102-03), she goes to London in pursuit of "life and a lover." Despite her experience with Nick Greene, she still believes in the greatness of writers, and the very names of Addison, Dryden, and Pope thrill her. Mrs. Woolf broadly satirizes fashionable literary circles, where all is illusion and no real wit, like Pope's, can be easily tolerated. Like Greene, Pope proves personally spiteful, and alienates Orlando forever with "the rough draft of a certain famous line in the 'Characters of Women'" (p. 151). She learns that genius, devoted to piercing illusions, is undependable in person and best found in books (p. 147). But she also learns, more practically, "the most important part of style, which is the natural run of the voice in speaking... They taught her this, merely by

12 Vita Sackville-West lost Knole due to the legal problems caused by that alleged marriage. Her son, Nigel Nicolson, explains the situation in Portrait of a Marriage (New York: Atheneum, 1973).
the cadence of their voices in speech; so that her style changed somewhat, and she wrote some very pleasant, witty verses and characters in prose" (p. 149).

Then dampness overcomes London, and the nineteenth century begins. Mrs. Woolf's satire is broadest on the Victorian period (as we might expect from a denizen of Bloomsbury). She symbolizes it with a great heap in front of Buckingham Palace.

Draped about a vast cross of fretted and floriated gold were widow's weeds and bridal veils; hooked on to other excrescences were crystal palaces, bassinettes, military helmets, memorial wreaths, whiskers, wedding cakes, cannon, Christmas trees . . . . The incongruity of the objects, the association of the fully clothed and the partly draped, the garishness of the different colours and their plaid-like juxtapositions afflicted Orlando with the most profound dismay . . . . it looked . . . as if it were destined to endure for ever. (pp. 163-64)

The sentimental gallimaufry affects her style. Even though she is overcome with shame at the legacy of her sexual adventures in the eighteenth century (a pregnancy, not sanctified by a husband), she writes on, but mortified now by her "involuntary inspiration," a corny facility (p. 168). This age breaks her spirit: she feels compelled to follow the unnatural but universal custom of coupling for life. True to her perennial spirit, she decides to marry Nature. Enter Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, who literally embodies it: his "wild, dark-plumed name" had for her "the steel-blue gleam of rooks' wings, the hoarse laughter of their caws, the snake-like twisting descent of their feathers in a silver pool, and a thousand other things which will be described
presently" (pp. 176-77). Language is inadequate to describe the communion of these androgynous soul-mates.

For it has come about, by the wise economy of nature, that our modern spirit can almost dispense with language; the commonest expressions do, since no expressions do; hence the most ordinary conversation is often the most poetic, and the most poetic is precisely that which cannot be written down. For which reasons we leave a great blank here, which must be taken to indicate that the space is filled to repletion. (p. 178) (Cf. "some little language such as lovers use," The Waves, p. 204)

They marry. But "Shel" must resume his adventures around Cape Horn ("'It's about all a fellow can do nowadays,' he said sheepishly," p. 178) and Orlando, though married, continues to write. The biographer has trouble dealing with her cerebral activity: even "killing a wasp" would be "a fitter subject for novelist or biographer than this mere woolgathering" (p. 189). He wishes she would at least think about love, even if only in the form of (Lawrence's) whistling gamekeeper. But at last the poem is finished, and the manuscript literally longs to be read. Orlando takes it to London for publication, and is astonished to find that Nick Greene has grown respectable, and is the chief critic of the day. Now he reveres the Elizabethans, the Restoration wits, and the eighteenth-century neoclassicists, and, as always, deplores the present. "'It is an age,'" he says, referring to Tennyson, Browning, and Carlyle, "'marked by precious conceits and wild experiments--none of which the Elizabethans would have tolerated for an instant'" (p. 196). He loves Orlando's manuscript: "There was no trace in it, he was

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
thankful to say, of the modern spirit. It was composed with a regard to truth, to nature, to the dictates of the human heart, which was rare indeed, in these days of unscrupulous eccentricity. It must, of course, be published instantly" (p. 198). She sends a telegram to her husband: "'My God Shel, . . . life literature Greene toady,'" a "cypher language" similar to that which Mrs. Woolf ridicules Joyce for, but which is surely "some little language such as lovers use," necessary to convey her discovery that it is not literature (revealed by numerous critical journals to be determinedly derivative) but "ecstasy that matters" (pp. 201-03). Her rhapsody on natural happiness, symbolized by the kingfisher, climaxes with the birth of a son (pp. 206-09).

The book ends, like The Years, with the present day, given as 11 October 1928, about the same time Virginia Woolf was delivering A Room of One's Own at Girton. The fantasy is gone, for the memory now leaps through time and space to convey the unity of all in the moment. Orlando is shopping.

'Time has passed over me,' she thought, trying to collect herself; 'this is the oncome of middle age. How strange it is! Nothing is any longer one thing. I take up a handbag and I think of an old bumboat woman frozen in the ice. Someone lights a pink can-

---

13 Gruber, pp. 35-36.
14 Holtby, Ch. VIII, "Two in a Taxi," discusses the parallels in Orlando and A Room of One's Own, summarized as the ideas that 1) literature is composite, 2) the writer must be free economically, and 3) literature must be androgynous.
15 For the Bergsonian implications, see Hafley, pp. 96-101, and Kumar.
... it cannot be denied /Continues the biographer/ that the most successful practitioners of the art of life, often unknown people by the way, somehow contrive to synchronize the sixty or seventy different times which beat simultaneously in every normal human system so that when eleven strikes, all the rest chime in unison, and the present is neither a violent disruption nor completely forgotten in the past." (p. 215)

It is Orlando's task in the present moment to find unity among her many selves. It comes in a moment of distraction, the kind of loss of self Virginia Woolf always sought ("it was at this moment, when she had ceased to call 'Orlando' and was deep in thoughts of something else," in fact, thoughts of that Elizabethan poet who has always haunted her like a wild goose who flies away to the sea, "that the Orlando whom she had called came of its own accord," p. 221). The present moment becomes very satisfying, and she tours her house. It comprises the past: her personal history (pp. 223-24), but, like Pointz Hall, all history as well (pp. 225-26). But suddenly she experiences the terror of the present, which "has no body, is as a shadow without substance or quality of its own, yet has the power to change whatever it adds itself to," lacking all beauty and order (p. 227). Then a missing thumbnail casts her "into a pool where things dwell in darkness so deep that what they are we scarcely know," where "everything was partly something else" (p. 228). With subconsciousness restored the present is less bleak, and she mounts the hill to her oak tree. She buries her book:

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
What has praise and fame to do with poetry? ... Was not writing poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice? ... What could have been more secret, she thought, more close, and like the intercourse of lovers, than the stammering answer she had made all these years to the old crooning song of the woods ... (p. 229)

It is ecstasy that matters.

Neither _Hudson River Bracketed_ nor _Orlando_ offers any surprises to the student of Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf. While the first is certainly not Mrs. Wharton's best novel, for it has enough loose writing and sentimental notions to justify the charge that she simply lost her grip on her craft after _The Age of Innocence_, _Hudson River Bracketed_ is formed along characteristic lines.  

It is "realistic": the characters are meant to be living characters, and Vance, I think, is, although there is convincing criticism of the trio of women who embody too neatly the various pulls on Vance's susceptible nature. The setting is organic. The cities are states of mind: Euphoria, crass opportunism; New York, commercial drive; Paris, intellectual inquiry, and so

---

16 For instance, there are some repetitions of striking (if not over-blown) phrases that a sprightlier Mrs. Wharton would surely have revised out. Vance muses that he "knew now that he and she /Halo/ might have walked those flaming ramparts together..." (p. 246). Later Halo muses that "she wanted a companion on the flaming ramparts" (p. 362). Vance and Halo also realize, again separately and in private, how arbitrary "time measures" are in "this world of fever" (HRB, p. 323), "the sentimental world" (GA, p. 101). It would be hard to defend the passage in _The Gods Arrive_ where the moon is personified as an intellectual judgment on the dazzling fireworks of Nice, like Halo (pp. 218-19).

17 See Nevius, esp. pp. 233-34. Askew, Ch. IV, "The Portrait of an Artist," discusses more favorably the mythological symmetry—Laura Lou as Venus, Halo as Artemis.
forth.\textsuperscript{18} There is the central use of houses: the Willows is the past for raw Vance, until (like Edith Wharton herself) he discovers that England is the prototype for this paler imitation. And, just as we saw in The Reef and The Age of Innocence, rooms reveal a great deal about their occupants, such as Halo's book-lined sitting room (pp. 136-37), Laura Lou's squalid boarding-house room (pp. 292-94). The plot is built upon dramatically staged "crucial moments," scenes featuring dialogue; and a jump in time is characteristically represented by a dramatic juncture, followed by a flashback to fill in the interim (see opening of Book IV, p. 135). The agent of presentation is that omniscient narrator who, as in The Age of Innocence, limits herself to an angle of vision, here two (Vance and Halo), but at all times knows more, sees more, than they do. It is interesting that Mrs. Wharton seems to be experimenting with a Joycean development of consciousness: the first chapters use slang to try to dramatize Vance's provincial mentality—an attempt which unfortunately leans rather heavily on the use of the word "fellow."

An example: in the library of the Willows Vance muses on the lines "Is this the face that launched a thousand ships/
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?" "My God! Who wrote it?" he bursts out. "Who could have? Not any of the big fellows he knew about. . . ." (p. 92).

\textsuperscript{18} Buchan argues convincingly (p. 344) that this is not a novel of manners, but the saga of Vance's development, so that the lack of close, realistic observation of the midwest and New York is not the serious flaw sometimes seen (see note 6, above).
Orlando is sometimes omitted from studies of Virginia Woolf's novels, perhaps because she herself dismissed it as a "sport" after the joy of writing it was over and she started in earnest on The Waves. In her diary she pronounced it "too freakish and unequal... I expect I began it as a joke and went on with it seriously. Hence it lacks some unity" (31 May 1928, pp. 125-26). However valid that criticism might be (and I do not think it a serious problem, as we shall see), Orlando includes all of Mrs. Woolf's typical concerns. It is quite delightfully "fantastic": the character of Orlando is meant to figure forth the inner life as it evolves in response to a remarkably entertaining medley of times and places. The setting is, like the interludes of The Waves and The Years, the embodiment of that ineluctable reality that the self must confront, things in themselves. That great house with 365 rooms encompasses Orlando's whole past, and the whole history of England as epitomized by her noble family. Each century she lives through has its own personality evinced by its climate, its architecture. The plot, as we have come to expect, is more than the sequence of events which the "biography" of Vita Sackville-West happily requires: it is a series of moments of vision--of the Eliza-

19 Some critics take Orlando at Mrs. Woolf's own valuation. John W. Graham, in "The 'Caricature Value' of Parody and Fantasy in Orlando," University of Toronto Quarterly, 30 (July 1961), 345-66; rpt. VW: 20th Century Views, pp. 101-16, takes her Diary entry of 7 November 1928 ("I want (and this was serious) to give things their caricature value," p. 134) as the text for his analysis of her mixed accomplishment.
bethan poet, of Sasha, of the bumboat woman—which have a cumulative effect, and lead to the great epiphany under the oak tree, where "the moment" comes to embody all time. As we might expect, Mrs. Woolf plays with the "point of view," using a pompous biographer who, like the narrator of Jacob's Room, comments self-consciously on his limitations but who also is forgotten when Mrs. Woolf's typical poetic narrator, that visionary who can see as far as Mrs. Woolf herself can stretch her mind, takes over, as it clearly does in the climactic epiphany atop the hill overlooking, fantastically, all England.

Both Mrs. Wharton's and Mrs. Woolf's bildungsromans end as we should expect. Vance Weston learns a lesson: after involvement with sensual Floss, soulful Laura Lou, he comes to recognize his responsibility to intellectual Halo (yes, it is too neat). After dallying with poetry, historical novels, theoretical novels, and so forth, he comes to see the justice of Frenside's (and Goethe's and Wharton's) contention that he must experience for himself real life: enrich himself so that he can write a novel of manners or character. The end of The Gods Arrive is dramatic: the homecoming to these truths is dramatized by Vance's submission to the pregnant Halo as to a mother (with suggestions of Goethe's Mothers of the Deep, the fount of true inspiration.) This tableau has been justly ridiculed, but it illustrates Mrs. Wharton's perennial attempt to embody in a situation the conflicts of which her novels are made. Orlando, in con-
contrast, achieves a state of being: after dancing through the centuries with Sasha, Rosina Pepita, and Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine (another neat trio) she brings the separate pieces together: horizontally, her separate selves (p. 221), and vertically, her conscious thoughts and their unconscious springs (p. 228). After pouring forth abstract Elizabethan verse, bombastic plays, crisp apothegms and characters, insipid sentimental verse, constituting a veritable survey of English literature, she publishes a manuscript incredibly cross-hatched and re-written, the cumulative product of four centuries of seeing nature, the oak tree. We presume that the manuscript, like Orlando herself, has changed from masculine to feminine, from the clear-cut oratory of the Elizabethans to the sinuous "dark places of psychology" of the twentieth century. The end of Orlando is poetic: Orlando buries her prize-winning book because it is irrelevant to those "secret transactions" she has had through the ages with reality, and feels the crucial "ecstasy" as Shel, the wild goose, lands at her side. This is Virginia Woolf's "poetry," that experience of perceiving and communicating the direct truth about reality that she sought in other nov-

---

20 See Gruber, Ch. 3, "Literary Influences: The Formation of a Style," which discusses Orlando as a mockery of the masculine styles (a parody of Asiatic varieties, similar to Joyce, a commentary on Attic varieties, similar to Strachey), and as a recapitulation of her own evolving style, from the "emotionally feminine" writing of The Voyage Out, to the "attempted restraint" of Night and Day, to the stream-of-consciousness and Impressionism of the later novels (pp. 24-38).
els, and tried desperately to embody in her own.

Thus strictly as novels Hudson River Bracketed and Orlando illustrate the subjects and manners that this study has found to be typical. They also contain, as the brief summaries above indicate, quite a bit of literary criticism themselves. Mrs. Wharton's novel is not as tightly written as her best work is, and at times her attitude is hard to extract. Instead, for instance, seems at first a legitimate study of the "substitution of values" of the heroine, but is dismissed later, seemingly with Mrs. Wharton's approval, as a pretty costume drama. Colossus seems at first a healthy reaction against stream-of-consciousness fiction, and Mrs. Wharton's disapproval of that is unequivocal, and yet it too is dismissed later as faddish, derivative. Nevertheless, the underlying message is clear: Vance must find the Past. The present--whether Euphoria, Illinois, or the iconoclastic literary rebels in New York or Paris--is hollow. In the North Woods Vance begins to find his true orientation:

He had written "Colossus" in a fever, but his new book was shaping itself in a mood of deep spiritual ardour such as his restless intelligence had never before attained, and these weeks outside of time gave him his first understanding of the magic power of continuity. (p. 409)

Orlando is the work of a writer often considered the complete rebel, but the underlying message of that book, like her literary criticism read as a whole, is an insistence on the necessity of the past as vigorous as Mrs. Wharton's. But where Vance must find the past, Orlando literally em-
bodies it, in her person from the sixteenth century, in her
heritage from the dawn of time when her ancestors "came out
of the northern mists wearing coronets on their heads" (p. 9).
"The Oak Tree" is an accumulation of a long tradition, "for
masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the
outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by
the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass
is behind the single voice" (A Room of One's Own, p. 66).

Edith Wharton found the appropriate tradition; Vir-
ginia Woolf was saturated in the tradition and skimmed above
it, trying to outdo it--and it is these facts, so nicely
dramatized by the pair of novels just examined, that illumi-
nate the two writers' comments upon each other with which
this study opened. In "American Fiction" (1925) Mrs. Woolf
charged that Mrs. Wharton was too obsessed with European cul-
ture to be considered "American." But that is surely be-
cause, like Vance Weston, Mrs. Wharton found what Mrs. Woolf
saw as the epitome of America ("its tin cans, its prairies,
its cornfields flung disorderly about like a mosaic of in-
congruous pieces waiting order at the artist's hands," II: 120)
disappointingly thin. She was, of course, an "American" writ-
er: Edmund Wilson successfully demolishes Percy Lubbock's
contention that she was at the end of a Europeanized trad-
tion with his observation that she was "as much a contributor
to the realism of the age that followed hers as she was an
inheritor from James, and that a book like The Custom of the
Country opened the way for novels like Babbitt and Manhattan
Transferred. But Mrs. Wharton did in fact revere the past, and ridicule her contemporaries turning away from it in those ill-tempered essays at the end of her career. In "Permanent Values in Fiction" (1934) Mrs. Wharton charged that Virginia Woolf and others have distorted the axiomatic definition of the novel, "a work of fiction containing a good story about well-drawn characters" (p. 603), thus avoiding the difficulties of drawing life-like characters and relating them to general laws of human experience. Virginia Woolf was not, of course, a purely experimental writer: we have seen above how the psychological and philosophical notions that led to the alteration of character, setting, and plot in Jacob's Room and The Waves were modified during the thirties so that her final book, Between the Acts, reverts to traditional modes enough so that it can serve as a viable parallel with Mrs. Wharton's own finest novel, The Age of Innocence. But she did in fact experiment with form throughout her career, try to break all the moulds, in the interest of matching her vision.

The matter of vision is the innermost matter of this comparison, as it is in every consideration of creative work. Both Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf, interestingly enough, compared the essence of it to elusive birds. Near the end of The Writing of Fiction Mrs. Wharton acknowledges that her foregoing analysis of creation may seem dry, dogmatic, com-

plicated, or perhaps even irrelevant:

No doubt there is some truth in all these objections; . . . It would appear that in the course of such enquiries the gist of the matter always does escape. Just as one thinks to cast a net over it, a clap of the wings, and it is laughing down on one from the topmost bough of the Tree of Life! (p. 118)

Mrs. Wharton is talking about the impossibility of critical analysis; Mrs. Woolf goes farther, discussing the impossibility of embodying the vision in creative work in the first place. As Orlando drives herself home from Marshall & Snelgrove's in the twentieth century she suddenly remembers the bald poet of the sixteenth century:

'Haunted! ever since I was a child. There flies the wild goose. It flies past the window out to sea. Up I jumped (she gripped the steering-wheel tighter) and stretched after it. But the goose flies too fast. I've seen it, here--there--there--England, Persia, Italy. Always it flies fast out to sea and always I fling after it words like nets . . . which shrivel as I've seen nets shrivel drawn on deck with only seaweed in them; and sometimes there's an inch of silver--six words--in the bottom of the net. But never the great fish who lives in the coral groves.' (p. 221)

This mood of frustration reminds us of Mrs. Woolf's depression over Jacob's Room and The Waves.

But neither Mrs. Wharton nor Mrs. Woolf, determined artists both, stopped trying to capture the vision. Mrs. Wharton goes on:

Is all seeking vain, then? Is it useless to try for a clear view of the meaning and method of one's art? Surely not. If no art can be quite pent-up in the rules deduced from it, neither can it fully realize itself unless those who practise it attempt to take its measure and reason out its processes. It is true that the gist of the matter always escapes, since it nests, the elusive bright-winged thing, in that mysterious fourth-dimensional world which is the
artist's inmost sanctuary and on the threshold of which enquiry perforce must halt; but though that world is inaccessible, the creations emanating from it reveal something of its laws and processes. (WF, p. 119)

Vance, we are led to believe, will write books emanating from that "one small luminous space" in his imagination where the characters become "the sole reality, and he who was the condition of their existence was yet apart from them, and empowered to be their chronicler" (pp. 373-74) (cf. BG, pp. 197-205). Neither did Mrs. Woolf stop. Orlando buries her book, perhaps because she has asked more of literature than literature can yield, that the vision itself be embodied and communicated, that her private world (which Mrs. Wharton, with a characteristic spirit of compromise, has consigned to mystery) be public, and given herself over to ecstasy in life itself. The wild goose is Shelmerdine. Perhaps Guiguet is right when he decides that literature was for Virginia Woolf a means of living, a search for and bridge to reality, without which she would be imprisoned in the "damned egotistical self" she so deplored.22

Orlando was not Virginia Woolf's final word, however: it was followed by The Waves and Between the Acts, those books which this study has examined most closely. I paired Orlando with Mrs. Wharton's final statements on life and

---

22 Guiguet quotes Mrs. Woolf's diary (27 February 1926, pp. 84-85) describing her restless search for "it," reality, and sums up her attitude toward art as "restlessness, search, instability, fervour, a need for absoluteness, the sense of mystery and the climax of a pacifying illumination" (p. 112).
literature because of the convenient parallel in theme, but a further comment must be made. Chapter IV above was devoted to demonstrating that Mrs. Woolf modified her visions, those "fins passing far out," even, we might say, those "wild geese," which as private visions understandably remained "secret transactions." Her effort to depict the general life, the mind in relation to solitude, was given over to an effort to delineate social relations, the traditional concern of the novel.\(^{23}\) She reverted to a surprising extent to Mrs. Wharton's more public (because more conventional) transactions in her last two novels. *Between the Acts* is concerned with the community and the traditions which bind it: Miss La Trobe, far from burying her work, broadcasts her central message over a loudspeaker! Both Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf dreaded the disorder of the modern world, but both counted on art, the art of the novel, to contribute some order and beauty to it. "Dispersed are we; who have come together. But . . . let us retain whatever made that harmony," broadcasts Miss La Trobe (p. 137). The harmony is chords of past and present, the continuity that Vance Weston finds in Mrs. Wharton's last volumes, the continuity that Miss La Trobe celebrates in Mrs. Woolf's final volume. We cannot "make it new," and make it last.

\(^{23}\) Brewster and Burrell's "The Wild Goose: Virginia Woolf's Pursuit of Life," which suggested to me this figure for Mrs. Woolf's visionary search, was written in 1930, and obviously could not take account of the later change.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Edith Wharton

Primary Works:

Non-Fiction


"Fiction and Criticism." Undated fragmentary typescript in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. 8 pp.


"Mr. Sturgis's Belchamber." Bookman, 21 (May 1905), 307-10.

"Permanent Values in Fiction." Saturday Review of Literature, 10 (7 April 1934), 603-04.


"Tendencies in Modern Fiction." Saturday Review of Literature, 10 (27 January 1934), 433-34.

"The Vice of Reading." North American Review, 177 (October 1903), 513-21.

"Visibility in Fiction." Yale Review, NS 18 (March 1929), 480-88.

**The Writing of Fiction.** New York: Scribner's, 1925.

**Fiction**


**The Fruit of the Tree.** New York: Scribner's, 1907.


**Summer.** 1917; rpt. New York: Scribner's, n. d.

**The Valley of Decision; a Novel.** New York: Scribner's, 1902.

**Secondary Works:**

**Askew, Melvin W.** "Edith Wharton's Literary Theory." Diss. U. of Oklahoma 1957.


Tuttleton, James W.  "Edith Wharton: Form and Epistemology of Artistic Creation."  *Criticism*, 10 (Fall 1964), 334-51.


**Virginia Woolf**

**Primary Works:**

**Non-Fiction**


"Coleridge as Critic."  *TLS*, 7 February 1918, p. 67.

"Creative Criticism." TLS, 7 June 1917, p. 271.


Fiction


Secondary Works:


Bowling, Lawrence E. "What is the Stream of Consciousness Technique?" PMLA, 65 (June 1950), 333-45.


Francis, Herbert E., Jr. "Virginia Woolf and 'The Moment.'" Emory University Quarterly, 16 (Fall 1960), 139-51.


Goldman, Mark. "Virginia Woolf and the Critic as Reader." PMLA, 80 (June 1965), 275-84; rpt. VW: 20th Century Views, pp. 155-68.


Hynes, Samuel. "The Whole Contention Between Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Woolf." *Novel*, 1 (Fall 1967), 34-44.


Leavis, F. R. "After To the Lighthouse." *Scrutiny*, 10 (January 1942), 295-98.


Novak, Jane. "Virginia Woolf--"A Fickle Jacobean."


Pacey, Desmond. "Virginia Woolf as a Literary Critic." *University of Toronto Quarterly,* 17 (April 1948), 234-44.


---

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.


General Works


VITA

Julia Chandler L'Enfant was born 16 March 1944 in Hodge, Louisiana. Educated in public schools in Shreveport, she graduated from C. E. Byrd High School in 1961. She graduated from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge in 1965 with a combined curriculum of Arts and Sciences and one year of Law School. She did one year of graduate work in the English Department of LSU, and continued the Master's Degree program at Louisiana State University in New Orleans (now UNO) after her marriage to Howard W. L'Enfant in May of 1966. She graduated in June of 1968, and re-entered LSU for work on the Ph. D. degree in the summer of 1969.

Mrs. L'Enfant has held a graduate teaching assistantship for one and one-half years (1965-66 and part of the spring of 1967). She was awarded a Dissertation Year Fellowship by the Graduate School of LSU for 1973-74. She and her husband, a professor of law, have one daughter, Jamie.
Candidate: Julia Chandler L'Enfant

Major Field: English

Title of Thesis: Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf: Tradition and Experiment in the Modern Novel

Approved:

[Signatures]

Major Professor and Chairman

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

[Signatures]

Date of Examination:

June 10, 1974