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Criticism and the common reader: a study of the critical theory and practice of Virginia Woolf

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CRITICISM AND THE COMMON READER:
A STUDY OF THE CRITICAL THEORY
AND PRACTICE OF
VIRGINIA WOOLF

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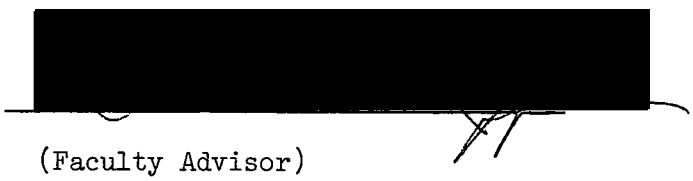

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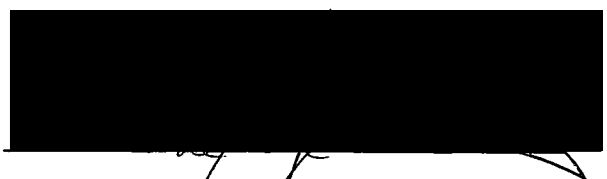

(Faculty Reader)

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INTRODUCTION

Criticism, for Virginia Woolf, is both a personal and a professional challenge--difficult to write and even more difficult to read when it concerns her own work. She never disciplines completely either the irony with which she views the world or the conflicts between heart and mind that arise whenever she reads a novel or examines a review. As a professional writer and reviewer, however, she recognizes that the heart, to which she finally turns in deciding whether a book is "good" or "bad," is too variable among people to work as a general standard. "Far be it from us to hazard any theory as to the nature of art,"[1] she disclaims, but her collected essays indicate that she has a standard, a critical theory of fiction, which she bases on much more than sensations of the heart. The purpose of this study is to set forth that theory, examine its strengths and deficiencies, and explore the extent to which Woolf herself uses her theoretical criteria in judging other writers' works.

In her essays Woolf shows great concern about the declining state of literature in the twentieth century, and she thinks that contemporary criticism, which "seldom or never applies to the problems of the present moment,"[2] is part of the problem. Its standards are too ill defined or reactionary for a rapidly changing world. Published entries from her personal diary indicate that she frequently thinks

of developing a new critical approach to fiction, much as she is experimenting with new forms in her novels. She considers, for example, devising a "new critical method; something far less stiff and formal than these Times [Times Literary Supplement] articles. . . . There must be some simpler, subtler, closer means of writing about books, as about people, could I hit upon it."[3] She does not succeed entirely; much of her theory includes the methods of earlier critics, but she does argue persuasively for critics' judging as readers, albeit well-informed ones, rather than as academicians or reviewers. Indeed, in her theory the reader is not only a critic but also a "creator" of the novel.

Other critics frequently have interpreted Woolf's emphasis on reader participation as indicative of an impressionist or affective approach in criticism. Her "theoretical" essays, however, provide ample evidence that her critical standards are essentially those of the objective critic, who is most concerned with the work itself. Confusion about her theoretical approach arises in part from her use of the terms "form" and "emotion." Unlike most of her contemporaries, she does not use "form" to mean an observable pattern of the whole, nor "emotion" to indicate an unreasoned or superficial feeling. For Woolf both terms describe aspects of the creative process itself, elements that lie so deep within the work that they cannot be separated from it.

In her own criticism, however, Woolf does adopt a variety of critical stances, including the biographical, historical, and impressionist, depending on her purpose; she frequently is more rhetorician

than judge. Ironically, some of her most subjective articles are therefore her most successful by her own theoretical criterion of whether a work seems "complete" in the reader's mind. But some other weaknesses in her criticism are not so easily excused. This study will concentrate specifically on her distorted view of the modern world and its serious effects on her perception of twentieth-century literature.

Woolf was respected as a critic during her lifetime, and her collected essays, The Common Reader and The Common Reader II, were well received. Since her death, however, most studies of her have concentrated on her fiction. The critics who do examine her nonfiction discuss its critical value in general terms, and none examines the essays in detail. While this study is not exhaustive, it is the first to bring together Woolf's critical views on fiction, specifically the novel, and to present them as a theory. The views have been derived from approximately fifty of her essays, written over a period of more than twenty years, which deal with the arts of reading and writing fiction. The resulting theory covers the nature of the art, the nature of the artist, and the nature of the critic, as well as the function of criticism and the criteria for fiction.

The primary source for the theoretical material is Virginia Woolf's Collected Essays, edited by Leonard Woolf; the study concentrates particularly on Volumes I and II, which contain most of her literary and critical essays. The study also considers the longer, independently published essays, A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas. A Writer's Diary, Leonard Woolf's edited version of her personal diary, and

Quentin Bell's recent biography of her provide additional valuable material. Other critics who have discussed her criticism or ideas about literature also have been consulted.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Virginia Woolf, "Hours in a Library," Collected Essays, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), II, 39.

[2]Virginia Woolf, "The Anatomy of Fiction," Collected Essays, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), II, 137.

[3]Virginia Woolf, A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1953), entry of November 16, 1931, p. 172.

CHAPTER I

THE THEORY OF CRITICISM

"Theories are dangerous things,"[1] Virginia Woolf concedes. But sometimes they are also necessary, and for her the necessity outweighs the danger. She examines her art conscientiously and, on the whole, judiciously. Much of her concern about fiction stems from convictions that most critics misunderstand their roles and that they misinterpret fiction as a static rather than an evolving art. Woolf's critical theory of fiction therefore involves an examination of the function of criticism, the nature of art, and the nature of the artist, in addition to the establishment of specific criteria for the great novel.

Virginia Woolf believes strongly that the function of criticism is to define, to mold, and to help create the art of fiction. History indicates that no art can endure without standards, and novel writing, as one of the newest arts, must develop according to standards derived from consideration of its most successful works. If we learn to "train our taste," she writes, "it will begin to bring us not merely judgments on particular books, but it will tell us that there is a quality common to certain books. . . . Thus, with our taste to guide us, we shall venture beyond the particular book in search of qualities that group books together; we shall give them names and thus frame a rule that

brings order into our perception. We shall gain a further and a rarer pleasure from that discrimination."[2] She points out that the novel is still struggling for respect because it has not yet demonstrated its initial integrity through adherence to some standard. In "On Re-reading Novels" she admonishes,

> We have not named and therefore presumably not recognized the simplest of devices by which every novel has come into being. We have not taken the pains to watch our storyteller as he decides which method he will use; we have not applauded his choice, deplored his lack of judgment, or followed with delight and interest his use of some dangerous new device which, for all we know, may do his job to perfection or blow the whole book to smithereens.[3]

Woolf hopes that these standards will compare favorably with those established by tradition in other literary genres. She would agree with F. R. Leavis that there is also a great tradition in fiction, but the problem, as she sees it, is that no one has yet identified the essence of that tradition. She thinks that critics ought to be dealing with this problem by considering why some novels are commonly called classics and why no modern novel measures up to those classics. Criticism ought to be examining modern fiction alongside the classics to help us understand what distinguishes the great novels from the nearly great.

Woolf suggests that such comparisons also would encourage novelists to continue to write in an increasingly hostile world. She hopes that the critics, by placing contemporary works in the larger perspective of past and present, will help guide novelists in the proper direction. This hope stems from a lifelong concern for the future of the novel; she sees the quality of fiction declining rapidly even at

the turn of the century, and by the 1920's much of the work being published only aggravates her fear that the novel will not survive such a trend. She thus looks to criticism to help answer for quality in fiction. In her view, individual artists cannot struggle against an unnamed current indefinitely; the reassuring word that they are helping develop a new art form must come from the critics, who ideally can observe disinterestedly as no author can.[4] That this task is difficult she does not dispute; but that it is essential for the survival of English literature she has no doubt. If authors know "the opinion of people reading for the love of reading, slowly and unprofessionally, and judging with great sympathy and yet with great severity, might this not improve the quality of the work?" she asks. "And if by our means books were to become stronger, richer, and more varied, that would be an end worth reaching."[5]

Another way for critics to ensure the survival of the novel, Woolf suggests, is to use criticism to show the public art's relevance to the rest of life. Criticism should demonstrate that art draws its strength from life; that it discovers beauty in the everyday and challenges us to find the beauty in our everyday worlds; that it creates an awareness of self and of others. Most important, perhaps, criticism may teach us that the greatest appeal of art is that it transforms our everyday worlds into more universal worlds, thereby acknowledging a significance in our lives that otherwise would remain unrecorded.

Woolf is not alone in her anxiety over the uncertain state of fiction, of course; other notable critics of her period who share her

concern include E. M. Forster in Aspects of the Novel (1927) and Percy Lubbock in The Craft of Fiction (1921). But, according to Woolf, Forster fails to consider fiction as an art in transition, while Lubbock emphasizes the form and technique of the novel at the expense of its heart. While she agrees with Forster that the traditional elements of a novel must be understood before new elements can be discussed, and acknowledges that Lubbock makes some pertinent observations on the working of the novel, she protests that neither of them defines his subject. Fiction is "in difficulties," she writes, precisely 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."[6] In a time of transition critics can no longer afford to be so undisciplined in examining their art. Woolf argues that England has no novels that compare in greatness to those of Russia, for example, because of English critics' refusal to take their obligations seriously. The English are indeed provincial in their tastes and ambitions, as Forster claims; content with proven ways, they feel no need to experience life in the broader perspective. But, writes Woolf, "if the English critic were less domestic, less assiduous to protect the rights of what it pleases him to call life, the novelist might be bolder, too. He might cut adrift from the eternal tea-table and the plausible and preposterous formulas which

are supposed to represent the whole of our human adventure. But then the story might wobble; the plot might crumble; ruin might seize upon the characters. The novel, in short, might become a work of art."[7]

Although Woolf feels that other critics have reneged on their obligation to help create art, she implies that the general reader should be sharing the responsibility. Obviously the aspects of criticism Woolf defines are interdependent, but the function of criticism is flexible and varied in form, emphasis, or proportion to suit its audience or the critic. Whatever the approach, criticism at its best is a tool for understanding literature; it helps preserve the best novels while encouraging their growth in new directions. But it is a double-handled tool, to be used by readers as well as by writers and critics. The best critics

> . . . light up and solidify the vague ideas that have been tumbling in the misty depths of our minds. But they are only able to help us if we come to them laden with questions and suggestions won honestly in the course of our own reading. They can do nothing for us if we herd ourselves under their authority and lie down like sheep in the shade of a hedge. We can only understand their ruling when it comes in conflict with our own and vanquishes it.[8]

The function of criticism, then, involves the artist's struggle, the critic's obligation, and the reader's responsibility to help create the art of fiction. This description leads quite naturally to Woolf's threefold perception of the nature of the critic.

Virginia Woolf derives much of her critical theory from her own experience as a writer; indeed, "Mrs. Woolf the critic often clarified

and formulated the problems of Mrs. Woolf the novelist."[9] While there may be disadvantages in this orientation, there are also compensations. Historically critics have tended to form rather closed societies. Many have contented themselves with analyses of works; other have attempted to place all works in categories; still others have used criticism merely as a vehicle for their own views of life or art. Too frequently the result has been an excess of pedantry, distortion, or egocentricity. Another more responsible group of critics, such as the neoclassicists or the expressionists, have at least tried to place contemporary art in perspective or to define it in terms of human values. Of the relatively small number of critics who have written about art with the firsthand knowledge of experience, many more are poets than novelists. Against this background of critical approaches, Woolf's observations are valuable for their insight into the creative process; we see that this process involves more dispassionate judgment than inspiration. The author, in fact, operates as self-critic. Woolf also clarifies at least one author's view of what the writer expects and receives from the public critic, the reviewer. Most important, however, she shows us what may be many writers' primary concern--the reader's private reaction to a work. Woolf, at least, considers the reader's response integral to the value of a work; the true critic, if he has no other credentials, must be a careful and caring reader.

Woolf's opinion that an author should be his own first critic undoubtedly results from her own experience, for she herself is very good at self-criticism and finds it valuable for her work. She

frequently questions the value, structure, and completeness of her writing, as illustrated by the following passage, recorded by Bell, about Mrs. Dalloway:

> . . . What do I feel about my writing? . . . One must write from deep feeling, said Dostoievsky. And do I? Or do I fabricate with words, loving them as I do? In this book I have almost too many ideas. I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity. I want to criticise the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense. But here I may be posing. . . . Am I writing The Hours from deep emotion? . . . It's a question though of these characters. People, like Arnold Pennett, say I can't create . . . characters that survive. . . . I daresay it's true that I haven't that 'reality' gift. I insubstantise, willfully 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?[10]

In evaluating his work, therefore, an author must ask himself whether he achieves the aims of fiction, which are to capture the complexity and nuances of life, to bring order to chaos, to be true to his senses, and, most important, to create a bond with the reader.

Woolf indicates that the writer, while observing, also is analyzing himself and the scene before him in order to create a world that is different from our world but just as real within its own limits. These limits are defined not only by the author's subject and by his depth of perception, but also by his ability to organize his world of senses:

> To sit cheek by jowl with our fellows cramped up together is distasteful, indeed repulsive. But draw a little apart, see people in groups as outlines, and they become at once memorable and full of beauty. Then it is not the actual sight or sound itself that matters, but the reverberations that it makes as it travels through our minds.

> These are often to be found far away, strangely transformed; but it is only by gathering up and putting together these echoes and fragments that we arrive at the true nature of our experience. So thinking, he [De Quincey] altered slightly the ordinary relationships. He shifted the values of familiar things. And this he did in prose, which makes us wonder whether, then, it is quite so limited as the critics say, and ask further whether the prose writer, the novelist, might not capture fuller and finer truths than are now his aim if he ventured into those shadowy regions where De Quincey has been before him?[11]

Singleness of purpose is vital to the author's task because purpose carries with it the author's convictions about his art, which he sacrifices at the risk of losing the integrity of his work. The author must make the novel's world real, its characters alive, and its emotions appealing enough that the novel will endure. In order to do so, he must believe in his fictional world and in the method with which he creates it. If his novel fails to convince him, it undoubtedly will fail to convince other readers. Woolf's own experience has shown her that a sense of the writer's being true to himself is a quality which critics, herself included, immediately remark upon. "My only interest as a writer lies, I begin to see, in some queer individuality; not in strength, or passion, or anything startling, but then I say to myself, is not 'some queer individuality' precisely the quality I respect?"[12] she observes in her diary.

It is the nature of the art itself, however, that most determines the artist's role as critic: "A writer, more than any other artist, needs to be a critic because words are so common, so familiar, that he must sieve and sift them if they are to become enduring,"[13] Woolf

explains. It is implicit that words endure only if chosen to do so; constant testing and revision of sentences is therefore the most crucial part of the author's task as self-critic. He must ask himself, "Does it hang together? Does one part support another? Can I flatter myself that it composes; and is whole?" and see that he "must still condense and point; give pauses their effect, repetitions and the run on."[14]

Creating a bond with the reader, the artist's ultimate aim, involves examining the work for its life, reality, and emotional appeal. Though important to the novelist, this aspect of critical judgment is perhaps most difficult; the author-critic must become a reader-critic in order to test his own vision.

The reviewer as public critic is almost a contradiction in terms in Woolf's estimation. Reviewers, of course, work for publications, which constantly are reconciling subject matter with deadlines and publics. Subject matter usually is compromised to meet deadlines or public whims. In this atmosphere reviewers can neither absorb a given book well enough to judge it on its intrinsic merits, nor place it in historical perspective to comment on its contribution to fiction. The result is "superficial" criticism.[15] Yet Woolf knows that the reviewer may be trying his best to act as a critic: "When I write a review I write every sentence as if it were going to be tried before three Chief Justices. I can't believe that I am crushed together and discounted,"[16] she admits. Moreover, she writes reviews for the same reason that others do; it provides a living. "It is a great standby--

this power to make large sums by formulating views on Stendhal and Swift,"[17] she observes. Thus she faces the constant dilemma of participating in a practice she abhors at its worst and despairs of at its best.

Working within the limitations of the public reviewer, Woolf nevertheless demands a certain internal integrity of any book as she tries to impose upon the reviewing wasteland at least a modicum of formal critical evaluation. "Is not every work of art . . . born of an original imagination and ought not the critic to concern himself with the creative act, the birth-pangs, the struggle of the artist to solve certain technical problems? The critic's duty is to communicate to the reader the particular vision of the artist, not to award good and bad conduct marks,"[18] she explains.

She first tests a book for its "reality," the balance of "blood and bone" that she looks for in her own work. Next, she looks for purpose; is she able to "spear that little eel in the middle--that marrow--which is one's object in criticism"?[19] Third, does the book "move"? Is it able to alter feelings in some respect, to reach from the author's heart to the reader's? Finally, she considers whether a book advances fiction as art, or whether it is one of increasing numbers of books written merely for the reader's quick perusal or idle entertainment and for the writer's commercial profit.

This last consideration reflects the heart of the reviewing problem. Many books that Woolf thinks advance art--those of Henry James and T. S. Eliot, for example--do not sell. She recognizes, however, that

journals are printed to sell and therefore must choose salable material; at the risk of losing their own readership, they cannot afford to review books the public will not read. "Fashion in literature is an inevitable thing,"[20] she concludes. But fashion leaves the reviewer-critic who is concerned about art in a position of continual compromise. Woolf experiences this pressure to write acceptably early in her career when the Times Literary Supplement editor objects to her use of the word "lewd" in an article on Henry James ("Henry James's Ghost Stories"). "He made it sufficiently clear not only that he wouldn't stand 'lewd,'--but that he didn't much like anything else," she writes. She doesn't want to "pander," but "writing against the current . . . cramps one. One writes stiffly, without spontaneity."[21]

As a result of such pressure, Woolf thinks, the tendency of most public critics is to succumb to commenting merely on a book's potential appeal and commercial success in order to make their reviews acceptable. Her concern over this situation culminates in her essay called "Reviewing," published in 1939, in which she argues that reviews are now so numerous, yet so short, that they serve neither the reader nor the author and may well offend the critical sense of the reviewer. The situation is bad and is getting worse, she concludes.

"Reviewing" causes an outcry, and Woolf is exasperated by comments "about my defiance of professional decency. Another allusion of a tart kind to Mrs. W. and her desire to kill reviewers in the Lit. Sup. yesterday."[22] Her attitude is all the more peevish because she believes she has recommended a good solution to the reviewing problem--

a system much like the doctor-patient relationship, in which an author would meet confidentially with "judges" he has chosen, who would discuss the book's artistic merits. She has no doubt that many novelists would ask for and use these "expositors," people well read in and articulate on literature--perhaps authors--to help them improve their work. "How many authors are there who would wish to have an expert opinion on their work? The answer to this is to be heard crying daily and crying loudly in any publisher's office or in any author's postbag. 'Give me advice,' they repeat, 'give me criticism.' . . . The art of writing is difficult; at every stage the opinion of an impersonal and disinterested critic would be of the highest value."[23] Reviews would be abolished, it is true, but solid critical articles reflecting a concern for the future of literature would take their place. The author, left in privacy, certainly would gain, literature would improve, and eventually the public would learn to read and evaluate critically, she concludes. "A new relationship might come into being, less petty and less personal than the old. A new interest in literature, a new respect for literature might follow. And, financial advantages apart, what a ray of light that would bring, what a ray of pure sunlight a critical and hungry public would bring into the darkness of the [writer's] workshop!"[24]

Unfortunately, Woolf's "solution" is idealistic and impractical. She does raise a legitimate concern and tries to suggest a system which "includes the good" in reviewing; "what a discovery that would be--a system that would not shut out,"[25] she writes. But while her

system does not shut out experimenters in art, it commits the more grievous error of shutting out many well meaning reviewers and the public at large, since neither group would retain much direct influence on the art.

If she despairs of the state of public criticism, however, she places great faith in the private critic, the reader, who provides "the real test."[26] "The reviewers are against me, and the private people are enthusiastic. Either I am a great writer or a nincompoop,"[27] she decides after publication of Jacob's Room. Preferring the private opinion, all her life she seeks her friends' appraisals, particularly those of writers, who, she feels, understand best what she is trying to do.

Her belief that all readers should train themselves as private critics is perhaps a natural extension of this regard for private evaluation of her own work. In fact, in "The Leaning Tower," a harsh evaluation of the perilous state of literature in a war-scarred nation, she argues that the public must become critical readers in order for literature and the society it serves to survive. With the security of the old class systems breaking down, she points out, "We have got to teach ourselves to understand literature. Money is no longer going to do our thinking for us. Wealth will no longer decide who shall be taught and who not. . . . In order to do that we must teach ourselves to distinguish--which is the book that is going to pay dividends of pleasure forever; which is the book that will pay not a penny in two years' time?"[28]

The true reader is "essentially young. He is a man of intense curiosity; of ideas; open-minded and communicative, to whom reading is more of the nature of brisk exercise in the open air than of sheltered study; he trudges the high road, he climbs higher and higher upon the hill until the atmosphere is almost too fine to breathe in; to him it is not a sedentary pursuit at all."[29] Although Woolf uses the word "essentially" in the literal sense, it actually has a double meaning here, for it is the young at heart, those most open to the world around them, who will gain most from what writers have to offer. In an echo of her father's advice to her to read what she liked because she liked it,[30] she recommends that readers read first for the joy of it. As Bloomsbury did, she believes that enjoyment of art is life's greatest pleasure. From a critical viewpoint, however, she might be assuming that a reader is unlikely to be sensitive to a book's good and bad characteristics if he cannot get past the subject matter. Unlike the author-critic or the reviewer-critic, therefore, the common reader-critic should not use a strictly objective approach in his readings; that is, if a writer has succeeded in creating a bond with the reader, the reader will find the book real and its characters alive and will appreciate the work for those reasons. It is enough if the book contains "important things" for the reader, if it "has in it the seeds of an enduring existence."[31]

Woolf suggests that it is even possible that the reader may sense more "blood and bone" in a work than the writer was conscious of as he wrote because "the reader has in common with the writer, though

much more feebly, the desire to create."[32] A writer who arouses in the reader this desire to create has succeeded in making his book a part of the reader. For the reader-critic perhaps nothing else is more important; sharing creative powers with the author brings the reader into the author's world with an immediacy that forces him to realize art's contributions to his own world. But in order to succeed, the reader "must be capable not only of great fineness of perception, but of great boldness of imagination if [he is] going to make use of all that the novelist--the great artist--gives [him]."[33] (The enormity of this demand on the "common reader" will be discussed in Chapter II.)

There is no art of fiction in England, Virginia Woolf suggests rather petulantly in one of her essays on modern literature.[34] Nor, she strongly implies, is there any school of criticism to develop one. Denials aside, however, in her less heated moments she indicates that she accepts part of not one but several critical theories of fiction and adds a few criteria of her own.

Her comments on the role of the reader suggest that she does not endorse an isolationist theory of "art for art's sake." On the contrary, the business of the novelist is to make his art live; the subject of art is life itself,[35] she asserts. Yet to say that she feels art imitates life would be to misinterpret her conceptions of "life" and "reality" in fiction. Critical opinions of her view of art range from David Daiches' blunt statement that "there is no 'art for art's sake' nonsense about Virginia Woolf; she recognizes the function of literature as that of illuminating experience for its readers "[36] to

Dorothy Brewster's apparent endorsement of Noel Annan's opinion that Bloomsbury "created an ethical justification for art for art's sake."[37] Although all agree that Woolf believes that art is neither created nor existent in a vacuum, they disagree over the way in which she sees art's relation to the rest of the world. Woolf struggles with the question herself and, using her own experience as a guide, eventually arrives at a rather expansive view of art. She always becomes absorbed in her own work. Her fiction is more real to her than her own life; it is her inner self poured out in periodic torrents of words. She likens the individual struggle of creating a book to giving birth. She also seems to realize, however, that once a book is "born," it, like a child, becomes autonomous, yet will gain its strength and endurance from interaction with others. Thus, it seems, the critics have defined her view of the function of art accurately but narrowly. Art does exist for its own sake during the creative process, and the creative process results in a self-contained entity, but in the end the art "grows" with others' growth. Her own early assessment of Thomas Hardy's work, for example, is that it is clumsy,[38] but in later years she respects no other living artist more.[39] Perhaps a more accurate description of her view of art, then, would be that art captures life, encompasses life, gives us life in a form more intensive than that of our everyday experience.

Since this definition of art is still nebulous, however, Woolf clarifies her meaning by being much more specific about what art is not than about what art is. One of her major concerns in this respect

is to distinguish between art and craft as they apply to the degree of a writer's achievement. The best fiction, of course, she considers art; it approaches poetry, enjoyed for its sensations, its beauty, and its universality. Craft complements these qualities to make the art enduring. Craft is therefore essential to great novels, but craft alone cannot create them, for art derives from the unconscious, while craft comes from the conscious mind of the artist. Art is spontaneous, or appears so, while craft is labored, however polished the result. Woolf reflects, in one diary entry, that the greatest book in the world would be "made entirely solely and with the integrity of one's thoughts. Suppose one could catch them before they became 'works of art'? Catch them hot and sudden as they rise in the mind--walking up Asheham hill for instance." She regrets that these spontaneous thoughts can only be made to appear spontaneous later, for the fragile thoughts need the support of craft in order to continue to live. It is unfortunate, she concludes, that "the process of language is slow and deluding. One must stop to find a word. Then, there is the form of the sentence, soliciting one to fill it."[40]

On the other hand, working first with the craft will never produce a work of art. Percy Lubbock's Craft of Fiction is a contradiction in terms as he uses them, she implies, for he neglects the often slowly and painfully aroused, but essential, spontaneity that is the basis, not the filler, for a book. "The theory of a conscious artist taking out his little grain of matter and working it into the finished fabric is another of our critical fables," she points out. "The

artist has simply to see that the relations . . . are the right ones. When we say that Henry James had a passion for storytelling we mean that when his significant moment [referring to Thomas Hardy's "moment of vision"] came to him the accessories were ready to flock in."[41]

Woolf's terms for these two states are the conscious and the unconscious, the upper-mind and the under-mind. "The under-mind works at top speed while the upper-mind drowses," she explains, until "the veil lifts; and there is . . . the thing he wants to write about, simplified, composed."[42] Some writers are more one than the other:

> Some writers are born conscious of everything; others are unconscious of many things. Some, like Henry James and Flaubert, are able not merely to make the best use of the spoil their gifts bring in, but control their genius in the act of creation; they are aware of all the possibilities of every situation, and are never taken by surprise. The unconscious writers, on the other hand, like Dickens and Scott, seem suddenly and without their own consent to be lifted up and swept onwards. The wave sinks and they cannot say what has happened or why.[43]

Ideally, Woolf looks for a combination of the unconscious and the conscious, spontaneity and craft. Orlando is said to be spontaneous, she reflects, yet she sacrificed other qualities in order to achieve that spontaneity. "It came of writing exteriorly; and if I dig, must I not lose it? . . . I think a kind of ease and dash are good;--yes; I think even externality is good; some combination of them ought to be possible."[44]

Art also derives from the artist's knowledge of both art and life, while craft often camouflages lack of knowledge or understanding with style. "It's life that matters," Woolf tells herself and her readers.

An artist makes us care about his inner and outer worlds, while a craftsman leaves us seeing the world but not understanding any more about it. Art, in other words, goes beyond surfaces so that implication is everything, whereas craft is superficial and at best produces second-rate art, the kind of book in which the characters "do things without diving deep." "If a writer accepts the conventions and lets his characters be guided by them, not conflict with them, he can produce an effect of symmetry: very pleasant, suggestive; but only on the surface. That is, I can't care what happens: yet I like the design,"[45] she explains. The difference between art and mere style in a novel lies in the artist's grasp of the nature of words themselves, which "seem to like people to think and to feel before they use them, but to think and to feel not about them, but about something different."[46] Only the great artist discerns the proper selection of details and succeeds in letting one word stand for many; "it is the mark of a second-rate writer than he cannot pause here or suggest there. All his powers are strained in keeping the scene before, its brightness and its credibility. The surface is all; there is nothing beyond."[47]

It is this superficial quality, presented with great skill and style, for which Woolf criticizes the Edwardian writers. She calls authors such as Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy "materialists" because they are "concerned not with the spirit but with the body,"[48] with the result that we see their characters live but do not sense any life in the novels. (The sort of "life" Woolf is looking for is discussed in the section of this chapter which covers the criteria of fiction.)

The most fundamental difference between art and craft, however, comes back to first impression and indefinable sensations of the heart. Art causes a particular sensation in the reader that craft alone cannot accomplish. Art gives rise to the sense that everything is "right" about an author's work, much as a "good life" encompasses an indefinable sense of well being in a human being. With an imperfect novel, "in those critical minutes which decide a book's fate, when it is finished, and the book swims up complete in the mind and lets us look at it, something seems lacking."[49] The craft of novel writing, therefore, can be learned, developed, and disciplined, but the art which makes fiction live must be felt.

Woolf's opinions on the nature of art all derive from her position that art records what she calls the facts, the truth, the reality of life--the author's vision of life etched clearly and precisely for the reader. Recognition of "reality" is a rare gift only the great artists possess. In this sense "reality" is almost a mystical concept, "a thing I see before me: something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky; beside which nothing matters; in which I shall rest and continue to exist. . . . that which I seek." But, she continues, "Who knows--once one takes a pen and writes? How difficult not to go making 'reality' this and that, whereas it is one thing."[50] In other words, "reality" may seem to be various things at various times, but the true reality is much more subtle than anything that can be labeled. It involves a recognition of oneself in reading a work of art. This ultimate reality involves what Woolf refers to in her diary as the

"silent land" or the "no man's land" of inner and outer reality which will allow the art to have the same effect on future generations that it has on her own.[51]

It is obvious that Woolf's "reality" takes on much more than the traditional literary connotation of capturing some semblance of the recognizable world around us, particularly human life. Woolf observes that there are "four? dimensions: all to be produced, in human life: and that leads to a far richer grouping and proportion. I mean: I; and the not I; and the outer and the inner."[52] Jean Guiguet, who has done the most exhaustive study of Woolf's work, concludes that her experimentations with temporal and spatial order and disintegration of characters in her novels are all ways of reducing "matter" so that these other forms of reality will become evident. Her "mysticism" means a "direct access to reality, to what is true and essential."[53] The "I", he explains, "is the sole and ultimate sum of everything, and it is, itself, the whole world reflected in itself."[54] The "not I" is the Universe.

> But these two terms . . . are beyond our grasp; no definition can circumscribe them, no description can account for them. . . . The only reality accessible between these two phantoms is the relationship between them, that function of the "soul," the inner life, or just life, which is sensation, emotion, feeling, desire, will, ideas . . . . All the moments and all the aspects of this activity have an essential common character; they are appearance, phenomena, phantasms; they arise, they alter, they remain, they disappear, they arise once more, and we can neither control nor account for these metamorphoses; this is reality, this is truth--the only ones to which we have access, all the rest being only

> a mode of representation, a convention, an algebra, convenient perhaps but illusory.[55]

Woolf cautions readers of her essays not to confuse "reality" with "lifelike" and tries to point out that "reality" involves understanding while "lifelike" approaches imitation. Actually, however, she sees reality on more than one level. There are the reality of facts, the observable or the given; the reality of truth, the understood; and the ultimate reality of the perceived, or heightened sense of truth. The first level of reality requires meticulously recording details in the mind with an infallible eye and ear. Essential as they are in bringing about the other realities, however, facts themselves are an "inferior" reality.[56] Truth involves the human element of reality, in which facts are relevant to us only as they help us see the world as it is and <u>understand</u> that it is that way. This reality, in other words, is one of the body and its sensations; we are saturated in the every day of didacticism and human reaction; "it is all concrete; it is all visualized. It is a world . . . in which one can believe with one's eyes and one's senses."[57] It is therefore the ultimate reality that the great artist strives for. In any novel, of course, we see people only as the writer sees them and shapes them, but "the great novelist feels, sees, believes with such intensity of conviction that he hurls his belief outside himself and it flies off and lives an independent life of its own."[58] This heightened reality, this search beyond truth to reveal the connection between the inner and outer worlds, has been accomplished by great writers to varying degrees:

> If . . . you think of the novels which seem to you great novels . . . you do at once think of some character who 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--of religions, of love, of war, of peace, of family life, of balls in country towns, of sunsets, moonrises, the immortality of the soul.[59]

One could infer that Woolf's three levels of reality correspond to levels of language: nonfiction, particularly journalism, is the reality of fact; modern fiction is the reality of truth; poetry is the heightened reality of perception. Poetry, the highest art, is awesome to Woolf. She most admires its universality, compression, and intensity of emotion; she believes that it always gives the reader more meaning than can ever be reduced to words; it possesses an internal musical quality that catches "the spirit of life itself."[60] As Guiguet explains it, poetry, to Woolf, is

> . . . a way of writing, a style, which is essentially that of the writer, freed from any preoccupation with realism, calling on all his resources, knowledge and skill with words to obtain an equivalent to the sort of reality he is trying to express. . . . [He aims for] what will affect the reader's sensitivity and intelligence, so as to make him conceive and feel, as though by direct experience, the conscious or subconscious reality which might form the stuff of the true interior monologue, in the usual sense of the term.[61]

Woolf believes that fiction at its best will be "poetry in prose," a novel which creates the emotional response, internal rhythm, and correspondence with the universe that true poetry has. "Why admit anything to literature that is not poetry--by which I mean saturated? Is that not my grudge against novelists? that they select nothing?

The poets succeeding [sic] by simplifying: practically everything is left out. I want to put everything in: yet to saturate,"[62] she explains.

It is not surprising that, given this all-encompassing view of reality, Woolf takes issue with time-worn conceptions which limit treatment of man, nature, and God, the universal subjects of fiction.[63] She states quite firmly, "'The proper stuff of fiction' does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss."[64] As Brewster puts it, "What it feels like to think is an experience to be recorded, just as significant as what it feels like to be in love or to lose a friend."[65] The key seems to be in knowing one's limitations and abilities in handling a subject; Woolf doubts that "any theme is in itself good or bad. It gives a chance to one's peculiar qualities--that's all."[66] The novel simply seeks to explore "the spirit we live by." Whatever its theme, subject, or form, "one element remains constant in all novels, and that is the human element; they are about people, they excite in us the feeling 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."[67]

This belief in the unlimited possibilities of observing and presenting human character and the belief that human character is the highest form of reality dictate her specific criteria for a good novel.

Virginia Woolf's criteria for judging a novel include degree of emotion, concept of form, creative tension between emotion and form, reality of characterization, unity of perspective, language and style, sense of tradition, and the effect of all these elements combined. In the end a book should seem "complete" in the reader's mind. In a work of art the whole is greater than the sum of its parts; the whole works a peculiar effect upon the heart and mind of the reader.

Woolf is explicit in the essay "On Re-reading Novels" that emotion is the first criterion in judging a work. "Both in writing and in reading it is the emotion that must come first," she insists.[68] To exemplify her point, she traces the process of reading a short story, Flaubert's "Un Coeur Simple," and notes the reader's reactions throughout. "A sudden intensity of phrase, something which for good reasons or for bad we feel to be emphatic, startles us into a flash of understanding," and so on through the story, until "all the observations which we have put aside now come out and range themselves according to the directions we have received. Some are relevant; others we can find no place for. On a second reading we are able to use our observations from the start and they are much more precise; but they are still controlled by these moments of understanding,"[69] Thus, she concludes, a reader understands what he reads "from the emotion outwards, and, the reading over, there is nothing to be seen; there is everything to be felt."[70]

This "understanding" is the heightened perception of life that is the object of art; if the book is "real" enough to produce some flashes

of understanding in the reader, the author has at least accomplished his goal of creating a bond with the reader. Because Woolf believes that a book contains more to be felt than seen, she is compelled to take issue with Lubbock's view in The Craft of Fiction that there is something called "form" in a novel which exists apart from the sensations one feels as he reads a book, that form is "the book itself," a concrete entity that one ought to be able to grasp as one reads and after one finishes a book, much as "the form of the statue is the statue itself."[71] Woolf objects that "when Mr. Lubbock asks us to test the form with our eyes we see nothing at all. But we feel with singular satisfaction, and since all our feelings are in keeping [having been sorted by moments of understanding], they form a whole which remains in our minds as the book itself."[72] Thus form is not imposed on a work, so that it can be traced from a book's beginning to end, but rather evolves from the reader's response to the material itself.

If emotion, not form, is the book itself, however, Woolf fully agrees with Lubbock that form is essential to a novel. The initial emotions the reader feels comprise the book itself must be analyzed for their enduring value. Critics must ask, "Is there not something beyond emotion, something which though it is inspired by emotion, tranquillizes it, orders it, composes it?"[73] Lubbock calls it "form," she says; she calls it "art" because it is creation at work, calling upon the moments of understanding already perceived in the novel to form a whole through their relationship to each other. The artist

conceives this relationship; only then can the reader perceive it. Thus Woolf concludes:

> 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, molds anew, or even invents for himself. Further, that the reader can detect these devices, and by so doing will deepen his understanding of the book, while, for the rest, it may be expected that novels will lose their chaos and become more and more shapely as the novelist explores and perfects his technique.[74]

It might be said, then, that Lubbock's perception of the conscious and the unconscious aspects of the art is confused; his idea that form is external and concrete makes it craft, in Woolf's view, while her seeing form as inherent in the nature of the work makes it art. Therefore, although Woolf argues for standards in evaluating a novel, she assumes that the judge is open minded and aware enough of the creative process that he does not confuse prescribed form--method--with standards. That is exactly what her standards of criticism would prevent; the true critic would recognize that Lubbock's "form" might well "inhibit the creative power," while "any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express, if we are writers; that brings us closer to the novelist's intention if we are readers."[75]

To conclude that Woolf therefore advocates emotion at the expense of form, however, is to mistake her aim. Novels, she says, "are all about the old, familiar things . . . they are about life, and one has life enough on one's hands without living it all over again in prose."[76] It is therefore apparent that setting down the facts, emotions, and

sensations of life is not enough to satisfy us; our greater pleasure comes from the order the author is able to find in them. Thus it is the art in a novel which adds the dimension readers desire to the "life" the author has captured. "The mind cannot be content with holding sensation after sensation passively to itself; something must be done with them; their abundance must be shaped,"[77] she explains. Indeed, a balance of emotion and form is critical to a novel's success as art; it is a delicate balance which produces a tension throughout the work so that one does not find that the artist resorts to mere factfinding in one area and to overzealous prose in another. Without this tension both form and emotion fail. "It is the gift of style, arrangement, construction, to put us at a distance from the special life and to obliterate its features; while it is the gift of the novel to bring us into close touch with life," Woolf writes in "Phases of Fiction." "The two powers fight if they are brought into combination. The most complete novelist must be the novelist who can balance the two powers so that the one enhances the other."[78]

Failure to achieve balance is the main failing of the Romantic novels, Woolf suggests, because all the form becomes meaningless in an excess of emotion, and "directly the power which lives in a book sinks, the whole fabric of the book, its sentences, the length and shape of them, its inflections, its mannerisms, all that it wore proudly and naturally under the impulse of a true emotion becomes stale, forced, unappetizing."[79] Henry James, on the other hand, "diminishes the interest and importance of his subject in order to bring about a

symmetry which is dear to him. We feel him there, as the suave showman, skillfully manipulating his characters; nipping; repressing; dexterously evading and ignoring, where a writer of greater depth or natural spirits would have taken the risk which his material imposes, let his sails blow full and so, perhaps, achieved symmetry and pattern, in themselves so delightful, all the same."[80] Neither can carry the burden of fiction alone. As Mark Goldman observes, "If her account of the critical (and creative) process is true, there is no possibility, she would maintain, of establishing the classic dichotomy of form and content. Only the imperfect works, she insists, allow us to separate the two."[81]

Goldman suggests that Woolf arrives at this understanding of a balance in works because of her position as an artist-critic.[82] A 1924 diary entry, for example, shows that she has learned from experience that balance is essential: "Writing must be formal. The art must be respected. . . . for if one lets the mind run loose it becomes egotistic; personal, which I detest. At the same time the irregular fire must be there. And perhaps to loose it one must begin by being chaotic, but not appear in public like that."[83] Authors adopt various approaches in organizing the chaotic, however, as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky illustrate. Form, Woolf writes, is "the sense that one thing follows another rightly. . . . [Yet] T. wrote and re-wrote. To clear the truth of the unessential. But Dostoievsky would say that everything matters. . . . The essential thing in a scene is to be preserved. How do you know what this is? How do we know if the D. form is better or worse than the T.?"[84] A great challenge to the writer, balance

well executed yields "a pleasure somewhat akin, perhaps, to the pleasure of mathematics or the pleasure of music,"[85] both of which please with combinations of detail, abstraction, and form.

Characterization is not Woolf's most important criterion in judging novels, but it undoubtedly is her most controversial. "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924), which Bell says is almost an "aesthetic manifesto,"[86] attacks the predominant Edwardian approach to creating characters which are "true, real, and convincing." Imitating reality does not make characters "real," she argues; an author cannot create human beings on the page by creating a world imitative of our world and leaving the reader to assume that the characters must be "real" because everything around them seems "real." Such "lifelike" characters are no longer good enough. People want desperately to believe that human nature is enduring in a rapidly changing world, and human nature cannot be portrayed by externals; it is the essence, not the exterior trappings, of Mrs. Brown which the artist must capture. She does not deny that characters are central to a novel: "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,"[87] she states. She implicitly but emphatically rejects Forster's popular notion of flat and round characters, however. Those who see flat characters are looking past Mrs. Brown, not trying to understand her and all the dimensions in which she exists. Joan Bennett's observation that "the impression that she does not create clear or memorable characters is due to the fact that her portraits are of a different kind from those

to which the reader of fiction is accustomed"[88] understates the case. This impression does not take into account Woolf's view of reality, her concept of form, or, most important, perhaps, her aim in characterization. According to Bennett, Woolf "came to believe that all definitions of character involved . . . a refusal to come near to other characters, keeping them at a distance and that characterization in the sense in which the word is used of persons in fiction, or, as often as not, in biography, does not exist in real life."[89] It is obvious from the earlier discussion of reality in this study that Woolf believes the novelist must "come near" before employing the artist's discipline of objective judgment in order to understand in any way the spirit we live by. In Guiguet's words, then, she is trying "to . . . deprive [human beings] of the opacity and rigidity which makes masks and puppets of them instead of the filters, the living beings that they are."[90] Characters, for Woolf, exist not to recreate life, nor even to understand human beings, but to help us comprehend "life itself." "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," then, is really less an attack on Edwardian characterization per se than a misunderstood effort to make novelists realize that these methods should no longer apply, that the death of Edward coincidentally signalled the beginning of a new kind of life that was bound to affect us all. "In or about December, 1910, human character changed,"[91] and it is the novelists' task to explore and help us live with that change.

Woolf also believes that unity, of course, whether it derives from a strong authorial vision of reality, a tightly-woven blend of plot

and character, a particular concentration on mood and atmosphere, or some other cohesive quality, is essential to any good novel. All these qualities depend on the author's limiting his perspective to his particular vision. The great novelists create consistent worlds; "the maker of each is careful to observe the laws of his own perspective, and however great a strain they may put upon us, they will never confuse us, as lesser writers so frequently do, by introducing two different kinds of reality into the same book."[92] Dickens is Woolf's favorite example of the novelist who never removes his characters from an exaggerated reality, so that "we say, 'How wonderfully like Mr. Micawber that is!'"[93] Austen similarly remains true to her "compact" of restraint. "Never . . . did she round upon herself in shame, obliterate a sarcasm in a spasm of compassion, or blur an outline in a mist of rhapsody. Spasms and rhapsodies, she seems to have said, pointing with her stick, end there; and the boundary line is perfectly distinct,"[94] Woolf observes.

Consequently, language and style are important to help ensure that the reader is "relieved of the swarm and confusion of life and branded effectively with the particular aspect which the writer wishes him to see."[95] Frequently bored by mere narration, perhaps because, by her own admission, "I can make up situations, but I cannot make up plots,"[96] Woolf looks for language that is disciplined and precise, yet heavy with implication and imagination. She wants to capture both the look and the feel of things:

> The look of things has a great power over me. Even now, I have to watch the rooks beating up against the wind, which is high, and still I say to myself instinctively 'What's the phrase for that?' and try to make more and more vivid the roughness of the air current and the tremor of the rook's wing slicing as if the air were full of ridges and ripples and roughnesses. They rise and sink, up and down, as if the exercise rubbed and braced them like swimmers in rough water. But what a little I can get down into my pen of what is vivid to my eyes, and not only to my eyes; also to some nervous fibre, or fanlike membrane in my species.[97]

Yet "wobble and diffusity and breathlessness"[98] are appalling, and she generally is quick to condemn them in a novel.

How a novelist uses words with discipline without destroying feeling involves style, "the difference between raw words and written words . . . . Even an inferior writer, using his own tongue upon his own ideas, works a change at once which is agreeable and remarkable. Under his pen the sentence shrinks and wraps itself firmly round the meaning, if it be but a little one. The loose, the baggy, shrivels up."[99] The artist knows when the critical stroke is needed[100] to add nuance to a phrase, to make the phrases more than words, so that the sentences enhance life rather than record it. Truth unadorned is unsatisfying, she has told us, but the writer should avoid the "dripping brilliance of words that live upon real lips" for a "flow of words [which] seems to darken and thicken."[101] Indeed, since the first aim of language is to help the reader understand life, "melodious prose" often exists only as a total effect.[102] Novelists should realize, however, that language, like the spirit of life it tries to convey, is evolutionary; beyond the fundamental values of each, the novelist

must try to use language in new ways to help illuminate an increasingly complex world. In England, she observes, "the word-coining power has lapsed; our writers vary the metres of their poetry, remodel the rhythms of prose, but one may search in vain for a single new word."[103] Language and style inevitably must change as new views of form, reality, and the function of the novel gain credence, she suggests.

While Woolf urges experiments in the novel, however, she believes that a mark of a successful novel is its ability to grow alongside the classics. "Whatever we may have learnt from reading the classics we need now in order to judge the work of our contemporaries," she explains, "for whenever there is life in them they will be casting their net out over some unknown abyss to snare new shapes, and we must throw our imaginations after them if we are to accept with understanding the strange gifts they bring back to us."[104] The great gift of the classics, of course, is their universal and timeless element; "the stable, the permanent, the original human being is to be found there."[105] The tradition the classics give us is important--the novelist, particularly, must know fiction's past before he can help determine its future--but it is the more fundamental grasp of the effects of language upon the reader's heart that makes a classic, she suggests. The classics thus provide a beginning for her ideal novel of poetry in prose.

Audience is another consideration in judging a novel. "To know whom to write for is to know how to write,"[106] Woolf states flatly. The writer cannot neglect the reader's role as creator or as critic; he must remember that audiences change with time and that he should

not compromise his own vision to try to please everyone else. Nor should he risk alienating the reader with excessive creative or judgmental demands. Dialogue, for example, is dangerous, because it "puts the most violent pressure upon the reader's attention. He has to hear, to see, to supply the right tone, and to fill in the background from what the characters say without any help from the author. Therefore, when fictitious people are allowed to speak, it must be because they have something so important to say that it stimulates the reader to do rather more than his share of the work of creation."[107] Moreover, the author's signals to the reader must be clear and the limits of creation understood, so that the reader knows from the beginning whether he is merely to adopt an unfamiliar but totally created world, as in Spenser's "Faery Queen," or try to discover the author's unconscious intention in producing a specific impression, as in Hardy's novels.

All these criteria, however, give way to a much more intangible value: the "completeness" of the book as a whole. A less than satisfactory book leaves the reader feeling as if it ought to "yield him more,"[108] while "satisfaction is, by its nature, removed from analysis, for the quality which satisfies . . . the reader is the sum of many different parts."[109] Generally, therefore, the reader should trust his first impressions, since the parts of the book will build up--or not--to a feeling that the author has accomplished his goal. Most modern books, unfortunately, leave us unsatisfied, feeling that "in order to complete them it seems necessary to do something--to join

a society, or more desperately, to write a cheque."[110] A novel should depend on no world but its own to convince the reader. Woolf again cites the achievement of the classics that the reader asks no more of them than they give:

> . . . you can read them as often as you will without finding that they have yielded any virtue and left a meaningless husk of words; and there is a complete finality about them. No cloud of suggestions hangs about them teasing us with a multitude of irrelevant ideas. But all our faculties are summoned to the task, as in the great moments of our own experience; and some consecrator descends upon us from their hands which we return to life, feeling it more keenly and understanding it more deeply than before.[111]

Writers who have accomplished this effect have captured the ultimate reality of life, "a mood of the great general mind which they interpret and indeed almost discover, so that we come to read them rather for that than for any story or character or scene of separate excellence."[112]

The nature of the artist is an integral part of Virginia Woolf's critical theory; it is a particular sort of person who will be able to safeguard the future of the novel.

Woolf believes in the "born writer" with an "artistic temperament," a person who naturally finds relief from everyday annoyances in language, "a man who detests meals, servants, ease, respectability, or anything that gets between him and his art; . . . who says whatever he has it in his mind to say, and has taught himself . . . a language for saying it."[113] He observes constantly and sees the possibilities

of art all around him; it is his gift to be "in touch with the thing itself and not the outer husks of words."[114] He thrives on a disciplined routine that gives him time to think unconsciously:

> A novelist's chief desire is to be as unconscious as possible. He has to induce in himself a state of perpetual lethargy. He wants life to proceed with the utmost quiet and regularity. He wants to . . . do the same things day after day . . . while he is writing, so that nothing may break the illusion in which he is living--so that nothing may disturb or disquiet the mysterious nosings about, feelings round, darts, dashes, and sudden discoveries of that very shy and illusive spirit, the imagination.[115]

The imagination, of course, generates the artist's particular vision, or insight into currents of life deeper than the surface movements nonartists call life. Many novelists have limited vision, so that, despite talent and inclination to write, they cannot create art. They have "a great deal of force and spirit and yet always at the leap something balks,"[116] while for the artist "the thing is to be venturous, bold, to take every possible fence."[117] For the artist, art is all consuming; it works upon the mind with an almost unbearable intensity so that he must write.

Fact and vision, however, must fuse; "if there is one gift more essential to a novelist than any other, it is the power of combination--the single vision,"[118] Woolf writes. Since the artist sees many possibilities in his observations, the great artist has learned to select the details and impressions from his observations which will help him construct and maintain a single vision of reality. Woolf explains that the novelist must "observe facts impartially, yet he

must also interpret them. Many novelists do the one; many do the other--we have the photograph and the poem. But few combine the fact and the vision."[119] The task is difficult because "the vision of a novelist is both complex and specialized; complex, because behind his characters and apart from them must stand something stable to which he relates them, specialized because since he is a single person with one sensibility the aspects of life in which he can believe with conviction are strictly limited."[120] Even the artist who succeeds in other ways may fail to sustain a single vision throughout his work. Woolf observes that Conrad, for example, manages double vision successfully in his earlier works, because what Woolf calls his two personalities complement each other, but the effort fails when his character changes and he is no longer convinced of his visions of reality.[121] Hardy, too, is poetic in other ways but fails to bring his double vision together. "First one gift would have its way with him and then another,"[122] Woolf explains.

Woolf suggests that Hardy's failure to recognize a single vision results from his personal conflict between a country upbringing and "book-learning." In fact, she implies that all artists who have not mastered their vision and are inconsistent in their achievements are affected greatly by their backgrounds. She believes that "every secret of a writer's soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind is written large in his works,"[123] and, further, that an author's life affects his approach to his work. The lesser novelist reflects this consciousness of self, and that consciousness permeates

and weakens all his work. The great writer, on the other hand, has "something elusive, enigmatic, impersonal about [him]."[124] (Woolf's prejudice in this matter will be discussed in Chapter II.)

It would seem that writing is a personal matter, but in fact one of the questions most troublesome to Woolf is the relationship of the artist to society. In A Room of One's Own she argues that a writer needs money and leisure, both social attributes, and Three Guineas is strongly oriented toward provoking social change. Brewster says that Woolf takes her "obligation to express the feminist viewpoint" very seriously.[125] Despite these involvements, she still has questions about the artist's obligation to society. "How far does anybody's single mind or work matter?" she writes. "Ought we all to be engaged in altering the structure of our society? . . . I can't deny my love of fashioning sentences."[126] She takes on obligations to help preserve the art of fiction, but she also distrusts anyone else who speaks out for the cause of human concern: "It seems to me more and more clear that the only honest people are the artists, and that these social reformers and philanthropists get so out of hand and harbour so many discreditable desires under the disguise of loving their kind, that in the end there's more to find fault with in them than in us."[127] A private person in a public world, Woolf seems to realize that the artist's nature may conflict with his obligation, as it finally does with her own. "In God's name I've done my share, with pen and talk, for the human race," she declares. "I deserve a spring--I owe nobody nothing."[128]

Given this situation, Woolf dislikes the moralist artist and suggests that didacticism is the weakest form of art, but she does not deny that "preachers" and "teachers" can be artists as well. Tolstoy and Dickens, two favorite models of the great tradition, are preacher-teachers,[129] and Sterne is "in his own way a moralist, and a teacher"; as she observes, "most great writers are, after all."[130] Even the "pure artist"[131] such as Austen or Turgenev, who reaches the reader in a deeper way than the preacher does, nevertheless gives the reader a "message" about life through his very choice of reality. Woolf's ideal artist would be a third type, one unbound by facts or philosophy, a poetical seer who understood rather than explained life. For it is this kind of artist that Woolf herself is striving to be.

Woolf's theory is quite sound and complete. Since Woolf has regarded literature from the reader's, the writer's, and the critic's viewpoints, our understanding of the nature of art is richer than it might be otherwise. More, important, perhaps, she has established the means for evaluating art with the reader-critic in mind, so that we may increase our pleasure in the art as we learn to read more critically. But understanding and pleasure in themselves are not enough. Woolf's theory urging more pertinent criticism and greater authorial perception of life is meant not only to improve literature, but also to help it survive. She argues for an alliance of readers, writers, and critics which she believes would ensure that survival. It is a hopeful theory, but it may be too optimistic in an age she concedes is more realistic than idealistic.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Virginia Woolf, "The Leaning Tower," Collected Essays, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), II, 163. All subsequent references to essays in this volume will be listed by article title, volume number, and page number in the volume.

[2]"How Should One Read a Book?" II, 10.

[3]"On Re-reading Novels," II, 127.

[4]This view is central to Woolf's appeal for a new kind of critic, the critic as reader. The best novelists can hope for at the moment is readers as critics. See the section of Chapter I on nature of the critic.

[5]"How Should One Read a Book?" II, 11.

[6]"The Art of Fiction," II, 52.

[7]Ibid., 55.

[8]"How Should One Read a Book?" II, 11.

[9]Dorothy Brewster, Virginia Woolf (New York: New York University Press, 1962), p. 164.

[10]Quentin Bell, Virginia Woolf: A Biography (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1972), p. 331. Quoted from an unpublished portion of her diary.

[11]Virginia Woolf, "Impassioned Prose," Collected Essays, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), I, 172. All subsequent references to essays in this volume will be listed by article title, volume number, and page number in the volume.

[12]Virginia Woolf, A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1953), entry of February 18, 1922, p. 44. All subsequent references to this work will include the abbreviated title, AWD, the item's entry date, and the page on which the item is found.

[13]"The Leaning Tower," II, 181.

[14]AWD, Dec. 29, 1935, p. 252.

[15]AWD, Aug. 16, 1933, p. 203.

[16]AWD, Feb. 18, 1922, p. 45.

[17]AWD, June 27, 1925, p. 78.

[18]Brewster, pp. 77-8.

[19]AWD, Aug, 20, 1930, p. 156.

[20]AWD, Oct. 29, 1939. p. 206.

[21]AWD, Dec. 19, 1921, p. 40.

[22]AWD, Dec. 18, 1939, p. 310.

[23]"Reviewing," II, 213.

[24]Ibid., p. 215.

[25]AWD, Oct. 2, 1932, p. 183.

[26]AWD, April 8, 1921, p. 31.

[27]AWD, Oct. 29, 1922, p. 52.

[28]"The Leaning Tower," II, 180.

[29]"Hours in a Library," II, 34.

[30]Virginia Woolf, "Leslie Stephen," Collected Essays, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), IV, 80.

[31]"The Narrow Bridge of Art," II, 229.

[32]"Phases of Fiction," II, 57.

[33]"How Should One Read a Book?" II, 3.

[34]"Modern Fiction," II, 103.

[35]"Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," I, 337.

[36]David Daiches, The Novel and the Modern World (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), p. 161.

[37]Brewster, p. 15.

[38]Bell, p. 144.

[39]Ibid., pp. 354-5.

[40]AWD, Rodmell, 1926, pp. 43-4. The reference to Asheham is a recollection of an earlier home of Woolf.

[41]"Henry James's Ghost Stories," I, 290.

[42]"The Leaning Tower," II, 166.

[43]"The Novels of Thomas Hardy," I, 258.

[44]AWD, Nov. 28, 1928, p. 136.

[45]AWD, May 6, 1935, p. 239.

[46]"Craftsmanship," II, 250.

[47]"Phases of Fiction," II, 61.

[48]"Modern Fiction," II, 104.

[49]"Phases of Fiction," II, 68.

[50]AWD, Sept. 10, 1928, pp. 129-30.

[51]In fact, it might be said that she is striving to obtain an effect that art is "of the moment" and thus will endure eternally. One senses that Woolf tries to extend herself through her art. Whether she really believes as a general principle that art is or should be an author's attempt at immortality is questionable, however. As will be discussed in Chapter II, although she has misgivings about considering the artist in judging the art, she sometimes does so.

[52]AWD, Nov. 18, 1935, p. 250.

[53]Jean Guiguet, "The Waves," from Chapter 5, Virginia Woolf and Her Works, in Critics on Virginia Woolf: Readings in Literary Criticism, 8, ed. Jacqueline E. M. Latham (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1970), p. 90.

[54]Jean Guiguet, "Characters and Human Relations," from Virginia Woolf and Her Works, in Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Claire Sprague (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 47.

[55]Ibid.

[56]"How Should One Read a Book?" II, 6.

[57]"Phases of Fiction," II, 338.

[58]"George Moore," I, 338.

[59]"Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," I, 325.

[60]Ibid., p. 337.

[61]Guiguet, "The Waves," p. 89.

[62]AWD, Nov. 28, 1928, p. 136.

[63]"Phases of Fiction," II, 64.

[64]"Modern Fiction," II, p. 110.

[65]Brewster, p. 166.

[66]AWD, Sept, 13, 1926, p. 100.

[67]"Phases of Fiction," II, 99.

[68]"On Re-reading Novels," II, 126.

[69]Ibid., p. 125.

[70]Ibid., p. 126.

[71]Ibid., p. 124.

[72]Ibid., p. 126.

[73]Ibid., p. 127.

[74]Ibid., pp. 129-30.

[75]"Modern Fiction," II, 108.

[76]"On Re-reading Novels," II, 123.

[77]"Phases of Fiction," II, 83.

[78]Ibid., p. 101. Manley Johnson feels that this tension is present because Woolf wanted writing "to evoke the powerful, satisfying, non-verbal response that good painting gives, as well as communicate that meaning that can be put into words--she wanted, in short, feeling plus concept." He sees the conflict as "ultimately irreconcilable": "to 'love life', and to describe that life as physical--as in the thrust of legs, and women giving suck to babes--and to insist that the life 'increasingly real to us' dwells in personality, not in acts, is to establish and maintain a paradox." He points out, however, that this paradox creates the tension in Woolf's own work. He might well have

added that the tension is felt only because of her mastery of form. Woolf proves to herself that a balance can be struck and therefore looks for it as the only solution possible in the struggle between the old and new views of reality in novels. Manley Johnson, Virginia Woolf (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1973), pp. 21-2.

[79]"Phases of Fiction," II, 70.

[80]Ibid., p. 82.

[81]Mark Goldman, "Virginia Woolf and the Critic as Reader," from PMLA, 80 (June 1965), in Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Claire Sprague (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 160.

[82]Ibid., p. 162.

[83]AWD, Nov. 18, 1924, p. 68.

[84]AWD, Aug. 16, 1933, p. 203.

[85]"Phases of Fiction," II, 82.

[86]Bell, p. 335.

[87]"Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," I, 324.

[88]Joan Bennett, "Characters and Human Beings," from Chapter 2, Virginia Woolf: Her Art as a Novelist, in Critics on Virginia Woolf: Readings in Literary Criticism, 8, ed. Jacqueline E. M. Latham (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1970), p. 19.

[89]Ibid.

[90]Guiguet, "Characters," p. 46.

[91]"Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," I, 320.

[92]"How Should One Read a Book?" II, 3.

[93]"David Copperfield," I, 193-4.

[94]"Jane Austen," I, 146.

[95]"Life and the Novelist," II, 135.

[96]AWD, Oct, 5, 1927, p. 114.

[97]AWD, Aug. 12, 1928, p. 128.

[98]AWD, June 23, 1929, p. 140.

[99]"Phases of Fiction," II, 89.

[100]Ibid., p. 68.

[101]"Life and the Novelist," II, 135.

[102]"The Novels of Thomas Hardy," I, 265.

[103]"American Fiction," II, 120.

[104]"Hours in a Library," II, 39.

[105]"On Not Knowing Greek," I, 4.

[106]"The Patron and the Crocus," II, 151.

[107]"An Essay in Criticism," II, 257.

[108]"Phases of Fiction," II, 60.

[109]Ibid., p. 77.

[110]"Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," I, 326.

[111]"Hours in a Library," II, 40.

[112]"Henry James," I, 270.

[113]"George Moore," I, 341.

[114]"Oliver Goldsmith," I, 108.

[115]"Professions for Women," II, 287.

[116]AWD, Aug. 28, 1940, p. 330.

[117]AWD, May 31, 1933, p. 201.

[118]"The Novels of E. M. Forster," I, 345.

[119]"The Novels of Turgenev," I, 249.

[120]"Joseph Conrad," I, 306-7.

[121]Ibid., pp. 304-7.

[122]"The Novels of Thomas Hardy," I, 257.

[123]Johnson, 13.

[124]"Personalities," II, 275.

[125]Brewster, p. 21.

[126]AWD, Oct. 2, 1935, p. 247.

[127]AWD, July 19, 1919, p. 17.

[128]AWD, March 29, 1940, p. 318.

[129]"The Novels of E. M. Forster," I, 345.

[130]"The Sentimental Journey," I, 101.

[131]"The Novels of E. M. Forster," I, 345.

CHAPTER II

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS AFFECTING THE THEORY

Virginia Woolf's critical essays provide many valuable insights into the way one writer views the art of fiction. We see that reading and writing are cooperative ventures between the reader and the writer, that great fiction is to be cherished as a rare gift of mind, and that the preservation of such creativity in both reading and writing is important to us in a difficult world and essential to the future of the novel. What is not so immediately apparent is the way these conclusions, based as they necessarily must be in Woolf's own experiences, are subject to her particular biases, oversights, and distorted emphases. This chapter will focus particularly on the effects of these weaknesses on Woolf's view of the common reader, her ties with tradition, and her view of social aspects which help determine the nature of the artist. These considerations are particularly significant because they distort her critical view of contemporary literature.

A major problem in Virginia Woolf's critical theory is her dependence on the "common reader." Unfortunately, she assumes that readers have her imagination, curiosity, and discipline in literature; that is, she has persuaded herself that they actually have the creative powers she attributes to them. The assumption that other readers are like her is evident throughout the essays. The following passage

from "On Not Knowing Greek," a selection from the first Common Reader, serves to illustrate several faulty assumptions she makes about the reader:

> Pick up any play by Sophocles, read--'Son of him who led our hosts at Troy of old, son of Agamemnon,' and at once the mind begins to fashion itself surroundings. It makes some background, even of the most provisional sort, for Sophocles; I imagine some village, in a remote part of the country, near the sea. Even nowadays such villages are to be found in the wilder parts of England, and as we enter them we can scarcely help feeling that here, in this cluster of cottages, cut off from rail or city, are all the elements of a perfect existence. Here is the rectory; here the Manor house, the farm and the cottages; the church for worship, the club for meeting, the cricket field for play. Here life is simply sorted into its main elements. Each man and woman has his work; each works for the health and happiness of others. . . . But it is the climate that is impossible. If we try to think of Sophocles here, We must annihilate the smoke and the damp and the thick wet mists. . . . With warmth and sunshine and months of brilliant, fine weather, life of course is instantly changed; it is transacted out of doors, with the result, known to all who visit Italy, that small incidents are debated in the street, not in the sitting-room, and become dramatic.[1]

The most obvious assumption is that the reader will have a mind that "at once begins to fashion itself surroundings." Woolf's mind does so constantly; indeed, she is most comfortable in the worlds she creates. The average reader, however, unless he is already familiar with the play, is more likely to concern himself with trying to understand the language and situation of the drama. A reader who felt he could handle these fundamental aspects adequately might begin to

indulge in imagination, but probably it would turn in the direction of character; as Woolf herself has pointed out, it is the overwhelming sense of human character in the classics which most impresses the reader. In this passage, particularly, the specific name Agamemnon and the label son would lead a reader to imagine what kind of man this Greek figure was, what kind of relationship he might have had with his son, and what qualities of the father the son possessed. Woolf actually is aware of this tendency, it seems, since she writes, "I imagine some village, in a remote part of the country, near the sea." Thus a reader who might have been considering character is forcibly led into considering setting because she, as writer, does. Moreover, the reader for whom Troy might have raised images of fortresses or cities or busy harbors is swayed into Woolf's own vision of a remote village instead. Here again Woolf acknowledges just enough of the reader's tendency to equate the unfamiliar with the familiar so that he actually might, if guided, think of an English town. The next quoted lines suggest a third major assumption: that the reader's imagined village is like her own and further, that its life represents "a perfect existence" of order and tranquillity. Woolf's own world is London and its environs, increasingly a scene of disorder amidst civility, and she tends to view the countryside with an artistic rather than a realistic eye.[2] If her reader is also a city dweller, she may succeed in this intrusion upon his imagination as well. But the reader's own creativity suffers a final blow when she indicates that all he has conjured up with her guidance must be eliminated, for

as "known to all who visit Italy," England's fogs and industry have no place in Agamemnon's part of the world. At this point the reader's creativity seems rather battered and inadequate; he likely has imagined incorrectly throughout the process and finally finds he cannot do all that is required of him, for he never has been to Italy.

The point is obvious: Woolf's view of the "common reader" is both naive and impractical. While the reader of the essay "On Not Knowing Greek" may well be much like her, the reader of novels is far less likely to be motivated to explore the world around him than she seems to assume he will be. A reviewer of The Common Reader (I) comments that Woolf's dominant concern in the essays is "the relation of artist and audience"[3] but that he feels the public is now two audiences: a small group of professional critics and a reading public influenced largely by reviewers. Given this atmosphere he wonders whether Woolf's common reader is among "the inarticulate, who silent and unnamed, form the real modern audience."[4] Whether Woolf herself fits Dr. Johnson's definition of the common reader as one 'uncorrupted by literary prejudices'[5] or whether Woolf is indeed "quite as 'uncommon' in the art of reading as Dr. Johnson"[6] is debatable, but Woolf certainly must realize that her "common reader" is rare in the twentieth century. Even if readers were found who had read the expanse of literature she prescribes, and had re-read it for greater understanding, it is doubtful whether they would demonstrate the born reader's sensitivity to language which she implicitly demands of them. (The possible appeal of these assumptions to a growing body of readers aspiring to be

"highbrows" will be discussed later in the chapter. It is a conscious but misguided appeal on Woolf's part.)

It is possible that she nevertheless relies on this reader because there is little else in the literary world to encourage her. "Since she considered her position as an artist dependent upon a certain intelligent class of common readers, she felt that the academic interest in literature could only lead to a fatal split between the specialized group on the one hand and the reading public on the other, with the artist somewhere in the middle,"[7] Goldman suggests. Furthermore, her own extreme sensitivity to the public critics may have forced her into a position of hoping that the private reader, if properly instructed, could fill the void left by academicians and reviewers. "Encouragement, I must note, by way of supplying my theories that one should do without encouragement, is a warmer, a reviver. I can't deny it,"[8] she admits. Since she is almost obsessed by the Times' reaction to her work, for example, to the point that "one slight snub" in its columns is enough to make her decide to "alter the whole of The Waves,"[9] she might well turn to an audience that either applauds or remains silent about her work. It is clear from her diary that nothing disturbs her so much as a noncommital attitude, "gentlemanly, kindly, timid, praising beauty, doubting character, and leaving me moderately depressed."[10] The trained reader, she conceivably has assured herself, would be reading with enthusiasm and therefore he, more than any other kind of critic, would express what he thought about a work.

Regardless of possible rationalizations, however, her expectations of readers are despairingly high. She has said that readers share, if much more feebly, the writer's desire to create, but she actually requires a partnership. In a rather lengthy directive to readers in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," for example, she asserts that Mrs. Brown is "just as visible to you who remain silent as to us who tell stories about her." She adds:

> In the course of your daily life this past week you have had far stranger and more interesting experiences than the one I have tried to describe. You have overheard scraps of talk that filled you with amazement. You have gone to bed at night bewildered by the complexity of your feelings. In one day thousands of ideas have coursed through your brains; thousands of emotions have met, collided, and disappeared in astonishing disorder. Nevertheless, you allow the writers to palm off upon you a version of all this, an image of Mrs. Brown, which has no likeness to that surprising apparition whatsoever. In your modesty you seem to consider that writers are of different blood and bone from yourselves; that they know more of Mrs. Brown than you do. Never was there a more fatal mistake.[11]

The difficulty is that Woolf <u>does</u> think that writers are of "different blood and bone" from other people; there are "born writers," who see the world differently and sense life more acutely than other people, and, most important, are aware of their special vision. If they do not know more of Mrs. Brown than anyone else, they nevertheless observe her with the artist's perspective. It is useless to ask readers to be what they are not. To paraphrase her own objection to the Edwardians, Woolf is asking her reader to believe that because she grants him creative power, there must be an artist within him.

As she points out, however, merely providing the circumstances for the existence of creative power is not the same as having it exist.[12]

A second kind of creativity Woolf demands of the reader is that of seeing with the novelist's eye in any given work. "All alone we must climb upon the novelist's shoulder 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 . . . God,"[13] she explains. Many readers resist this task, she admits, with the result that they misunderstand or abuse the novelist's perspective rather than learning to expand their own vision to include his. Persuading the reader to accept his vision is the novelist's first challenge, of course, while mastering it is the reader's first obligation. Yet if the reader reads first for the joy of it, as she has told us he should, he presumably would reject a book whose author's vision he could not accept. She therefore implicitly demands that the reader possess a maturity and discipline acquired only through the developed taste of reading experience. Again, the expectation goes beyond the character of the "common reader," as she herself sometimes admits: "They all read now; and they want to be told how to read and what to read; and their teachers--the reviewers the lecturers, the broadcasters--must in all humanity make reading easy for them."[14]

Reading also involves the kind of "creativity" Woolf herself unconsciously illustrates in the previously cited passage from "On Not Knowing Greek." This is the creativity of imagination, adding

to what the author has provided so that the words on the page become "alive" as the reader absorbs them. For Woolf reading is indeed an adventure, the experiences of which she seizes enthusiastically for their ability to stimulate her own imagination. But the real "common reader" is not so fortunate. While his adventures usually are vicarious at best, the sort of imagination she possesses has been helped by life-long experiences with world travel, intellectual discussion, and books of all kinds. In the essay "Reading" her analogy of intellectual creation to the experience of finding and trapping a moth in the darkest part of the forest illustrates an acute sensitivity to common experience that the ordinary reader never will feel. He would not be likely to follow a long, dark, mysterious path with uncertain purpose. He would know that this was or was not the way to catch moths, if he ever wanted to, and would react accordingly. Trees falling in the night would be just that; he would not wonder at the dramatic significance of their falling. The creative experience to which she compares this adventure is exactly that; for the sensitive mind,

> something definite happens. The garden, the butterflies, the morning sounds, trees, apples, human voices have emerged, stated themselves. As with a rod of light, order has been imposed upon tumult; form upon chaos. Perhaps it would be simpler to say that one wakes, after Heaven knows what internal process, with a sense of mastery. Familiar people approach all sharply outlined in morning light. Through the tremor and vibration of daily custom one discerns bone and form, endurance and permanence.[15]

For the untrained or unimaginative mind, however, this sensation is as remote as the heart of the forest.

Woolf sums up her expectations of the reader in "The Patron and the Crocus." Her argument here, as in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," is that reader and writer are "twins indeed, one dying if the other dies, one flourishing if the other flourishes,"[16] but the emphasis is quite different. Here the reader is the patron, the guardian, of authors and literature; "the patron should shade and envelop the crocus in an atmosphere of the very highest importance, so that to misrepresent it is the one outrage not to be forgiven this side of the grave."[17] In order to carry out this duty, however, the reader must have impeccable judgment and character. He must know other languages and literatures, and he must separate indecency from artistic necessity, being able to "distinguish infallibly between the little clod of manure which sticks to the crocus of necessity, and that which is plastered to it out of bravado." She adds:

> He must be a judge, too, of those social influences which inevitably play so large a part in modern literature, and able to say which matures and fortifies, which inhibits and makes sterile. Further, there is emotion for him to pronounce on, and in no department can he do more useful work than in bracing a writer against sentimentality on the one hand and a craven fear of expressing his feeling on the other. . . . He will add, perhaps, something about language, and point out how many words Shakespeare used and how much grammar Shakespeare violated, while we, though we keep our fingers so demurely on the black notes on the piano, have not appreciably improved upon Antony and Cleopatra.[18]

It is obvious that Woolf assumes an ideal reader, perhaps one even more articulate and well read than herself, yet one who can judge disinterestedly. He must possess the artist's eye and sensitivity,

yet be a nonartist. The idea of a partnership between reader and writer progressively strengthens as Woolf views with increasing dismay the state of literature. Although the idea seems naive, Woolf is not wrong to hope that such a reader exists, nor is she, given her aims in criticism, being any more impractical in suggesting this sort of reader than in urging a better novel. Both undoubtedly would lead to a better, healthier literature. As in her novels, this ideal may be Woolf's way of trying to create a new reality which would respond to the needs of the time.

Interestingly, Woolf's flattering view of the reader in theory is contradicted by her more cynical perception of the reader in practice. While the reader is a close companion, the public is a shallow, hostile body, "a vast miscellaneous crowd, who want--they do not know exactly what. They must be amused and flattered; they must be fed on scraps and scandals and, finally, they must be sent sound asleep."[19] Although her irritation sometimes breeds a condescension toward that vast public, however, she seems to feel an obligation to help it. This sympathy seems to surface specifically when she considers the effects of the educational system on literature. "Who is to be blamed if what they want they get?"[20] she asks about the public. She blames academia because it has not educated the public to expect anything better. She wonders whether the public, given the opportunity, might become more discerning readers, perhaps even artists. She sees hope in a new library system which says to the public, "'It is time that even you, whom I have shut out from all my universities for centuries, should

learn to read in your mother tongue'."[21] She encourages the public to "begin now" to change society and education through literature, to read "omnivorously, simultaneously, poems, plays, novels, histories, biographies, the old and the new," to read the "kings" of Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Virgil, and Dante along with the lesser writers, to be unafraid of "trampl[ing] many flowers and bruis[ing] much ancient grass":

> Let us trespass at once. Literature is no one's private ground; literature is common ground. It is not cut up into nations, there are no wars there. Let us trespass freely and fearlessly and find our own way for ourselves. It is thus that English literature will survive this war and cross the gulf--if commoners and outsiders like ourselves make that country our own country, if we teach ourselves how to read and to write, how to preserve, and how to create.[22]

Unfortunately, although Woolf's point is valid, it also is prejudiced by her lack of understanding about society, including her own sensitivity to the exclusiveness of the educational system and her extreme consciousness of the differences in opportunity afforded men and women.

A lifetime of reading, writing, and eventual success never blunted Woolf's keen awareness of her own lack of formal education. The Stephens' funds were reserved for her brothers' educations, and while she did not begrudge them the schooling, she felt that she ought to have had the same opportunities. She inaugurated her own program of education, reading vastly in her father's well balanced library and listening to the conversations of her brothers' university friends.

But one feels that she often considered what would have happened to her particular genius if she had not grown up in an encouraging atmosphere. She came to realize that even if her family had had the means to send her to a university, the best schools and opportunities were reserved for men only. Hence, although she respected knowledge and believed in wisdom,[23] the universities came to be an irrational, if understandable, symbol of superficiality for her. She faults academic literary criticism, in particular, for being "clever, airless, fleshless ingenuities" produced by a "second hand, frozen fingered, university specialized, don trying to be creative, a don all stuffed with books."[24] The "fleshless" writing undoubtedly results from the academic critic's failure to go beyond the bounds of criticism into creation. The critic who will make readers love literature has himself experienced the "turmoil of creation."[25] But this prejudice against university criticism also dictates her attitude toward university literature courses. She argues in "All about Books" that such courses teach students much about trends in literature, the history of literature, and important figures in literature, but very little about how a novel works. "Such methods, of course, produce an erudite and eugenic offspring," she writes, but also a strictly limited vision which will not produce art. "One asks, turning over the honest, the admirable, the entirely sensible and unsentimental pages, where is love? Meaning by that, where is the sound of the sea and the smell of the rose; where is music, imagery, and a voice speaking from the heart?"[26]

Prejudice breeds inconsistencies, however, and Woolf's contradictions directly affect her common reader. She has prescribed for him a course of action quite similar to the approach of students and academic critics: survey the literatures, make comparisons, judge with discipline, and through that procedure come to some understanding of the process of creation so that the partnership between reader and writer may succeed. Moreover, she overlooks the possibility that the university may have no pretense about teaching writing through studying literature; it is she, in fact, who is urging this relationship, if only on a private scale. Indeed, she writes that "perhaps the quickest way to understand the elements of what a novelist is doing is not to read, but to write; to make your own experiment with the dangers and difficulties of words,"[27] and then turn back to the masters with a greater appreciation of their accomplishments. The difference, of course, is that she and her common reader are teaching themselves through the experiences of trial and error and of life in general, while she seems to feel that students are forced into uniform approaches under strict guidance. It is not so much that she thinks the educational system is necessarily stifling--she herself taught at Morley College for several years--but that it usually seems to be so, and that, in turn, greatly affects the state of literature. It apparently is impossible for someone to whom reading is such a creative endeavor and writing is almost a therapeutic exercise which allows her to free her mind of chaotic thoughts to understand how either art can be taught.

Woolf is speaking from experience, of course, and she naturally considers this standard as authoritative as any other by which to survey the world. But everyone else's experience is not like hers. She recognizes this fact in theory, but in practice she tends to ignore it in her enthusiasm for helping literature survive. She does not deny the influence of society on literature, for example--the writer's audience is always there--but her own sensitivity to a real world she at once seeks out and withdraws from greatly affects her view of the twentieth century world and its literature.

We already have seen that Virginia Woolf's view of the common reader is unrealistic. Although this view is still valuable as a theoretical ideal, one might expect Woolf to come to terms with the discrepancies because her theory grows out of a practical concern for the novel's future. She cannot, however, any more than she can bring together the separate parts of her own nature.

Bell suggests that her work, and presumably her entire approach to literature, is determined by this background. The Stephens were comfortable with facts and "useful" ideas; they were advocates of social causes. Yet "for intuitions, for the melody of a song, the mood of a picture, they [had] little use. There [was] therefore a whole part of the human experience of which they [fought] shy." Woolf's mother's family, on the other hand, produced aristocratic women remarkable for their beauty. Thus there were "two sides of Virginia's inheritance, an inheritance which was, at all events, real enough in

her imagination. It is not hard to find labels for the paternal and maternal sides: sense and sensibility, prose and poetry, literature and art, or, more simply, masculine and feminine."[28] Although in her early novels she writes about her parents to rid herself of an acknowledged "unhealthy obsession" with them,[29] Woolf maintains this faith in the masculine and feminine, real and ideal, aspects of society all her life.

"I fancy sometimes the world changes. I think I see reason spreading,"[30] Woolf writes optimistically after a speech at Girton, a women's college. Her audience has not been "much impressed by age and repute. Very little reverence or that sort of thing about." The world is too conscious of class, fame, and wealth, Woolf seems to feel, and too often its policies are determined by those with position and reputation rather than good sense. One cannot quarrel with the opinion, except that Woolf herself is part of the upper middle class, with fame and influence besides, and for this reason several critics find her work quite limited. "There is no evidence through all her work that Mrs. Woolf has a comprehension of the social forces underlying the world she describes,"[31] Beach asserts. Batchelor, while more sympathetic to her achievements, believes that she is "essentially a private and personal writer [who] does not have an instinctive interest in the 'public' aspects of life."[32] Bennett says that Woolf's characters are "apprehended rather than comprehended."[33] In her fiction the seriousness of the charges depends, by her own criteria, on whether Woolf presumes a greater vision than she presents, but in

nonfiction the problem is clear. She argues for a literature directed toward the individual when everyone around her clamors for attention to public affairs. While she understands that literature must fulfill its audience's needs in order to survive, she misinterprets the needs because of her limited contact with other sorts of life. Ultimately she is limited, in Moody's words, to the "virtues, and defects of upper-middle-class intellectual, professional and society people. Her diagnosis of the 'civilisation' they represented is impersonal and penetrating; she revealed with impressive strength and sanity the radical causes of its diseased condition, and what was needed if it was to recover health and wholeness. But her authoritative criticism of life of that class has not quite the same authority as a criticism of life in general."[34]

Nowhere is Woolf's refusal to recognize this distinction clearer than in her attitude toward working-class women. Her Morley students were working class women who attended her lectures in their little spare time. Woolf expressed shock at one student's account of her publishing job on Grub Street, a world apart from the TLS and Woolf's own Hogarth Press, and she was dismayed at hearing how little of their lives they could call their own. She found them "more intelligent" than she had expected but "suffering terribly from being half-educated."[35] She discovered that she must be entertaining above all in her lectures, so she chose to discuss the liveliest episodes of history, with bits of literature interspersed, rather than try to rouse their interest through literature itself. The poetry of the classics, the pleasures

of foreign languages, and the mysteries of human character piqued their curiosity briefly, but they were interested in a "practical" education. Woolf does what she can for them, but she does not learn from them. She persists in the belief that, given a choice, they would become her ideal "common readers," willing to discipline themselves to learn what they did not know about art for the sake of being able to enjoy "life's greatest pleasure." She seems to feel that fundamental differences among people somehow can be transcended; perhaps Clive Bell's impression (gathered from reading unpublished parts of the diary) that Woolf sees life "as a novel in which her friends, all unknowing, might be cast for a part,"[36] may explain this attitude. Although life is not so easily manipulated as characters in a novel, nor so readily comprehended merely by mastering the novelist's vision, Woolf taught several years at the college, evidently hoping to make an impression on another world.

Claire Sprague, along with other critics, observes that Woolf "antagonizes many people because of her intellectual artistocratic connections and her divergent opinions and actions."[37] In short, many feel she is a snob. Her view of the common reader perhaps derives from what Sprague calls a "romantic middle class notion that the working class has a monopoly on reality."[38] Although Woolf's reason and experience tell her that this is not so--far from monopolizing it, her students would have had no concept of her "reality"--she nevertheless tries to form an alliance of highbrows and lowbrows against middlebrows,[39] unaware that many lowbrows would be middlebrows if they could.

Woolf is concerned specifically with the unification of highbrow and lowbrow women against middlebrow men. In general, she finds men vain and patronizing. "The egotism of men surprises and shocks me even now," she writes in 1928. "Is there a woman of my acquaintance who could sit in my armchair from 3 to 6:30 without the semblance of a suspicion that I may be busy, or tired, or bored; and so sitting could talk, grumbling and grudging, of her difficulties, worries; then eat chocolates, then read a book, and go at last, apparently self-complacent and wrapped in a kind of blubber of misty self-saturation?"[40] She resents their privileges and combined power; in order to achieve anything women "must tell lies, and apply every emollient in our power to the swollen skin of our brothers' so terribly inflamed vanity,"[41] she decides. But middlebrow men are the most dangerous to women, to society, and to art because they make decisions with little apparent regard for their effect on other classes and show no awareness of anything outside the middlebrow life of war, commerce, and the like.

Since she feels strongly about the situation of women in society, she assumes that all other women must feel the same way and, further, that if women controlled more of the world, they would improve it. She seems to want to adapt Bruno Walter's comment about the Germans to women's resistance to men's power: "We must say that they are uncivilised. We will not trade with them or play with them. We must make them feel themselves outcasts--not by fighting them: by ignoring them."[42] To a working class woman, however, this course would seem

impractical and foolhardy. As Woolf herself observes, the lowbrows take middlebrow activities quite seriously.[43] They line up for the movies "after the day's work, in the rain, sometimes for hours, to get into the cheap seats and sit in hot theatres in order to see what their lives look like"[44] because they want to be assured that their lowbrow life is better than it seems. If their life is "real living," they do not want it. They want to move out of their reality, both in fact and in imagination, into a world of comfort and status and everything else the middlebrow has to offer. The highbrow, who already has the creature comforts, can afford to minimize their importance and indulge himself in imagining that he is "experiencing life" as the lowbrow does. In addition, although highbrow status requires a particular background, else one is accused of being a pretentious middlebrow barely out of South Kensington, one can move from lowbrow to middlebrow in one's lifetime, with hard work. The working class, in short, recognizes that middlebrows control the world and that one succeeds most by cooperating with, not fighting against, such power.[45]

Three Guineas illustrates Woolf's attempts to diagnose society from the slightly altered and broader perspective of professional women in a wartime society. Asked to contribute one guinea to each of three causes--rebuilding a women's college, helping professional women earn their livings, and preventing war and protecting culture and individual liberty--Woolf answers that all three share the same end of preventing war. The prescription she writes is for women to

take what is good about male institutions--universities, professions in themselves--but to put them to better use to teach "magnanimity and generosity."[46] War is a man's habit, she argues, learned at the universities. Therefore, if women learn to "transmute the old ideal of bodily chastity into the new ideal of mental chastity--hold that if it was wrong to sell the body for money, it is much more wrong to sell the mind for money, since the mind, people say, is nobler than the body,"[47] they can use the one advantage they have over men in having been denied education, independent livings, and free minds for hundreds of years. Unprostituted minds, in turn, would assure the survival of culture and intellectual liberty, respectively defined as the "disinterested pursuit of reading and writing the English language" and "the right to say or write what you think in your own words and in your own way."[48]

Woolf's assumption here that women are so inherently different from men that, given the same circumstances, they would prevent rather than make war allows neither for the fact that many men in their turns have maintained their integrity and lost their influence, nor for the possibility that women, once they find themselves more influential, will be no more virtuous than their male counterparts. She states that fighting for one's country is a masculine rationale irrelevant to women who have never had anything in England to call their own. But once women do have a greater stake in society, their views may alter. Although her sympathy for women may be both correct and understandable, it should not color her judgments of their essential

human nature, which, she has been careful to point out, is common to all of us. Unfortunately, however, her sympathy does distort her judgment; her tendency to view professional women as paragons whose faults may be excused because of past history interferes with her perception of their achievements, as will be discussed in Chapter III.

A second assumption about the interrelationship of war, women's rights, and the preservations of culture and intellectual liberty is deceptively simple: if war is abolished, money is freed for culture, and if everyone has the right to say or write what he thinks, there will be no need for war. Both readers and writers with "unadulterated minds" can demand truth, and if the truth is told about war, it will soon end, she reasons. The reasoning may be logical in an ideal world, but her faith in it only demonstrates her inability to accept people and the world as they are. Three Guineas argues valiantly for not only for women's freedom, but also for men's--an equal and peaceful society. But it is intellectual argument, ignoring much of this society and failing to address itself to the reality and advisability of resisting an actual war approaching England's shores. As Bell observes, "What really seemed wrong with the book . . . was the attempt to involve a discussion of women's rights with the far more agonising and immediate question of what we were to do in order to meet the ever-growing menance of Fascism and war. The connection between the two questions seemed tenuous and the positive suggestion wholly indequate."[49]

Two other factors in the complex interrelationship cannot be ignored, however. As will be discussed in a subsequent section, Woolf's view of a male-dominated society affected not only her critical judgments of women writers, but also her perception of the nature of the artist. Her ideal of an androgynous artist of masculine mind and feminine sensibility is undermined by her own extreme consciousness of the social position of artists. Second, her own fear of current society and the future forces her to acknowledge that artists are obligated to be involved in social change to help themselves and their art, but it leaves her incapable of defining the degree of involvement because she herself does not understand it. As Forster observes shortly after her death,

> Her books were conditioned by her age. She could not assimilate this latest threat [World War II] to our civilization. The submarine perhaps. But not the flying fortress or the land mine. The idea that all stone is like grass, and like all flesh may vanish in a twinkling, did not enter into her consciousness. . . . She belonged to an age which distinguished sharply between the impermanency of man and the durability of his movements and for whom the dome of the British Museum Reading Room was almost eternal. Decay she admitted; the delicate grey churches in the Strand would not stand forever; but she supposed, as we all did, that decay would be gradual.[50]

As she demonstrates in the theory of criticism, Woolf sees the need to assimilate change, personally and artistically, but her inability to do so is evident in her proclivity for looking back while urging others to look ahead.

Virginia Woolf's attachment to the past runs deep. She knows English literature well enough to write a definitive history of it,[51] yet she always resists such a formal organization of her experiences with the classics. She prefers people's lives to literary histories, and that preference, in the end, is detrimental to her criticism. Brewster's statement that Woolf's "free reverie in an ideal library [which] expresses the delight in reading, the sense of the long past of English history, the sharp realization of the present moment--the inner and outer streams mingling--and the continuing interplay of life and literature--were all to be found in the disciplined critical writing of The Common Reader"[52] is true, but its implications are troubling. Although Woolf urges an objective approach to literature, her own sensitivity to the past versus her insensitivity to the present affects her opinion of what objectivity is. For Woolf it is not an independent approach, but one dependent on circumstances, and her tendency is to decide that the circumstances of the present make contemporary art less good than the achievements of the past. This condition leads some critics to say that Woolf "tacitly accepted, even as she revolted against her elders, their innermost vision of reality."[53] Brace implies that Woolf turns to the past in order to begin work afresh toward a "new morality" which would reorient art (and society) not toward objects themselves, but toward the qualities of life evinced in those objects.[54] Whatever the case, the position itself raises difficulties in connection with her attacks on "materialists" and her call for a new kind of novel which embodies poetry in prose.

It would not be exaggerating too much to say that Woolf sees the past as good and the present as bad. It is perhaps part of man's nature to think past times were easier than the present, and Woolf, like most of us, recognizes that "one is tempted to impute to the dead the qualities we find lacking in ourselves."[55] She even suggests that looking back is a weakness of modern criticism:

> Must the duty of the critic always be to the past, must his gaze always be fixed backward? Could he not sometimes turn round and, shading his eyes in the manner of Robinson Crusoe on the desert island, look into the future and trace on its mist the faint lines of the land which some day perhaps we may reach? The truth of such speculations can never be proved, of course, but in an age like ours there is a great temptation to indulge in them. For it is an age clearly when we are not fast anchored where we are; things are moving around us; we are moving ourselves. Is it not the critic's duty to tell us, or to guess at least, where we are going?[56]

Nevertheless, apparently fearing the present and the future, Woolf seems obsessively concerned with the past. Although Brewster describes this tendency more charitably, observing that it is "characteristic of Mrs. Woolf's own perspective as reader-critic to bring together two writers far apart in time, because of some resemblances or contrast; thus creating the impression that the vast landscape of letters is always there, to be seen when she lifts her eyes from the little corner she is examining--as she looked out the window in the ideal library where she was reading, down a long corridor of English literature and life,"[57] Woolf's own view seems to exclude any additions to the landscape. On the one hand she urges comparison with the classics, but

on the other she suggests that all modern novels will fall short in the comparison. Thus her reverence for tradition makes her incapable of judging contemporary works, and although her main critical concern is to establish modern standards through close examination of works, she implies by extension that no critic can accomplish this goal. As Goldman states, the "great tradition" is the "final standard"[58] for Woolf, although that tradition is the very thing she is struggling against in her own fiction.

In this connection Leavis makes a worthwhile distinction, which Woolf neglects, between a novel's "importance historically" and its place among the "significant few" great novels.[59] Like Woolf, he considers Austen "great," along with Eliot, James, and Conrad. As we have seen, however, Woolf cannot approve James's preoccupation with form or Conrad's double vision, and Eliot is a special case because she is a woman. Perhaps the difference in opinions arises from the fact that Leavis sees Austen, for example, making tradition not only "for those coming after, but her achievement has for us a retroactive effect: as we look back beyond her we see in what goes before, and see because of her, potentialities and significances brought out in such a way that, for us, she creates the tradition we see leading down to her. Her work, like the work of all great creative writers, gives meaning to the past."[60] Woolf, by contrast, suggests that the past gives meaning to the future, but she is vague about the sort of meaning she is seeking from the past. For this reason she can--and does--call many works "great," if only in their own ways and not

according to objective critical standards. That is, she makes allowances simply because the works are part of the past. Interestingly, Leavis' criteria for great novels are like Woolf's: they "change the possibilities of the art for practitioners and readers, they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote, awareness of the possibilities of life."[61] Yet Defoe is a "great master of prose" to Woolf and not to Leavis. It is enough for Woolf that Defoe can make his vision clear. "Is there any reason," she asks, "why the perspective that a plain earthenware pot exacts should not satisfy us as completely, once we grasp it, as man himself in all his sublimity standing against a background of broken mountains and tumbling oceans with stars flaming in the sky?"[62]

Another look at the essay "On Not Knowing Greek" may help clarify these points. Woolf allows for the great differences in circumstances between the Greek writers and modern novelists; the Greeks were poets and playwrights, not novelists, and works were presented outdoors rather than read silently indoors. Yet they captured the essence of humanity--"heroism itself," "fidelity itself."[63] That is what modern novels should do, of course, which is the reason for novelists' studying the classics. But, she says, the Greeks present characters originally; as the method filters through the ages, its origins are evident and its effect is predictable:

> Here we meet them before their emotions have been worn into uniformity. Here we listen to the nightingale whose song echoes through English literature singing in her own Greek tongue. For the first time Orpheus with his lute makes men and beasts follow him.

> Their voices ring out clear and sharp; we see the hairy, tawny bodies at play in the sunlight among the olive trees, not posed gracefully on granite plinths in the pale corridors of the British Musuem.[64]

Woolf's implication is that the Greeks are revered for their original perception; it therefore becomes a fault of modern writing that it depends on the very tradition it is supposed to emulate. The Greek language has a "completeness of . . . expression"[65] which English cannot match. Its "vigour," moreover, has "no forerunners; no heirs;" it makes Greek the "literature of masterpieces" because Greek artists dare to experiment. The Greeks' vision is that "of the earth unravaged, the sea unpolluted, the maturity, tried but unbroken, of mankind."[66] What Woolf admires, then, is the uncomplicated world that she imagines the Greeks have experienced and have captured for future generations to enjoy. Although she wonders whether we are "reading into Greek poetry not what they have but what we lack,"[67] she still concludes that "it is to the Greeks we turn when we are sick of the vagueness, of the confusion, of the Christianity and its consolations, of our own age."[68] Although in her theory she seems to be admiring the classics for their control of emotion and form, language and style, and ability to communicate the author's vision, she actually reacts to them on quite different grounds. The classics become escapist literature, in a sense; she recognizes in them a harmony she cannot discern in literature of her own age.

This romanticism of worlds of the past, this judgment of them not on their own terms but in terms of the solace they provide, stems

partially from her attraction to a different culture and language; it is characteristic of Woolf to admire other literatures more than her own. Of her biased articles on Russian literature, for example, Brewster notes that "her own temperature begins to rise, and she discerns the features of a saint in every great Russian writer."[69] But England's past is almost as great a lure for her imagination and wishful thinking. She remarks rather wistfully in one essay the "writing is with [the Elizabethans] as it can no longer be with us, making; making something that will endure and wear a brave face in the eyes of posterity."[70] Even though Shakespeare, in his own time, was regarded as a crowdpleaser rather than a poet and dramatist of enduring talents, her judgment of his language is that "the pliancy of his mind was so complete that he could furbish out any train of thought; and, relaxing, let fall a shower of such unregarded flowers. Why should anyone else attempt to write? This is not writing at all. Indeed, I could say that Shakespeare surpasses literature altogether, if I knew what I meant."[71] With other writers the reaction is similar, if not so hyperbolic. She admits that comparisons of new and old books point up some of the imperfections of the old--"some of the great are less venerable than we thought them; indeed, they are not so accomplished or so profound as some of our own time"[72]--yet the new lose even then. "If in one or two cases this seems to be true, [however,] a kind of humiliation mixed with joy overcomes us in front of others," she continues.

> Take Shakespeare, or Milton, or Sir Thomas Browne. Our little knowledge of how things are done does not avail us much here, but it does lend added zest to our enjoyment. Did we ever in our youngest days feel such amazement at their achievement as that which fills us now that we have sifted myriads of words and gone along unchartered ways in search of new forms for our sensations? New books may be more stimulating and in some ways more suggestive than the old, but they do not give us that absolute certainty of delight which breathes through us when we come back again to Comus, or Lycidas, Urne Burial, or Antony and Cleopatra.[73]

In short, Woolf seems overwhelmed by all the life captured in books of the past:

> The books gently swelled neath my hand as I drew it across them in the dark. Travels, histories, memoirs, the fruit of innumerable lives. The dusk was brown with them. Even the hand thus sliding seemed to feel beneath its palm fulness and ripeness. Standing at the window and looking out into the garden, the lives of all these books filled the room behind with a soft murmur. Truly, a deep sea, the past, a tide which will overtake and overflow us.[74]

The present cannot compare to the "melodious days" of Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Austen, Thackeray, Dickens, or Sterne "if you think of the language, and the heights to which it can soar when free, and see the same eagle captive, bald, and croaking."[75]

It may be true, as Brewster observes, that "a pretense to scientific detachment is quite foreign to Mrs. Woolf's temperament,"[76] but nevertheless, as explained in Chapter I, Woolf has established a balance of emotion and form in the work and a generally objective critical approach to books among reviewers as essential criteria in

criticism. Moreover, while she writes that "we may be sure that the newness of new poetry and fiction is its most superficial quality and that we have only to alter slightly, not to recast, the standards by which we have judged the old,"[77] she also has argued that these "standards" have not been defined and that fiction's evolutionary nature is a main concern for the critic. It is therefore a serious deficiency in Woolf's own attempts to help the art of fiction that she is unwilling--or perhaps unable--to place the past in perspective and view modern fiction with a twentieth century eye. If the author's experience is "written large" in his own works, after all, the twentieth century author cannot be faulted for being true to his world and the vision it engenders, however distasteful that vision may be.

Unfortunately, however, Woolf's distaste for the vision prejudices her opinion of modern fiction. She admires the energy of modern writing and insists that no greater opportunity for writers ever has existed in England; "indeed there is every reason for optimism. No age can have been more rich than ours in writers determined to give expression to the differences which separate them from the past and not to the resemblances which connect them with it. . . . [One] can hardly fail to be impressed by the courage, the sincerity, in a word, by the widespread originality of our time."[78] Yet she renders a severe verdict of modern works' final effect on the reader:

> Book after book leaves us with the same sense of promise unachieved, of intellectual poverty, of brilliance which has been snatched from life but not transmuted into literature. Much of what is best in contemporary work has the appearance of being noted under pressure, taken

> down in a bleak shorthand which preserves with astonishing brilliance the movements and expressions of the figures as they pass across the screen. But the flash is soon over, and there remains with us a profound dissatisfaction. The irritation is as acute as the pleasure was intense.[79]

She concedes that good contemporary works may exist but that only time will reveal them:

> It is oddly difficult in the case of new books to know which are the real books and what it is that they are telling us, and which are the stuffed books which will come to pieces when they have lain about for a year or two. We can see that there are many books, and we are frequently told that everyone can write nowadays. That may be true; yet we do not doubt that at the heart of this immense volubility, this flood and foam of language, this irreticence and vulgarity and triviality, there lies the heart of some great passion which only needs the accident of a brain more happily turned than the rest to issue in a shape which will last from age to age.[80]

Woolf's account of John Gibson Lockhart's career illustrates what she feels are the dangers in judging contemporary works. "A new book is attached to life by a thousand minute filaments. Life goes on and the filaments break and disappear. But at the moment they ring and resound and set up all kinds of irrelevant responses,"[81] she explains. Even a good critic, therefore, will "get the proportions right, but the detail wrong. He will single out from a number of unknown writers those who are going to prove men of substance, but he cannot be certain what qualities are theirs in particular, or how the importance of one compares with the importance of another."[82] What is discomforting about this otherwise legitimate observation, however, is that Woolf concludes, "One may regret, since this is so, that Lockhart fixed his

mind so much upon contemporaries and did not give himself the benefit of a wider perspective. He might have written with far greater safety and perhaps with far greater authority upon the dead."[83] The "wider perspective," given her views of the nature of the critic and the function of criticism, ought to include the present as well as the past. Further, her main complaint against academic critics is that they constantly are analyzing the already established works while neglecting modern fiction. It is unfortunate that Woolf suggests that any critic should choose "safety" and "authority" when the art so sorely needs guidance. "When we say that the death of Thomas Hardy leaves English fiction without a leader, we mean that there is no other writer whose supremacy would be generally accepted, none to whom it seems so fitting and natural to pay homage. . . . it is no less than the truth to say that while he lived there was one novelist at all events who made the art of fiction seem an honourable calling; while Hardy lived there was no excuse for thinking meanly of the art he practiced,"[84] she writes in 1928. One again detects a note of wistfulness in this comment; for Woolf, of another generation, Hardy already is part of the revered past. But if fiction is indeed in such straits, it would seem essential to have critics speaking out for current works. They must be prepared to pronounce judgment, and the jury of readers and writers must at least attend to the arguments if they are going to find replacements for the great books of past eras. Woolf understands this fact and urges its acceptance among others, but she never is able to reconcile herself to adopt this view herself.

Woolf's inconsistent position concerning modern literature stems from her ambivalent feeling about the need of authors' "power of . . . belief" in their convictions and in their worlds; "only believe, we find ourselves saying, and all the rest will come of itself."[85] This policy works for the past, evidently, but not for the present, for contemporary writers' reliance on this sort of faith in their created worlds is precisely what she criticizes in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." Thus the quality that makes novels of the past traditionally "great" seems at once to defeat modern works because they do not possess it and to deny them "greatness" if they do. Given her selective, even distorted, perception of the physical world in the twentieth century and her tendency to seek solace in the past from a difficult and painful present, the dilemma in which Woolf places herself is perhaps inevitable. As Louis Kronenberger explains, tradition could help Woolf only up to a certain point in her criticism:

> She was at home in the past and happy there; she accepted what the classics had to give without quarrel, sometimes without challenge; feasted off them, time and again envied the terms on which the old writers could write--with a sense of their age and their audience behind them. Aware--heavily aware, as a novelist--that all this had broken down in her own age of flux, she was possibly a little undiscerning and literary about the past, a little too fascinated with its decor and not quite enough concerned with its large outlines.[86]

This bias is perhaps one more result of Woolf's struggle with the impersonal versus the personal view of reality. Although in her fiction she may have been able to fuse the two, in her criticism, where the "hard facts" must come first, the fusion is more difficult.

It is interesting to note that Kronenberger describes Woolf's approach to criticism as "invincibly, almost defiantly, feminine."[87] Similarly, Rahv suggests that Woolf's demand for "sensation" above all in modern novels "really flows from the general tradition of English poetry and poetic sensibility rather than from characterization,"[88] which Woolf blames for the problems in contemporary fiction. He considers it a "crucial fault," since Woolf sees tradition "one-sidedly, and perhaps in much too feminine a fashion, not as a complete order but first and foremost as an order of sentiments."[89] Both critics assume, of course, that a "feminine" approach to criticism exists. One might prefer that they assume only that Woolf's personality, which may happen to be "feminine," comes through in her essays, as indeed Woolf thinks it should.[90] In fiction, however, personality is another matter, and hardly so clearcut. One of the most troublesome problems in Woolf's theory is the nature of the artist; her various attempts at definition, although apparently quite firm, become ambiguous or ambivalent when investigated further.

Rahv's and Kronenberger's assumptions raise the immediate point of a writer's "masculinity" or "femininity." In A Room of One's Own Woolf is emphatic about the androgynous nature of the artist:

> It is fatal for any one who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or a woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly: It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman. And fatal is no figure of speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death. . . .

> Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the act of creation can be accomplished.[91]

One is reminded of her image of the "birth" of a book, evidently the product of a marriage of minds. It seems as if she is trying to combine in the ideal artist the masculine and the feminine, the fact and the poetry, which Bell has pointed to in her own nature. She even argues that literature's great advantage as an art for women, besides its minimal costs for paper and pen, is that one may use "a man's name--say George Eliot or George Sand--with the result that an editor or a publisher . . . can detect no difference in the scent or savour of a manuscript, or even know for certain whether the writer is married or not."[92]

Unfortunately, however, Woolf indicates elsewhere that this may not be the case. The more an artist sees and captures of life, the better his book will be, she tells us,[93] but women, who have experienced so little, always betray their identities in their work. "In Middlemarch and in Jane Eyre we are conscious not merely of the writer's character, as we are conscious of the character of Charles Dickens, but we are conscious of a woman's presence--of someone resenting the treatment of her sex and pleading for its rights. This brings into women's writing an element which is entirely absent from a man's, unless, indeed, he happens to be a working man, a negro, or one who for some other reason is conscious of disability. It introduces a distortion and is frequently the cause of weakness."[94] Only a writer who recognizes his limitations and has a "very serene or a very powerful mind,"[95]

as Jane Austen or Emily Bronte has, can overcome this deficiency. Otherwise "the vision becomes too masculine or it becomes too feminine; it loses its perfect integrity and, with that, its most essential quality as a work of art."[96] With their increased rights and privileges women writers are becoming more impersonal in order to capture the poetic spirit in their works. But still, she asserts, "it is probable . . . that both in life and in art the values of a woman are not the values of a man."[97] One can see how her view of society leads to this position, but its effect on literature is to establish masculine and feminine subjects and treatments. Moreover, these different subjects and treatments require a different style to suit women writers. "The very form of the sentence does not fit her," Woolf states. "It is a sentence made by men; it is too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman's use." Yet since a novel requires the sentence to "get from one end of the book to the other," "this a woman must make for herself, altering and adapting the current sentence until she writes one that takes the natural shape of her thought without crushing or distorting it."[98]

Woolf's ambivalence may result from her own desire to be recognized as an individual making important contributions to literature, yet not to be known as a "woman writer." Her particular writing talent is her poetic quality, which traditionally, if misleadingly, is considered a "feminine" quality as opposed to the assertiveness of "masculine" language. But to Woolf the label "woman writer," as the critics use it, implies separate--and inferior--standards for these writers' works.

"One does not want an established reputation, such as I think I was getting, as one of our leading female novelists,"[99] Woolf emphasizes. If distinctions are not to be made between men and women writers, yet a woman's art is definitely not a man's, either the female artist must suppress her "feminine sensibilities" or the critics must ignore them. The implications for men are just as unsatisfactory, for the "feminine sensibility" in anyone's writing may be its most compelling quality. One wonders whether Woolf is oversensitive to "feminine" and "masculine" aspects in writing and therefore becomes ambiguous about exactly how impersonal a writer should be.

In this connection a second observation about the artist bears examination. Woolf asserts that there are "born" writers, who sense life more deeply and comprehend the possibilities of language more fully than others. But her use of "born" becomes ironical and conditional, for as she has pointed out, the writer's nature also is determined by his background, which involves hereditary, social, and economic situations. First, a writer or critic, no matter how much he "understands" English people, their history, and their literature, always will be a "foreigner" unless he is born an Englishman. Thus Conrad will always remain a Pole, and James, an American. "A special acuteness and detachment, a sharp angle of vision the foreigner will often achieve; but not that absence of self-consciousness, that ease and fellowship and sense of common values which make for intimacy, and sanity, and the quick give and take of familiar intercourse,"[100] she explains.

We already have seen the bases from which she argues that society and economics affect literature. The major premise of A Room of One's Own is that women writers have emerged only in the last century, and then not prolifically, because women writers, like male novelists, must have their own rooms and the means to support them--that is, they must be financially and socially independent--in order to write with leisure, integrity, and privacy, all necessary conditions for producing great writing. For that reason, Woolf says, artists will come from the middle class. Although she might wish that such considerations were unnecessary, or that classes did not exist, she suggests that growing "democracy" is destroying aristocratic models of earlier eras while making the working class more conspicuous. Thus "it is from the middle class that writers spring, because it is in the middle class only that the practice of writing is as natural and habitual as hoeing a field or building a house."[101] As she herself notes, a future of middle class writers may mean an end, not a new beginning, for fiction. Therefore, as much as her social inclinations are to urge a classless society, the implications for the kinds of "artists" such a society might produce must make her a bit uncomfortable.

Virginia Woolf cannot solve this or the other problems mentioned in this chapter, and we cannot ignore them. Her attempt to identify herself as a "humble reader" in an "immense class to which almost all of us belong," which English society has left "to pick up what we can in village schools; in factories; in workshops; behind counters; and

at home"[102] is romantic and inaccurate posturing. (It often is designing as well, as will be demonstrated in Chapter III.) The protest of innocence that "we" readers are not responsible for the literary dilemma brought about by middle class artists because "we are not in their position, we have not had eleven years of expensive education," and therefore "we" are not guilty of scapegoating[103] is only superficially true. The argument that peace, prosperity, and a class system so obvious that writers were unconscious of it allowed the writers of other centuries to "dig deep" as no contemporary writer can[104] is only partially true. Her opinion that modern writers should renounce all hope of producing masterpieces in such an age[105] is dissembling, coming from an artist striving to write the novel of the future. One cannot help feeling that Woolf is the artist afraid of the present[106] and that Woolf is the writer too conscious of herself as a woman and of other novelists as contemporaries. Despite these serious weaknesses, Woolf's theory remains valuable as an idealistic statement about literature, for her weaknesses grow out directly out of prevailing literary conditions. And once one is aware of the limitations of and qualifications to her theory, one can hope, with her, that the ideal will conquer the real for the sake of her art.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Virginia Woolf, "On Not Knowing Greek," Collected Essays, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), I, 1-2. All subsequent references to essays in this volume will be listed by article title, volume number, and page number of that volume.

[2]J. K. Johnstone, The Bloomsbury Group: Study of E. M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, and Their Circle (New York: The Noonday Press, 1963), p. 150.

[3]F. R. Leavis, ed., Toward Standards of Criticism: Selections from The Calendar of Modern Letters, 1925-1927 (London: Wishart & Co., 1933), p. 143.

[4]Ibid., p. 146.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Dorothy Brewster, Virginia Woolf (New York: New York University Press, 1962), p. 33.

[7]Mark Goldman, "Virginia Woolf and the Critic as Reader," from PMLA, 80 (June 1965), in Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Claire Sprague (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 166.

[8]Virginia Woolf, A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1953), entry of January 18, 1939, p. 300. All subsequent references to this work will include the abbreviated title, AWD, the item's entry date, and the page on which the item is found.

[9]AWD, Dec. 4, 1930, p. 158.

[10]AWD, May 5, 1927, p. 105.

[11]"Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," I, 336.

[12]Ibid., p. 330.

[13]"Robinson Crusoe, I, 70.

[14]Virginia Woolf, "A Letter to a Young Poet," Collected Essays, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), II, 184. All subsequent references to essays in this volume will be listed by article title, volume number, and page number in that volume.

[15]"Reading," II, 25.

[16]"The Patron and the Crocus," II, 152.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid., p. 151.

[19]"Oliver Goldsmith," I, 106.

[20]Ibid.

[21]"The Leaning Tower," II, 180.

[22]Ibid., p. 181.

[23]E. M. Forster, "Virginia Woolf," from Two Cheers for Democracy, in Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Claire Sprague (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 21. Originally the Rede Lecture, delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge, 1941.

[24]AWD, Sept. 17, 1940, p. 337.

[25]"Walter Raleigh," I, 316.

[26]"All about Books," II, 267.

[27]"How Should One Read a Book?", II, 2.

[28]Quentin Bell, Virginia Woolf: A Biography (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1972), pp. 20-21.

[29]AWD, Nov. 28, 1928, p. 135.

[30]AWD, Oct. 27, 1928, p. 132.

[31]J. W. Beach, "Her Characters' Limitations," from "Virginia Woolf," The English Journal, 26 (1937), in Critics on Virginia Woolf: Readings in Literary Criticism, 8, ed. Jacqueline E. M. Latham (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1970), p. 16.

[32]J. B. Batchelor, "Feminism in Virginia Woolf," from English, 17 (Spring 1968), in Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Claire Sprague (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 178.

[33]Joan Bennett, "Characters and Human Beings," from Chapter 2, Virginia Woolf: Her Art as a Novelist, in Critics on Virginia Woolf: Readings in Literary Criticism, 8, ed. Jacqueline E. M. Latham (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1970), p. 20.

[34]A. D. Moody, Virginia Woolf (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1963), p. 7.

[35]Bell, p. 112.

[36]Brewster, p. 18.

[37]Claire Sprague, Introduction, Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 3.

[38]Ibid.

[39]"Middlebrow," II, 197.

[40]AWD, Nov. 7, 1928, p. 135.

[41]AWD, April 9, 1935, p. 236.

[42]AWD, April 28, 1933, p. 193. A similar implication that women should ignore men, thereby distracting them and forcing them to notice the silent protest of their ways, is made in Three Guineas (New York: Harbinger Books, 1963), p. 109. This attitude, combined with Woolf's determination not to accept any male-conferred honor or university appointments, frequently has been interpreted to indicate that Woolf was part of the feminist movement. Her concerns, however, were for artists and literature and only peripherally for politics and social conditions as they affected her concerns. She found the ugly realities of feminists' sufferings repulsive. Moreover, she felt no particular affinity for women; she could not talk to them, in general, and found the male world much more comfortable. She was, however, extremely conscious of her femininity, which, as other critics have pointed out, may have been confused with feminism. She was painfully aware of her inability to have children and was sensible to others' opinion about her dress, for example. Yet her consciousness of her sex affected her as an artist, primarily; for that reason, perhaps, A Room of One's Own, about women artists, strikes most readers as convincing, while Three Guineas, about professional women in society in general, fails to persuade many readers.

[43]"Middlebrow," II, 200.

[44]Ibid., p. 198.

[45]Woolf, it seems, never is able to understand working class women and eventually concludes that it would be pointless to try to experience working class life. E. M. Forster considers this self-recognition an admirable show of "hardness" on her part, yet he does not think it a sympathetic stand; that would be asking too much of a fragile personality. As he explains it, "she could be charming to individuals, working-class and otherwise, but it was her curiosity and her honesty that motivated her. And we must remember that sympathy, for her, entailed a tremendous and exhausting process, not lightly to be entered on. It was not a half-crown or a kind word or a good deed or a philanthropic sermon or a godlike gesture; it was adding the sorrows of another to one's own" (see note 23). Woolf's commitment to anything is never halfway, it is true, but it is also a fact that Woolf enjoys her highbrow position in society.

[46]Virginia Woolf, Three Guineas (New York: Harbinger Books, 1963), p. 29.

[47]Ibid., p. 82.

[48]Ibid., p. 91.

[49]Bell, p. 441.

[50]Forster, p. 21.

[51]Brewster, p. 67.

[52]Ibid., p. 13.

[53]Philip Rahv, "Mrs. Woolf and Mrs. Brown," from Image and Idea: Fourteen Essays on Literary Themes, in Critics on Virginia Woolf: Readings in Literary Criticism, 8, ed. Jacqueline E. M. Latham (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1970), p. 142.

[54]Marjorie Brace, "Worshipping Solid Objects," from "Worshipping Solid Objects: The Pagan World of Virginia Woolf," Accent, 4 (1944), in Critics on Virginia Woolf: Readings in Literary Criticism, 8, ed. Jacqueline E. M. Latham (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1970), p. 123.

[55]"Reading," II, 21.

[56]"The Narrow Bridge of Art," II, 218.

[57]Brewster, p. 49. According to Marilyn Zorn, Woolf demonstrates the same perspective in her fiction (which may help explain Woolf's justification for turning to the past in literature). Zorn says that Between the Acts, for example, is "built on this series of echoes and

half-echoes from Shakespeare, Shelley, Byron, and Tennyson. Meant to be conveyed is all of English literature from the nursery rhyme to . . . T. S. Eliot . . . . It is as if the author willed that her audience find a traditional body of myth in the evocation of a traditional literature." Marilyn Zorn, "The Pageant" in Between the Acts, from Modern Fiction Studies, 2 (1956), in Critics on Virginia Woolf: Readings in Literary Criticism, 8, ed. Jacqueline E. M. Latham (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1970), p. 117.

[58]Goldman, p. 15.

[59]F. R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (New York: George W. Stewart, Publisher, Inc., 1948), p. 3.

[60]Ibid., p. 5.

[61]Ibid., p. 2.

[62]"Robinson Crusoe," I, 75.

[63]"On Not Knowing Greek," I, 4.

[64]Ibid., p. 5.

[65]Ibid., p. 11.

[66]Ibid.

[67]Ibid.

[68]Ibid., p. 13.

[69]Brewster, p. 56.

[70]"Reading," II, 15.

[71]AWD, April 13, 1930, p. 134.

[72]"Hours in a Library," II, 39.

[73]Ibid.

[74]"Reading," II, 23.

[75]"Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," I, 334.

[76]Brewster, p. 53.

[77]"How Should One Read a Book?", II, 9.

[78]"How It Strikes a Contemporary," II, 158.

[79]Ibid.

[80]"Hours in a Library," II, 38.

[81]"Lockhart's Criticism," I, 183.

[82]Ibid., p. 184.

[83]Ibid.

[84]"The Novels of Thomas Hardy," I, 256.

[85]"How It Strikes a Contemporary," II, 159.

[86]Louis Kronenberger, "Virginia Woolf as Critic," The Republic of Letters: Essays on Various Writers (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 248. The essay originally was published in 1942.

[87]Ibid., p. 249.

[88]Rahv, p. 141.

[89]Ibid.

[90]"The Modern Essay," II, 46.

[91]Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (New York: Harbinger Books, 1957), p. 108.

[92]Woolf, Three Guineas, p. 90.

[93]"Life and the Novelist," II, 135.

[94]"Women and Fiction," II, 144.

[95]Ibid.

[96]Ibid., p. 145.

[97]Ibid., p. 146.

[98]Ibid., p. 145.

[99]AWD, April 8, 1921, p. 31.

[100]"The Russian Point of View," I, 238.

[101]"The Niece of an Earl," I, 222.

[102]"The Leaning Tower," II, 180.

[103]Ibid., 171.

[104]Ibid., 166.

[105]"How It Strikes a Contemporary," II, 160.

[106]"The Narrow Bridge of Art," II, 221.

CHAPTER III

THE CRITICAL THEORY IN PRACTICE

During a career of more than twenty years as a public critic, Virginia Woolf wrote prolifically for the Times Literary Supplement, besides publishing numerous works independently. Although the style of these essays and reviews varies greatly, depending on her subject or purpose, she usually has been dismissed as an impressionist or subjective critic whose primary interest was her own reaction to a work. Daiches expresses the common opinion that her essays are "only rarely criticism in the strict academic sense, but are frequently history, biography, discourse or argument."[1] Goldman is one of the few contemporary critics to insist that "Woolf, although her essays are informal and impressionistic, really belongs to the modern critical tradition, with its emphasis on the formal, objective values of the work of art."[2] He adds that Woolf establishes a balance between subjective response and objective judgment in most of her criticism and that she has "suffered a certain neglect as a serious critic for choosing the middle way between the individual, emotional experience and the analytical, evaluative or judicial responsibility."[3] However, although Goldman acknowledges her "very real stake in the critic as common reader,"[4] he does not explore the relationship between Woolf's idea of the common reader and her own critical practice. This

relationship helps explain much about the "impressionist" style and "familiar" form of many of Woolf's essays. She is a public critic who adopts the stance of the reader-critic because she realizes, as all writers do, the importance of reaching her audience not only through ideas but also through style. It therefore may not be a critical weakness for her to adopt a colloquial style or to turn to "discourse or argument" to help her common readers understand what she has to say about literature. Although her criteria are objective, the common reader's response is subjective, and Woolf therefore must combine the two approaches to satisfy herself and her audience. What some critics apparently fail to recognize is that Woolf's style does not necessarily preclude sound critical judgment in her essays. If, as Kronenberger suggests, her judgments are not original, her style at least makes them easier or more enjoyable to read and understand.[5]

Yet one cannot argue that Woolf is an entirely successful critic. At times the disparity between her approach and the difficult task of critical judgment is too great; the style does not change as it sometimes should to meet the demands of its subject. A more serious problem is that biases and distorted perceptions, such as those discussed in Chapter II, hinder her ability to make sound judgments. With contemporary fiction, particularly, she is "not always successful as a critic, either through failure to master her author's perspective or through distaste for that perspective."[6] The three essays selected for analysis in this chapter illustrate the effects on her criticism of such biases, distorted perceptions, and failures to master other authors' perspectives.

While all three essays employ to varying degrees her own objective criteria in judging the work at hand, Woolf assumes various critical stances to suit her purpose, and she frequently employs rhetorical devices to strengthen her argument. Indeed, a rhetorical analysis of her essays reveals that she herself adopts the tools of classical rhetoric in attempts to persuade her audience to her views.

"Rhetoric" is used here in the Aristotelian sense of being the "faculty or power [dynamis] [sic] of discovering all the available means of persuasion in any given case."[7] The phrases "rhetorical analysis" and "rhetorical criticism" are used in Edward P. J. Corbett's sense of a concentration on the text and what it reveals about the author and the audience "to ascertain the particular posture or image that the author is establishing in this particular work in order to produce a particular effect on a particular audience."[8] Since it seems evident that in her essays Woolf relies most heavily upon the classical rhetorical element of style, as opposed to invention or arrangement, rhetorical analysis seems to be the best means of discovering the ways in which she uses style to persuade her audience. In Corbett's words, "what makes attention to style peculiarly rhetorical is some attempt to relate the stylistic features not only to the formal and material elements in the work itself but also to the ethos of the author and to the effects the author is seeking to produce in an audience."[9] The extent of this interrelationship in Woolf's writing among the work, the author, and the audience is precisely what this study is attempting to establish.

She also emphasizes one of the three possible rhetorical "proofs" in each of the essays. In "Sir Walter Scott," the first essay examined, Woolf is only superficially the objective critic. Her reverence for tradition leads her to make omissions, evasions, and generalizations in her attempt to place Scott among her other "great writers." Since she assumes the reader-critic role in this essay, she relies primarily on the ethical "proof," "the appeal exerted by the confidence and admiration that the speaker or writer inspires in his audience by his display of good sense, good will, and moral integrity."[10] In "George Eliot" she combines the ethical and pyschological "proofs." Although the "proof" is a rhetorically "convincing" appeal from one public critic to others, the essay suffers because Woolf cannot, for all her powers of persuasion, overcome the vitiating effect of her distorted perceptions about society and women writers on her original assumption. "Notes on D. H. Lawrence," the final essay, most rigidly illustrates her use of logos and objective criteria in judging a work. In this essay she is reader-critic and public critic, as well as writer-critic, but she fails to master Lawrence's perspective and consequently to choose the most effective means of persuading her audience. Her consciousness of her own distaste for the work interferes with both her rhetorical and her critical judgment.

In judging the effectiveness of her rhetorical technique, it is important to keep in mind Woolf's view of the function of criticism. She is attempting to help define, to mold, and to create art; she is vitally concerned with the survival of literature and the identification

of the literary tradition. In straying from her own objective criteria and in using the various rhetorical "proofs" and stylistic devices to help persuade her audience, Woolf, operating primarily as her favorite reader-critic, is therefore faithful to her own convictions.

"Either Scott the novelist is swallowed whole and becomes part of the body and brain, or he is rejected entirely,"[11] Woolf writes, and she accepts him wholeheartedly. He (with Dickens) is "the last of the playwright novelists, who, when the pressure of emotion is strong enough behind them, can leap the bounds of prose and make real thoughts and real emotions issue in real words from living lips,"[12] and for this reason Woolf considers him a great author. That he is a "genius with limitations"[13] does not disturb her, for Woolf revels in the charm, beauty, enticing (and irregular) story line, and purely escapist nature of his work. An examination of "The Antiquary," the second part of the Scott essay, reveals that, indeed, Woolf can forgive Scott almost all his faults because he gratifies her senses and her imagination. She responds to him, as she does to virtually all but contemporary writers, as a reader-critic, and she therefore can relax standards and make allowances which she does not make for modern fiction. In fact, her concern in this essay is to answer unnamed critics who imply that only uncritical readers find satisfaction in Scott and that there is "something vicious about such a pleasure."[14] To condemn Scott is to misunderstand both his art and his motives, she argues. (She, of course, takes little notice of the fact that her own argument may misrepresent his art a bit in the other direction.)

Woolf's method is to minimize faults while maximizing potential strengths in his writing, as she demonstrates in rebutting the critics' first charge that Scott's style is "execrable."[15] She admits his use of Latinized words, worn-out metaphors, and languorous sentences, all commonly acknowledged weaknesses in his style. "But . . .," she adds, and the "but ..." always outweighs the main point of her arguments. This first "but . . ." is aimed directly at the critics, who, she suggests, purposely remove the Latin words and metaphors from their contexts to make them seem more ridiculous than they actually are. Moreover, she adds, "a good case might be made against the snobbery which insists upon preserving class distinctions even among words."[16] Here she characteristically shifts her readers' attention from the weakness in Scott's work to an implied weakness in the critics who point out the original failing. In subtly ridiculing those who have maligned Scott, Woolf is urging her readers not to err similarly, lest they also become the object of her satiric pen. It is important to note that Woolf, who has argued that a classless society, with its attendant lack of discrimination in language, might greatly harm literature, is attacking those who wish to preserve distinctions among literary, journalistic, conversational, and other types of words. This method of argument is typical of Woolf; she frequently alters her stance to suit her purpose. In this instance her purpose is to defend a favorite author, and standards therefore take second place. She is not, however, reacting as an impressionist critic. Rather, she examines the work itself and addresses criticism of the work itself

while also making great and effective use of rhetorical devices in her argument. Her ability with language is such that she satisfies her readers with a stylistically achieved ethical "proof," thus winning reconsideration of an author according to standards different from those her readers normally would accept.

In this case, having discredited the critics, Woolf then asserts that when these seemingly unimaginative or pretentious word choices are "read currently in their places, it is difficult either to notice or to condemn them. As Scott uses them they fulfil their purpose and merge perfectly in their surroundings."[17] Thus she wins the argument both ways: either Scott is so good at his art that these words are appropriate in context, or he is so good at his craft that the words do not call attention to themselves.

Rhetorical strategy, however, cannot conceal the fact that her fondness for the past interferes with sound judgment. She writes that "these slips and slovenlinesses [of language] serve as relaxations; they give the reader breathing space and air the book."[18] Labels such as "slips and slovenlinesses" are either accurate or not, and if they are accurate, Woolf's attempt to justify Scott's diction cannot camouflage the implications of her own description. Moreover, Woolf's readers, conscious of her usual attention to style, might feel that she is straining credibility in advancing this argument. If overwrought language can provide "breathing space" in Scott's work, why not in another writer's, one wonders; and further, is the pace so breathless throughout his work that such "breathing space" is required?

Woolf returns to a sounder base when she refers once again to her own criterion of whether a book "works" as a whole, regardless of its style. She compares Scott's writing to Robert Louis Stevenson's much more controlled style and remarks that "we get from Scott an incomparably larger impression of the whole. The storm in The Antiquary, made up as it is of stage hangings and cardboard screens, of 'denizens of the crags' and 'clouds like disasters round a sinking empire', nevertheless roars and splashes and almost devours the group huddled on the crag; while the storm in Kidnapped, for all its exact detail and its neat dapper adjectives, is incapable of wetting the sole of a lady's slipper."[19] In her reader-critic role she is satisfied that the book is "real" in the sensations it captures. It is worth observing, however, that Woolf compares Scott to a popular but minor author rather than to another "great writer"; given a weak partner in comparison, Scott inevitably appears greater, although to what degree remains uncertain. (Had she chosen to compare Scott's and Emily Brontë's storms, for example, she would have been comparing Scott's "greatness" to that of a "poetic" novelist whom she admired immensely.)

Having nearly exhausted the possibilities for defending a commonly acknowledged weakness in Scott's writing, Woolf minimizes it as much as possible with one final shift in approach. She introduces a second, "much more serious charge against Scott,"[20] thereby implying that the first is not worth all the attention critics have given it.

The "more serious charge" is that Scott uses the "genteel pen," a style inappropriate to describe "the intricacies and passions of the

human heart."[21] Woolf's handling of this problem also is characteristically rhetorical. She admits the fault--there obviously is none of the "emotion" of human character that she seeks in the Greek classics or modern fiction--but she suggests that the "failure" is intentional. That is, Scott is being true to his own vision of a romantic and amusing reality, and "we are not meant to care a straw"[22] what happens to his characters. She suggests that by freeing himself so obviously from conventional treatments of artistic and moral values, Scott is able to create a convincing world of his own which, like the worlds of all classics, brings his readers back again and again. We know what Scott's characters are by watching their faces and hearing their voices, she argues. At each reading "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."[23]

Since Woolf has placed Scott's characters on a level with Shakespeare's and Austen's, however, she must justify this view with more than a personal sense that the characters are true, real, and convincing. Again, therefore, she admits the characters' "serious disability" of never thinking, of being "alive" only when they speak,[24] but she qualifies her concession with an implicit admiration. Rather than attempting what he may not be able to carry out, Scott uses his ability to let us "know" his characters through speech and action to his own best advantage, so that "he is perhaps the last novelist to practise the great, the Shakespearean art, of making people reveal

themselves in speech."[25] Ignoring Shakespeare's other quality of giving his characters thoughtful speech and dismissing comparisons to Tolstoy, Stendhal, and Proust as irrelevant, Woolf agrees that Scott does not explore the human heart as deeply as these authors do, but neither does he feel the need to explain all his discoveries. He has the artist's power to "create a scene and leave us to analyze it for ourselves."[26] And more important, perhaps, by having characters reveal themselves in speech, "the different emotions . . . all rise spontaneously, as if Scott had merely to record, and we have merely to observe," so that "what we lose in intricacy we gain perhaps in spontaneity."[27]

Woolf's technique at this point again involves disparaging Scott's critics and shifting the focus of critical attention from a weakness to a strength. In this case, she anticipates other critics' objections to the idea that characters reveal themselves in speech. "But how far then can we know people, the hostile critic may ask, if we only know that they say this and do that, if they never talk about themselves, and if their creator lets them go their ways, provided they forward his plot, in complete independence of his supervision or interference?"[28] she asks for the critics. Anyone who would raise this question, however, would be "hostile" toward Scott and therefore be prejudiced in his questions and judgments. The obvious implication is that a critic ought to be well disposed, or at least noncommittal, toward an author until he discovers how well the writer's techniques work in context. Although she seems to respond to these hypothetical questions out of

good will, however, Woolf actually is preparing to shift from the public critic's stance to the reader-critic's concern for authorial recognition of the reader's desire to create. Since satisfying this desire is the author's most important consideration in trying to create a bond with the reader, Scott's inadequacy with character from one angle becomes an attribute from another. Woolf continues this ingenious demonstration of his talents by asserting that although "he creates carelessly, as if the parts came together without his willing it,"[29] the parts nevertheless do come together in the reader's mind. Even the carelessness, like the "slips and slovenlinesses" of his language, is explicable and even defensible if the critic alters his viewpoint appropriately. If Scott's scenes frequently fall apart, as she admits they do, they do not harm his work, first because he has not tried to make them stay together, and second, because, as she has pointed out, he is not attempting to show deep interrelationships among human hearts. Therefore, the breaks in his scenes, rather than weakening the whole, actually help capture the "emotion" of fate, Scott's true concern.[30] Fate, of course, can interrupt with impunity.

In employing such techniques Woolf obviously is not an impartial critic. The middle portion of the essay, for example, indicates three likely explanations for her admiration of Scott, quite aside from these she discusses. First, her remark that Scott "showed up the languor of the fine gentlemen who bored him by the immense vivacity of the common people whom he loved"[31] could reflect as easily Woolf's own boredom with "fine gentlemen" and her own romanticized affinity with

the common people. Second, Scott "shoot[s] every thought as it flies, and bring[s] it tumbling to the ground in metaphor."[32] Woolf greatly admires metaphor, and although some of Scott's may be weak, they have the added attraction of being colored by dialect. Third, she sees no message whatsoever in Scott's writing; if it is merely entertainment at times, it nevertheless is untainted literature that is tied to neither its times nor its author; indeed, one may read Scott's works and "never know for certain what Scott himself was or what Scott himself thought."[33]

Woolf is not a disciplined critic here, either, since she alters her criteria and viewpoint to suit her purpose. But she does present a persuasive argument through illustration of the real value of a critic's operating as a reader. The appeal is to common sense--for looking for the "good" in a work and for enjoying a book as something to be read and experienced rather than studied. It is no accident that throughout the essay Woolf adopts the editorial "we" to include her readers, thus almost compelling them to become part of a group which, she hopes, will accept her carefully controlled and presented viewpoint without being quite conscious of her manipulations to get them to do so. "Let us run through The Antiquary again and make a note or two as we go,"[34] she invites her readers, although "us" is Woolf and the notes are selected carefully to appeal most to the reader-critic. Unfortunately, Woolf too frequently becomes the reader-critic when she wishes to justify obvious weaknesses in works, yet her skill is such that she usually succeeds in making her readers acknowledge her point,

even if they wonder how, against their better judgment, they can be persuaded that Scott is comparable to Shakespeare. Although in a true comparison Scott may fall well short of the Elizabethan master, Woolf manages to raise the possibility that Scott may as easily move up in the readers' estimations. Raising such possibilities is healthy for criticism and literature.

The findings of this brief analysis of "The Antiquary" suggest that Woolf does not adhere strictly to her own criteria in judging a work, or at least one by an early nineteenth-century author. An examination of "George Eliot," about a more recent author still generations removed from Woolf, reinforces this impression. It also underscores the extent to which Woolf will use rhetorical devices to persuade her readers to adopt a particular critical stance if the issue is important enough to her.

Woolf's essay on Scott at least retains the appearance of objective criticism in considering emotion, form, characterization, language, style, and completeness of the work as a whole. She shifts critical positions and uses rhetorical devices to persuade more readers to regard Scott as she does. Because Scott already has many admirers, however, and because critics can do little harm to his popularity, Woolf does not write with particular urgency in "The Antiquary." She is merely a reader trying to change other readers' opinion without insisting upon the change. Her fondness for the past and Scott's ability to recreate it is evident, but the distortion of critical

perspective may be excused as having little final effect on her critical integrity.

The "George Eliot" essay, by contrast, is a serious attempt to force a general critical reevaluation of Eliot's work. As such, it must be examined more carefully for what it indicates of Woolf's own critical technique. In the essay Woolf at first abandons the objective criteria for a more complex discussion of the value of Eliot's work; in fact, the essay becomes a masterful display of Woolf's rhetorical technique. Her adoption of this strategy at the expense of formal criticism illustrates the extent to which Woolf's concern for the nature of the artist and the plight of women writers impairs her ability to function as a critic under certain circumstances. As discussed in Chapter II, Woolf feels that women writers have worked and struggled under conditions different from those of male writers and that their work therefore must be judged by different criteria. With few exceptions, such as Jane Austen, who possesses extraordinary self-control, and Emily Brontë, whose poetic nature transcends life's usual difficulties, women writers have found themselves in situations much like George Eliot's. Woolf's purpose therefore goes beyond a vindication of Eliot to a plea for understanding (rather than judging) women writers' books. The objective answer to such a plea, of course (as she herself points out in "theoretical" essays such as "How Should One Read a Book?"), would be that all works must be judged on their merits alone and that standards for all works must be the same. Acceding to this probable response, Woolf therefore chooses the most effective alternative

approach for her purposes; since she cannot rely on exposition to demonstrate to her readers the important difference between men and women writers, she uses a rhetorical "proof" to attempt to persuade them to her point of view. Only then can she discuss the intrinsic merits and deficiencies of Eliot's work. Presumably this is the reason for Leavis's remark that "George Eliot" is a "characteristic and not very satisfactory essay" in which Woolf "makes no serious attempt at the work of general revision . . . and the appreciation of George Eliot's oeuvre has not been put on a critical basis and reduced to consistency."[35] An examination of the essay for its carefully planned technique and the success of that technique seem to indicate otherwise, however, at least in Woolf's terms; if the function of the critic is to help define and advance art, it is essential to bring great writing to others' attention by the most effective means.

In the essay Woolf examines the prevailing opinion of Eliot as "a deluded woman who held phantom sway over subjects more deluded than herself."[36] The ridicule and general lack of respect for Eliot, argues Woolf, reveal not only the (unnamed) critics' lack of understanding and tolerance, but also, and more important, their lack of sympathy for a woman who was in her own way "triumphant," who "dared and achieved" in an unfriendly world.[37] As Leavis points out, although Woolf calls Eliot's Middlemarch "one of the few English novels written for grownup people,"[38] she does not base her appeal on Eliot's genius, but on her person.[39] Yet that is the most appropriate method for answering criticism based on her person, and it also allows Woolf to use style to

achieve her aims of persuading her audience to reject the still prevalent late Victorian view of Eliot and of convincing them that Eliot is a special case for criticism because she, as a woman writer, has suffered personally in ways other writers have not.

To do so Woolf employs the rhetorical devices, already pointed out in the discussion of "The Antiquary," of admitting Eliot's weaknesses and shifting attention to her strengths. For example, she admits at the outset that "one cannot escape the conviction that the long, heavy face with its expression of serious and sullen and almost equine power has stamped itself depressingly upon the minds of people who remember George Eliot, so that it looks out upon them from her pages."[40] She further admits that "in fiction, where so much of personality is revealed, the absence of charm is a great lack,"[41] and that "George Eliot was not charming."[42] The implied conclusion is that Eliot thus lacks an element important to the success of her fiction. But Woolf is not disturbed by such a conclusion, which obviously would weaken her own argument; she merely diverts her readers' attention to a more fundamental quality of Eliot, stirring them with an appeal to consider Eliot's struggles and endurance, thereby implying that charm, after all, is an overrated virtue. And, she adds, since Eliot has suffered more and struggled more than other writers, particularly male writers, her final triumph is all the greater.

It is with a writer's knowledge of audience and mastery of language, however, that Woolf virtually compels her readers to accept her argument. Indeed, from the opening lines of the essay she almost

forces her audience to identify with her point of view. "To read George Eliot attentively is to become aware how little one knows about her. It is also to become aware of the credulity, not very creditable to one's insight, with which, half consciously and partly maliciously, one had accepted the late Victorian version of a deluded woman who held phantom sway over subjects even more deluded than herself,"[43] the essay begins. Woolf chooses to write in the third person, preferring the general "one" to the particular "I," to help involve the reader as part of an all-inclusive group to whom she is speaking. The inclusion is much more formal, and the expression is much more prevalent in this essay than the "let us" and "we know" constructions are in "The Antiquary"; its tone is both serious and insistent. Woolf also consciously appeals to her readers' perhaps subconscious desire to be considered careful and worthy readers; either a reader must recognize, with her, that he really knows little about Eliot, or he must acknowledge that he has not read "attentively." In the second sentence the potential insult to the reader's understanding is even sharper, for even if he is now aware of having misread Eliot earlier, he must accept that he had been credulous, "half consciously and partly maliciously," in his earlier estimate of her. This error cannot be excused by any subconscious motives or presuppositions; the reader alone is responsible for the misreading. The fact that Woolf seems to include herself in the general "one" does not soften the impact of what she says. She knows that her audience is an educated and literary one, but she also knows that its members are as human as anyone else. So she skillfully

plays upon the desire of sophisticated people to hold the right opinions at the right time and attempts to startle her readers, who are used to having their opinions valued, with her assertion. She thus puts their integrity at stake; if angered by her subtle insult, they still must hear her to the end to discover whether her charges are valid.

To strengthen her assertion, Woolf opens with two infinitive phrases in a balanced structure. "To read . . . is to become aware . . .," she states, with the implication that one action leads inevitably to the other. In addition, the two infinitive structures emphasize the two points Woolf wants her audience to consider most: reading and awareness. She thus prepares her readers for recognizing her essential point in this essay: reading involves awareness not only of the work itself, but also of the circumstances surrounding it. Reading, like writing, is a creative as well as a studious process. Repetition of the infinitive phrase, "to become aware," in the second sentence re-emphasizes the point.

Having asserted that the common view of Eliot is erroneous and having shown how that view came about, Woolf then proves the point. "In all these records," she writes of commentaries on Eliot, "one feels that the recorder, even when he was in the actual presence, kept his distance and kept his head, and never read the novels in later years with the light of a vivid, or puzzling, or beautiful personality dazzling in his eyes."[44] With this observation Woolf deftly disposes of other, possibly much more valid, criticisms of Eliot by focusing her readers' attention on the lack of tolerance evinced by Eliot's earlier

readers. Woolf writes "one feels" rather than simply stating, "The recorder . . . kept his distance"; she forces her readers to identify with her feelings. Moreover, although the words are her own, she implies that a "vivid, or puzzling, or beautiful personality," rather than merit, was what Eliot's critics sought in her work. The verbal "dazzling" becomes the ultimate denigration of other critics' opinions; it suggests a concern for the superficial and the ornamental in a literary work. The diction and structure of the remark, "The recorder . . . kept his distance and kept his head" underscore the significance of this point. The repetition of the direct, single-syllable word with the hard "k" sound suggests derogatory connotations of the critics' being too short and too harsh in their judgments. The parallel structure in the phrase suggests that the critics viewed Eliot's work with a cool and measured objectivity inappropriate to her achievements. The implication is that, in this case, critical objectivity weakens the usefulness of criticism in helping others understand a literary work.

Woolf's task of altering her audience's attitude toward Eliot is now easier than it might have been, since she already has put her readers on the defensive and has minimized the importance of her opponents' argument. Given the objective of trying to destroy the image of Eliot as a cold and impersonal author, Woolf introduces, after some preparation with material on Eliot's melancholy early life, images of the warmth, openness and obvious appeal of the sun. Eliot, she says, was "basking in the light and sunshine of Scenes of Clerical Life

[first publication], feeling the large mature mind spreading itself with a luxurious sense of freedom in the world of her 'remotest past' . . . . All experience filtered down through layer after layer of perception and reflection, enriching and nourishing."[45] Her sympathies "play most happily in dwelling upon the homespun of ordinary joys and sorrows."[46] She "pours" a "flood of memory and humour . . . spontaneously"[47] into her writing. Her writing process is so "natural" that we feel a "delicious warmth and release of spirit."[48] Woolf concludes the image quite specifically: "As one comes back to the books after years of absence they pour out, even against our expectation, the same store of energy and heat, so that we want more than anything to idle in the warmth as in the sun beating down from the red orchard wall."[49]

Woolf thus deftly has transferred the image from the person to the work, so that if one acknowledges the presence of this kind of warmth in the first, one must acknowledge it in the second, and vice versa. She speaks of Eliot's "unthinking abandonment"[50] to her work, so that "she gathers in her large grasp a great bunch of the main elements of human nature and groups them loosely together with a tolerant and wholesome understanding which, as one finds upon re-reading, has not only kept her figures fresh and free, but has given them an unexpected hold upon our laughter and tears."[51] Picking up the nature image in the last paragraphs of the essay, she equates one of Eliot's weaknesses--emotional scenes--with clouds and showers: "the more one examines the great emotional scenes the more nervously one 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 disillustionment and verbosity."[52] But then she reasserts the presence of greatness that can overpower such weaknesses. "The width of the prospect," she writes of Eliot's work, "the large strong outlines of the principal features, the ruddy light of the early books, the searching power and reflective richness of the later tempt us to linger and expatiate beyond our limits."[53] In the end, Woolf argues, Eliot is as "triumphant"[54] over her world as the sun is over ours.

This long metaphor no doubt is meant to generate sympathy as well as warmth, however, for sympathy is vital to Woolf's readers' acceptance of the assertion that Eliot has been denied the special consideration due her. Here Woolf relies on the ethical appeal that only another woman author, such as Woolf, can understand what anguish Eliot suffered in her career. Throughout the essay she emphasizes that Eliot, as a woman writer, had to combat prejudice. Eliot's critics, she notes, now call Eliot an "errant woman"[55] when once she was the "pride and paragon of her sex."[56] She was viewed as a "grave lady"[57] when ladies were not meant to be grave. "Her critics," Woolf writes rather pointedly, "who have been, of course, mostly of the opposite sex, have resented, half consciously, perhaps, her deficiency in a quality [charm] which is held to be supremely desirable in women."[58] And her personal circumstances were only aggravated by her being a woman, Woolf asserts. A man would not have been so tied by duty to a sick parent, nor would he have been condemned so strongly for separating himself from the

parental religion. Nor would a man have been judged publicly, as she was, for entering a liaison of great happiness. Throughout the essay Woolf brings out biographical details which specifically parallel similar experiences in her own life, knowing that her readers will recognize them as such and therefore will find her point all the more valid. She insists particularly that the critics, through their condemnation of Eliot's attachment to George Henry Lewes, forced Eliot into the security of the past and provincialism for which she generally has been criticized. The critics failed to recognize Eliot's move toward personal liberation, which is essential to a novelist. In a comment reminiscent of her own concern at being a "famous woman writer" or "a member of Bloomsbury," Woolf writes that Eliot, "by becoming thus marked, first by circumstances and later, inevitably, by her fame . . . lost the power to move on equal terms unnoted among her kind; and the loss for a novelist was serious."[59]

Having gained her audience's sympathy for Eliot, Woolf then, in what is perhaps the most ingenious of her rhetorical achievements, persuades her readers that the distance, the lack of intimacy, Eliot's critics cite actually is the great virtue that enabled Eliot to triumph in the end. She is able to see the irony of a real world without its false ornaments. Since Eliot understands the world of her characters, she makes us "share their lives, not in a spirit of condescension, but in a spirit of sympathy."[60] Even Eliot's heroines, admittedly weak, can be excused because they reflect Eliot herself; their difficulties are hers, and her lack of control of them reflects her lack of control

over her own life when forced beyond the bounds she knows. Thus her heroines, like her, triumph in their own ways; they find an ultimate freedom as unrecognized by their worlds as Eliot's is by hers. Eliot and her characters have sought a religion to soothe their anguish. They have found none because men allow none, but those who struggle in spite of the knowledge that society allows them no satisfactory solution to their difficulties must be admired for trying. Forced into alienation themselves, they triumph over their worlds in not subordinating their sense of worth to the conditions of a world which rejects them.

Woolf concludes the essay with a passionate statement far removed from the rational balance and precision of her opening sentences. "As we recollect all that she dared and achieved," she writes, "how with every obstacle against her--sex and health and convention--she sought more knowledge and more freedom till the body, weighted with its double burden, sank worn out, we must lay upon her grave whatever we have it in our power to bestow of laurel and rose."[61] The formal "one" is now the more sympathetic "we"; Woolf's readers share her sympathy for a misunderstood author. The word must suggests that it is now impossible for any reader not to admire Eliot to some degree, but Woolf wisely leaves it to readers to decide upon the precise degree of praise. She therefore does not force her readers to relinquish all their earlier opinions, only to understand them.

Rhetorically, Woolf has made her point by using a psychological "proof." Critically, however, she has fallen into ambiguity. The

rhetorical approach does allow for discussion of the works themselves, and Woolf attempts to examine them according to her objective criteria. But the remarks are vague and general: "It is impossible to estimate the merit of [the characters] because they have put on flesh and blood and we move among them . . . with that unquestioning acceptance of all that they say and do, which we accord to the great originals only";[62] or Eliot's manner "leaves us with little consciousness that there is anything to criticize";[63] or Eliot's "unthinking abandonment in . . . submitting to the humours of Midland farmers and their wives . . . is right in the circumstances. We scarcely wish to analyse what we feel to be so large and deeply human."[64] Such comments add little to one's understanding of Eliot's achievements, and it is hardly adequate, if Woolf is trying to reestablish a reputation, merely to assert that an author's books are unquestionably great. Yet the essay cannot be dismissed as an exercise in impressionism because Woolf does focus on elements of the work itself, particularly characters and setting. It is her discussion of these aspects, however, which creates her critical dilemma, for she insists on tracing the characters and atmosphere of the books to Eliot's own life.

Thus the tension in Eliot's works derives from her own uncertainty rather than from a balance of form and emotion. The story of her heroines, as has been noted, is "the incomplete version of the story of George Eliot herself."[65] Her books are therefore marked by a self-consciousness which cannot be erased. As Woolf explains, "She disguised [her characters] in every possible way. She granted them beauty and

wealth into the bargain; she invented, more improbably, a taste for brandy. But the disconcerting and stimulating fact remained that she was compelled by the very power of her genius to step forth in person upon the quiet bucolic scene."[66]

Apparently Eliot has stepped beyond the limits of her vision; she is writing uneasily about a world she does not know. And to weaken her writing further, she writes personally, so that she is reflected in her work, while the great writer remains inscrutable and his work impersonal. Woolf, however, refuses to acknowledge these faults as the serious weaknesses she has insisted elsewhere they are. Indeed, she claims that these weaknesses are essential to Eliot's art, explaining, "Dismiss the heroines without sympathy, confine George Eliot to the agricultural world of the 'remotest past', and you not only diminish her greatness but lose her true flavour."[67] One must conclude that although Woolf's rhetorical "proof" that Eliot should be considered as a special case is successful, the same stand is not so viable in criticism. Not only are the criteria she wishes to ignore fundamental to the success of most works, but they also lose their value in all works if they can be amended or ignored depending on the critic's desire to make a book appear better or worse than it is.

Since Woolf's rhetorical approach does succeed in bringing about a reappraisal of the author, however, the most important consideration concerning Woolf's approach to Eliot is its effect on Woolf's performance as a critic. It seems that her strong identification with Eliot, which works so admirably in rhetoric, impairs Woolf's critical judgment. A

critic must be involved but disinterested in his subject; once he reveals his partiality, all his opinions are suspect. In this instance, particularly, Woolf's involvement with Eliot and the problems of women writers in general is so intense that the phrases become a little too sharp and satiric, the efforts to create sympathy a bit too maudlin. Although "we know little about the days of her youth,"[68] for example, Woolf nevertheless writes that it is a "singularly depressing record"[69] of Eliot's "raising herself with groans and struggles from the intolerable boredom of petty provincial society."[70] Everything is done to Eliot; she does nothing herself but submit. Unlike her own life as Eliot's experiences are, however, Woolf empathizes with Eliot to the point of seeking out and undeniably using superficial parallels in their circumstances to make her point about the universal suffering of women authors. And, as she tends to do among real women, Woolf finds common elements among diverse Eliot characters; they all become not merely products of Eliot's personality, but parts of it. As a result, Woolf commits the critical fallacy of assuming a writer's work is a record of his life. This assumption is complicated by Woolf's perhaps unconscious willingness to impart her own sentiments to Eliot. For example, Woolf's own feelings about an artist's need to be free of social, economic, and political encumbrances in order to let his mind work both consciously and unconsciously are so strong that she tends to equate untraditional activity with attempts at liberation. Thus Eliot becomes an heroic figure to Woolf, although it is questionable whether Eliot ever interpreted her chance for

personal happiness in terms of artistic freedom. Eliot emerges not as an elderly woman in black, as Woolf paraphrases the common view, but as a modern Eve; "for her . . . the burden and the complexity of womanhood were not enough; she must reach beyond the sanctuary and pluck for herself the strange bright fruits of art and knowledge."[71] Her remarkable quality is not so much that she achieved, but that she dared to try, Woolf implies.

Such an argument, of course, ignores much of the true merit of Eliot's work while trying to force Eliot into a reality which, ironically, would severely restrict her vision if it were totally true. One senses that it is not entirely true, that Woolf has imposed her hopes upon another and thereby severely damaged her critical integrity. And despite her critical intentions, she also has failed to convince her readers that such a qualified view of women writers' work will do much to assure their survival because it will weaken rather than strengthen respect for their achievements. Woolf's distortion of critical perspective is not evident in all her writing about women authors--she can admire Jane Austen with detachment--but when it does occur, it reveals more about Woolf than about her subject.

Interestingly, Woolf takes issue with critics who attempt to separate an author's life from his work. "A writer is a writer from his cradle; in his dealings with the world, in his affections, in his attitude to the thousand small things that happen between dawn and sunset, he shows the same point of view as that which he elaborates afterwards with a pen in his hand,"[72] she writes. Her own ventures

into connecting authors' works with their lives, however, as illustrated by "George Eliot" and "Notes on D. H. Lawrence" (in the discussion to follow), lead her far astray from her critical standards because of her tendency to become more involved with the lives than the works. Neither essay is a failure because of this characteristic, but each essay's effect on readers' perceptions is often quite different from what Woolf intends.

If Woolf makes special cases for older works and women writers, however, her article on D. H. Lawrence illustrates that she is quite likely to apply her formal criteria to contemporary writers. In "Notes on D. H. Lawrence" there is very little of the rhetorical or biographical approach so fundamental to the Eliot essay. Rather, Woolf becomes so dispassionate that one wonders whether she has removed herself too far from the circumstances of the work. Kronenberger's observation that she tends to consider contemporary works with the writer's eye[73] certainly seems valid. It is therefore all the more perplexing that she does not give contemporary writers the benefits of her writer's understanding of an art in transition.

Unlike most of her essays, in which one can detect little hesitancy in her judgment, "Notes on D. H. Lawrence" opens with a disclaimer concerning Woolf's own competence as a critic of Lawrence. Besides the difficulty of his being a contemporary whose work cannot be judged in perspective, his reputation has provided Woolf with little impetus to experience his work herself. The pieces she has read are short

stories, "hot," "overwrought," or "stuffed with careful observation in the Bennett manner,"[74] hardly impressions to make her well disposed toward further reading. She finally is "driven" to reading Sons and Lovers again by the excesses of the "prophet's worshippers" and the abhorrence these excesses create in "respectable people."[75] She wants to see "whether, as so often happens, the master is not altogether different from the travesty presented by his disciples."[76]

In this instance, then, Woolf obviously is not the critic as reader who reads first for the joy of it. Nor is she interested in rehabilitating a reputation. She has expressed distaste at Lawrence's earlier works and approaches Sons and Lovers only out of a sense of duty, with perhaps a bit of curiosity to see whether her own first impressions will be vindicated by closer examination of the book. Her admission that this approach "shuts off many views and distorts others"[77] hardly compensates for the fact that she is approaching contemporary fiction, which as a public critic she ought to be open minded about, with evident discomfort. Acknowledging that Lawrence's work has enough in it to excite contemporary readers, although not always to admiration, she regards the work analytically, adhering to her formal standards here in a way she could not or would not in judging the nineteenth century works. The final result, however, is still prejudiced because Woolf seems unable to discard preconceptions as she attempts to grasp what is at once so attractive and so repulsive in Lawrence's work.

She begins cautiously, observing that the work is "clean cut, decisive, masterly, hard as rock."[78] But here and throughout the

essay she qualifies her judgment, and the qualification is seldom to Lawrence's advantage, as it was to Scott's and Eliot's. In this case, she immediately adds, as if fearful of giving too much credit to this mastery of language, that although "the power of the writer to indicate with one stroke and then to refrain indicated a mind of great power and penetration," this hardness, this clarity, this admirable economy and sharpness of stroke are not rare qualities in an age of highly efficient novelists."[79] The term "highly efficient" is no compliment; one is reminded of her earlier comment about the "entirely sensible and unsentimental pages" of modern writers. This aspect of novels, then, has become so commonplace that it is hardly worth remarking.

Woolf's choice of words--"cleancut," "hard as rock"--about a novel "shaped, proportioned by a man who, whatever else he might be--prophet or villain, was undoubtedly the son of a miner who had been born and bred in Nottingham"[80] reflects a second prejudice toward contemporary writers. Although an author's personality should be written large in his works, she feels that modern writers are too self-conscious. Rather than qualifying or excusing this weakness, however, as she does for George Eliot, she maintains a rigid standard. Therefore Lawrence's ability to present a "coloured and stereoscopic representation of life . . . so like that surely it must be alive"[81] becomes a failing in two ways. First, there is the obvious parallel in language to her criticism in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" that representation of reality has substituted for reality in the "materialists'" books. The similar language here implies a similar criticism that Sons and

Lovers, like Lawrence's Lost Girl, is realistic "rather in the Bennett manner," which is precisely what contemporary fiction should not be. Second, the implication is that Lawrence's life has dictated the style and subject matter of his work, that art is following life rather than enhancing it. Thus what appears to be a tribute to Lawrence's ability to capture life so that the reader experiences rather than observes the miner's life, thus shaping his book with emotion, not form, becomes instead a rebuke at his supposed reliance on old or common techniques.

Art survives this approach, if barely, only because "one feels, from some indescribable brilliance, sombreness, significance, that the room is put in order."[82] It would seem that this admirable ability to achieve order without resorting to mere craft would be commended; indeed, it appears as if Woolf agrees. "Casual and natural as the arrangement seems . . . some eye of astonishing penetration and force, has swiftly arranged the whole scene, so that we feel that it is more exciting, more moving, in some ways fuller of life than one had thought real life could be, as if a painter had brought out the leaf or the tulip or the jar by pulling a green curtain behind it,"[83] she writes. The strength of the "eye of astonishing penetration and force" is forgotten, however, in her concern for the "green curtain," which she considers a stylistic trick which will deprive the work of any enduring quality. It becomes craft after all, an ease and versatility with words which produces a "reality" robbed of its ultimate vitality. Literature is not produced from the raw, Woolf insists, but it evidently seems to her that Lawrence assumes that it can be. Her choice of

"remarkable quality" to describe his ability never to be caught "arranging" is noncommittal. One can only infer from subsequent comments that to have "words, scenes flow as fast and direct as if he merely traced them with a free rapid hand on sheet after sheet"[84] is undesirable. If art is supposed to appear spontaneous, it seems inconsistent of Woolf to criticize Lawrence because "not a sentence seems thought about twice: not a word added for its effect on the architecture of the phrase."[85] But she suggests that although his style can excite and move the reader, it cannot hold him; the writing "quivers" and "shimmers," "by no means content to stand still and be looked at."[86] And although there are scenes, characters, and people "related to each other by a net of sensations,"[87] as she has suggested is necessary to "form" in a novel, she concludes that this form is not good enough in this case because it does not grow out of the emotion of the book. The relationships do not exist "for themselves,"[88] but to lead the reader on to further relationships. The implication is that the book will not endure because it lacks the classics' ability to draw readers back again and again.

But Lawrence's book fails most in the ultimate test of a work--its completeness. "Lawrence lacks the final power which makes things entire in themselves. . . . The world of Sons and Lovers is perpetually in process of cohesion and dissolution,"[89] Woolf writes. The intense moments are momentary; there is "unrest and a desire for something withheld."[90] Lawrence has not mastered his vision himself, and as a result the book's disparate parts never come together for the reader.

Therefore, dispite her original distaste for his earlier work and her oblique but serious dismissal of his mastery of language, Woolf's criticism of Lawrence's book seems based quite closely on the criteria she has outlined for other critics to follow. Yet her concluding paragraphs are disturbing for two reasons: they seem to suggest that the only allowance Woolf will make for a contemporary writer's weakness is his social and economic background, and they show that her preoccupation with the past interferes with her judgment of Lawrence's achievement.

Woolf has indicated that Lawrence's work betrays his origins as a miner's son. She considers Sons and Lovers to be autobiographical, essentially, with Paul Morel "like Lawrence himself."[91] Thus Morel's dissatisfaction is Lawrence's; in fact, Woolf combines the two personalities into one pronoun reference. "His natural honesty is too great to be satisfied with his mother's argument that the common people are better than the middle class because they possess more life,"[92] Woolf writes, referring to Morel, but in the following sentence she switches to Lawrence: "The middle class, Lawrence feels, possess ideas or something else that he wishes himself to have,"[93] thus tying both author and character to the same point about the middle class. She argues that one cause of Lawrence's evident unrest, hence the disunity in his work, is the fact that "he, like Paul . . . disliked his conditions."[94] One wonders, however, whether her own prejudices about class and her own tendency to feel that the lower class has a "monopoly on reality" affects her judgment. It seems that since the idea of an

artist's turning to the middle class for a better life--and more opportunities for his art--is dissatisfying to Woolf, she cannot accept the book on its own terms. Her lack of understanding of the working class undoubtedly has its adverse effect on her judgment; she can accept neither Lawrence's vision nor the world of the character he creates. Lawrence's vision of reality is too much that of the preacher and that of the present to satisfy Woolf either aesthetically or personally.

Lawrence, it seems, is part of his time. "He never looked back at the past, or at things as if they were curiosities of human psychology, nor was he interested in literature as literature. Everything has a use, a meaning, is not an end in itself,"[95] she writes. She finds this attitude particularly repugnant; it is, of course, the great weakness of contemporary art. Since she does not understand the working class, however, she cannot understand their attention to the present, which they are struggling to live with, and the future, which is their hope for a better life. This lack, combined with her own preoccupation with and extreme regard for the past, leads her to conclude that because Lawrence "echoes nobody, continues no tradition, is unaware of the past, of the present save as it affects the future,"[96] his art suffers. His writing becomes too hard, too direct. Woolf implies that his ideas become too obvious, shaped as they are into such forceful language, so that "the thought plumps directly into his mind; up spurt the sentences as round, as hard, as direct as water thrown out in all directions by the impact of a stone."[97] She

reiterates her original impression that "not a single word has been chosen for its beauty, or for its effect upon the architecture of the sentence."[98]

Woolf yearns for beauty in modern literature, it seems; she evidently feels that Lawrence's vision is too strong and should be tempered by a different language. Thus one feels that despite her criteria and her attempts at objectivity, Woolf cannot approve this sort of balance of emotion and form. She would prefer another emotion entirely, but if she cannot have that, she feels that the form should be altered consciously to provide more beauty. Beauty therefore emerges as her true criteria in modern fiction; although she has insisted that an artist should not aim for it, she seeks an aesthetic rather than a purely sensory appeal. Modern fiction has none of the Greeks' beauty of character, the Elizabethans' beauty of language, or even the Romantics' beautiful sentiments to satisfy Woolf's need to make the present more bearable. Thus, as Marjorie Brace observes, "that responsiveness to what was truly alive which, in her literary essays, emerged in such tender appreciations of personalities from a warmer past, left her shivering . . . before the cold looming problems of her own time."[99]

Although this chapter necessarily is limited in focus, concentrating specifically on the ways in which Woolf's most serious biases affect her critical practice, it does serve to illustrate that Woolf's rhetorical style is more than incidental to her criticism, that her theoretical

insistence on the importance of tradition is founded deep in her own critical practice, and that her personality controls her judgment as surely as it governs her quest for a new form for the novel. Although the discoveries are not all complimentary to Woolf, they do indicate that her criticism is well worth reading for its insight into her own fiction as well as for its reflections of one creative mind's reaction to its time.

FOOTNOTES

[1]David Daiches, Virginia Woolf, as quoted in Dorothy Brewster, Virginia Woolf (New York: New York University Press, 1962), p. 35.

[2]Mark Goldman, "Virginia Woolf and the Critic as Reader," from PMLA, 80 (June 1965), in Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Claire Sprague (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 163.

[3]Ibid., p. 165.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Louis Kronenberger, "Virginia Woolf as Critic," The Republic of Modern Letters: Essays on Various Writers (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 245. The essay originally was published in 1942.

[6]Dorothy Brester, Virginia Woolf (New York: New York University Press, 1962), p. 41.

[7]Edward P. J. Corbett, Introduction, Rhetorical Analyses of Literary Works (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. xii, quoting from Aristotle's Rhetoric, Bk. I, Chap. 2.

[8]Ibid., p. xix.

[9]Ibid., p. xxvi.

[10]Ibid., p. xiii.

[11]Virginia Woolf, "Sir Walter Scott," Collected Essays, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), I, 134. All subsequent references to essays in this volume will be listed by article title, volume number, and page number of that volume.

[12]Ibid., p. 138.

[13]Ibid., p. 134.

[14]Ibid., p. 139.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid., pp. 139-40.

[19]Ibid., p. 140.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid., p. 141.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Ibid., p. 143.

[26]Ibid., p. 142.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Ibid.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid., p. 143.

[31]Ibid., p. 141.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid., p. 139.

[35]F. R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (New York: George W. Stewart, Publisher, Inc., 1948), p. 35.

[36]"George Eliot," I, 196.

[37]Ibid., p. 204.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Leavis, p. 35.

[40]"George Eliot," I, 196-7.

[41]Ibid., p. 197.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Ibid., p. 196.

[44]Ibid., p. 197.

[45]Ibid., p. 199.

[46]Ibid.

[47]Ibid., p. 200.

[48]Ibid.

[49]Ibid.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid.

[52]Ibid., p. 203.

[53]Ibid.

[54]Ibid., p. 204.

[55]Ibid. p. 196.

[56]Ibid.

[57]Ibid.

[58]Ibid., p. 197.

[59]Ibid., p. 199.

[60]Ibid., p. 200.

[61]Ibid., p. 204.

[62]Ibid., p. 200.

[63]Ibid.

[64]Ibid.

[65]Ibid., p. 204.

[66]Ibid., p. 202.

[67]Ibid., p. 203.

[68]Ibid., p. 198.

[69]Ibid.

[70]Ibid.

[71]Ibid., p. 204.

[72]Virginia Woolf, "Sterne," Collected Essays, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), III, 86.

[73]Kronenberger, p. 245.

[74]"Notes on D. H. Lawrence," I, 352. She refers specifically to Trespassers, "The Prussian Officer," and The Lost Girl.

[75]Ibid.

[76]Ibid.

[77]Ibid., p. 353.

[78]Ibid.

[79]Ibid.

[80]Ibid.

[81]Ibid.

[82]Ibid.

[83]Ibid.

[84]Ibid.

[85]Ibid.

[86]Ibid.

[87]Ibid.

[88]Ibid., p. 354.

[89]Ibid.

[90]Ibid.

[91]Ibid.

[92]Ibid., p. 355.

[93]Ibid.

[94]Ibid.

[95]Ibid.

[96]Ibid.

[97]Ibid.

[98]Ibid.

[99]Marjorie Brace, "Worshipping Solid Objects," from "Worshipping Solid Objects: The Pagan World of Virginia Woolf," Accent, 4 (1944), in Critics on Virginia Woolf: Readings in Literary Criticism, 8, ed. Jacqueline E. M. Latham (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1970), p. 120.

CONCLUSION

Virginia Woolf immensely enjoyed reading. Her enthusiasm for every kind of literature, from collected letters to poetry, is evident in the variety of material she writes about in her own essays. And the enthusiasm is infectious. After joining her for a few hours in the library or following her in her excursion through the phases of fiction, a reader cannot help feeling he must explore for himself long-neglected classics throughout the range of literature. But, for all the delights reading offered, Woolf perhaps enjoyed writing even more. Painful as it was, it also provided her with relief, security, and self-knowledge--a shield against the outside world. "She liked writing with an intensity which few writers have attained. . . . She had a singleness of purpose which will not recur in this country for many years, and writers who have liked writing as she liked it have not indeed been common in any age,"[1] Forster writes in tribute to her after her death.

It seems fortunate for other lovers of reading and writing that Woolf can combine these two talents so successfully in many of her essays. What consistently emerges from her critical articles is a sense that she is above all concerned with revitalizing literature by encouraging the common reader. As this study has attempted to show, her concern may lead her into critical dilemmas, but her technique almost always is successful with readers. Indeed, some essays approach the new,

freer style of criticism she has sought, combining insight and discipline with a refreshing touch of imagination. An essay "should give pleasure,"[2] she writes. "Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end. It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last. In the interval we may pass through the most various experiences of amusement, surprise, interest, indignation; we may soar to the heights of fantasy with Lamb or plunge to the depths of wisdom with Bacon, but we must never be roused. The essay must lap us about and draw its curtain across the world."[3] Because she loves life and understands words, Woolf is able to weave that curtain and invite us to draw it in a way few of us can refuse.

One of Woolf's most delightful habits is her inclination to reduce abstract concepts to concrete images. "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" provides a familiar example of this extremely effective technique. In this essay, of course, Woolf is discussing the "materialists'" approach to characterization, and since it is a complex concept, she decides that "instead of analysing and abstracting, I will tell you a simple story which, however pointless, has the merit of being true, of a journey from Richmond to Waterloo, in the hope that I may show you what I mean by character in itself; that you may realize the different aspects it can wear; and the hideous perils that beset you directly you try to describe it in words."[4] She proceeds to recount the journey, calling her fellow passengers Mr. Smith and Mrs. Brown, and describing Mrs. Brown's probable circumstances because she is

"uncomfortable, like most people, at travelling with fellow passengers unless I have somehow or other accounted for them."[5] Then she adds Mr. Wells, Mr. Galsworthy, and Mr. Bennett to the railway carriage, and by describing the same setting three times over, illustrates quite clearly how Mrs. Brown becomes lost or forgotten in the materialists' view of reality. The structure of the essay is one large metaphor which produces an effect different from that of most metaphors. Because we, as Woolf's readers, also are passengers in the railway car, the analogy is not only her image but also an experience all of us share. Mrs. Brown is an exemplification of our own knowledge, based on experience, that real people change constantly depending on our view of them. Thus Woolf succeeds in "defining" characterization while taking her readers along on an adventure, where they "meet" characters as they might "meet" them in a novel.

Woolf uses similar techniques in "Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor-car." Again she imagines a setting and establishes a story line for us. In this essay, however, she is attempting to illustrate the writer's need to be aware with all his senses. Ordinarily the common reader might not understand the complex relationship of the outer and the inner, the conscious and the unconscious parts, of the author's mind. Woolf therefore draws each of the artist's selves as a character who joins her in her motor-car. As she and her selves travel along in the twilight, two selves hold "a colloquy about the wise course to adopt in the presence of beauty."[6] A third self joins them, and Woolf remarks how happy they are "to enjoy so simple an

occupation."[7] Suddenly a fourth, much less disciplined, self "jumps upon one unawares. Its remarks are often entirely disconnected with what has been happening, but must be attended to because of their very abruptness."[8] This self startles Woolf into a poetic consciousness of the blend of past and future in the scene before her. As darkness falls, she calls her selves together to discuss the day's discoveries, much as a group of tourists might share their day's experiences. Through perceptive observation they have discovered beauty in their surroundings, and through a moment of recognition Woolf has gained reassurance about her vision of reality. In this essay, then, she not only skillfully reduces abstracts to concretes, but also manages to combine a personal statement with a universal experience. In an entertaining essay of a few pages, marked by the poetic description she admires in others' writing, she has told her readers about the balance of emotion and form, of the need for facts and the need to be free of them, in order to create art.

Another sort of imagery is exemplified in "Professions for Women," in which Woolf is trying to convey to other women the problems women writers face. Again a second self is personified. Woolf calls her the phantom "Angel in the House."[9] This self, of course, is the traditional male concept of women which a woman author must combat and subdue every time she sits down to write lest her habitual submissiveness interfere with her personality's control over her work. This Angel in the House thus becomes the woman writer's demon, always ready to reassert itself whenever the writer is off her guard. By using such a

concrete image, again an abstraction personified, Woolf simply but successfully makes the same point as that she worked out much more laboriously in Three Guineas. Similarly, the lighthearted essay "Why?" manages to raise several of the most important questions about literature without weighting down the presentation with argument. Questions vie with one another for Woolf's--and our--attention like so many schoolchildren on an outing. Resolution of the problems is left for another time, but the essay literally and figuratively illustrates with an imaginative situation one of Woolf's most valuable attributes as a critic--an ability to raise the questions which must be asked in order for literature to survive.

Another enjoyable technique of Woolf, noted largely in her biographical essays, is her ability to reconstruct an author's life or circumstances in such a way that the person lives once more in our imaginations. In "The Pastons and Chaucer," for example, she begins what is ostensibly a review of The Paston Letters with an elaborate description of a setting in a desolate part of England and swiftly carries us back into the same territory hundreds of years earlier. We see John Paston and his son, also John, who, because he is always busy reading, leaves his father's grave without a tombstone. Reconstructing the tale this far from the letters, Woolf then employs her own talents to draw the Pastons more fully; the tone is familiar, even gossipy, as she imagines what must have gone on among the family as they tried to force son John to rectify such a terrible disgrace to a good name. Her real point, however, is not so much to make us see the Pastons as

to envision a contemporary, Chaucer, in the same environment. Son John is attracted to Chaucer because he makes John's world seem more inviting; "Lydgate's poems or Chaucer's, like a mirror in which figures move brightly, silently, and compactly, showed him the very skies, fields, and people whom he knew, but rounded and complete."[10] Conversely, however, the Paston letters show us "why Chaucer wrote not Lear or Romeo and Juliet, but the Canterbury Tales,"[11] for "when Chaucer lived he must have heard this very language, matter of fact, unmetaphorical, far better fitted for narrative than for analysis, capable of religious solemnity or of broad humour, but very stiff material to put on the lips of men and women accosting each other face to face."[12] The essay concludes with a nicely rounded reference to the opening scene, so that the article is a critical evaluation of Chaucer, within a less specific discussion of The Paston Letters, within a narrative framework. Thus Woolf reveals the reason for the extent of the classics' power over us (and subtly emphasizes that a classic's attraction is its enduring quality through the centuries--its effect on John is its effect on us), makes a multivolume collection of letters by obscure persons seem vital and historically interesting, and involves us in the setting, characters, and narrative of a story.

One aspect of Woolf's style perhaps is best appreciated in the essays in which she consciously abandons objective criticism. Then she also abandons any restraints on her personality and its effects on the language of an essay. Thus we admire the candidness of her reaction to Ernest Hemingway's Men Without Women, as she admits that it is formed

from prejudices, instincts, and fallacies.[13] But we enjoy even more the tongue-in-cheek praise of human nature that it accepts such a judgment. "Human credulity is indeed wonderful,"[14] she says, adding that our faith in kings and lord mayors is understandable because of their fancy trappings, but that our faith in the infallibility of critics is inexplicable, when critics, after all, are only human beings like us. This frankness and irony are even stronger in essays like "The Anatomy of Fiction," in which she observes that one of the rewards of being an "unmitigated snob" is that one is free to tear apart professors' "methods" of fiction with a clear conscience.[15]

Woolf's language is playful, humorous, ironic, mysterious, or poetic depending on her purpose. Even the most apparently casual essay is constructed carefully so that the reader will sense that it does indeed draw a curtain across the world. He does read her essays for pleasure. There is enough variety in them to suit all his moods and desires, as described in the more theoretical essays, such as "Reading" and "Phases of Fiction." Some of the more pleasurable essays omit the argument or explanation necessary for a strictly critical article, but, as she says of Scott's novels, "What we lose in intricacy we gain perhaps in spontaneity." And as we survey her essay style, with its frequent use of the traditional fictional elements of plot, setting, characterization, and atmosphere, we may conclude with Forster that in her search for the ideal of poetry in prose, "Virginia Woolf was frequently more of a novelist in her essays than she was in her novels."[16]

FOOTNOTES

[1]E. M. Forster, "Virginia Woolf," from Two Cheers for Democracy, in Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Claire Sprague (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 15. Originally the Rede Lecture, delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge, 1941.

[2]Virginia Woolf, "The Modern Essay," Collected Essays, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), II, 41. All subsequent references to essays in this volume will be listed by article title, volume number, and page number of that volume.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Collected Essays, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), I, 321. All subsequent references to essays in this volume will be listed by article title, volume number, and page number of that volume.

[5]Ibid., p. 322.

[6]"Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor-Car," II, 291.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid.

[9]"Professions for Women," II, 285.

[10]Virginia Woolf, "The Pastons and Chaucer," Collected Essays, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), III, 8. All subsequent references to essays in this volume will be listed by article title, volume number, and page number of that volume.

[11]Ibid., p. 17.

[12]Ibid.

[13]"An Essay in Criticism," II, 258.

[14]Ibid., p. 252.

[15]"The Anatomy of Fiction," II, 140.

[16]Forster, p. 19.

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