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# VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE CRITIC AS READER

BY MARK GOLDMAN

## I. Reader and Critic

VIRGINIA WOOLF'S title for the two volumes of essays collected in her lifetime, *The Common Reader*,<sup>1</sup> has been taken for a descriptive image of the critic as impressionist or amateur reader. In the preface to her first *Common Reader*, Mrs. Woolf explains her title and epigraph, taken from Dr. Johnson's "Life of Gray," in place of a statement of purpose. Her description is deliberately casual and informal, but she provides a structure and point of view for her essays by adding that the common reader does wish to create from his reading "some kind of whole—a portrait of a man, a sketch of an age, a theory of the art of writing."<sup>2</sup> Though Mrs. Woolf's deceptive remarks on the function of criticism may partly account for the persistent view of her as "reader" rather than "critic," other writers have contributed to the stereotype of Virginia Woolf as an occasional essayist and impressionist, as a literary portrait painter and miniaturist; or as an antiquarian rummaging through the attics of a rather charming but peripheral past. Unsympathetic readers have carried the belletristic image further and coupled it with the conception of her fiction as a total immersion in pure subjectivity or (in Sean O'Faolain's view)<sup>3</sup> as an exercise in the novel as narcissism. Yet, in fairness to reviewers of Virginia Woolf's essays, it should be noted that both favorable and unfavorable comments seem to be based on a similar conception of her as an appreciator or impressionist rather than a serious critic. Thus Horace Gregory, while presenting what he feels is a just and favorable estimate of Virginia Woolf as an essayist, tends to ignore her real value as a literary critic.

In her essays she was mistress of what often has been called an 'outmoded' form, and if one admits that the familiar essay was among the vehicles of her genius, one need not concern one's self too deeply over the question of her ability in literary criticism. She was not, I believe, vastly disturbed by problems of the intellect, and because she was not, one may find one of several reasons for lack of ease in the presence of Coleridge. She exerted an influence in literary matters because of her gifts and her intelligence, and because her artistry embraced the arts of persuasion and charm. It is only when her criticism appears to be incidental to the portrait of a literary figure that it becomes convincing to the eye, and when the portrait is lacking, and when the criticism takes the form of a set argument, the illumination fades, and we hear only the ringing of small bells.<sup>4</sup>

And Diana Trilling, in trying to account for Virginia Woolf's critical position, also raises the familiar charge of aestheticism and subjectivity in the essays. "And as we try to understand why someone so rich in appreciation was so little capable of a true appreciation of greatness, we are inevitably returned to the subjective bases of Mrs. Woolf's literary attitudes. . . . Art, Mrs. Woolf felt, must be freed from its dependence on material fact: it must not suffer to be tied to the common fate of ordinary human beings; it must create and celebrate a beauty which is larger than 'reality'."<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Trilling concludes her review by formulating Virginia Woolf as a literary essayist; and though she is somewhat less sympathetic than Horace Gregory, both begin essentially from the same premise and so reflect a similar point of view.

It has often been remarked of Virginia Woolf that she was a commentator on literature rather than a critic, more an antiquarian than a literary analyst. Now, as we read not only the old essays with which we are already familiar but also the majority of the new ones in 'The Moment,' the judgment is firmly supported. There is no question but that Mrs. Woolf was at her best, and that her best was superlative of its kind, when she was dealing with little-known figures of the past whom she could re-create out of scraps of letters and journal, out of a remembered morsel of talk here and a flash of scene there, rather than when she attempted to take the full meaning of the work of an established author.<sup>6</sup>

It is this basic premise, then—the commonly held view of Virginia Woolf as the familiar essayist or impressionist—that leads inevitably to Mark Schorer's conclusion about her importance

<sup>1</sup> *The Common Reader*, first series, 1925; *The Common Reader*, second series, 1932. These have been supplemented by a series of posthumous volumes edited by her husband, Leonard Woolf (*The Death of the Moth*, 1942; *The Moment and Other Essays*, 1947; *The Captain's Death Bed*, 1950). Though Mr. Woolf announced, in the Editor's note to *The Captain's Death Bed*, that this would be the last posthumous collection of essays, another volume appeared in 1958 (with an explanatory note by Mr. Woolf) entitled *Granite and Rainbow*.

<sup>2</sup> "The Common Reader," in *The Common Reader*, first series, 1925 (London, 1951), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Sean O'Faolain, "Narcissa and Lucifer," in *New World Writing*, x (November 1956), 161-175.

<sup>4</sup> Horace Gregory, "On Virginia Woolf and Her Appeal to the Common Reader," in *The Shield of Achilles* (New York, 1944), p. 192.

<sup>5</sup> Diana Trilling, "Virginia Woolf's Special Realm," *The New York Times Book Review*, 21 March 1948, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

as a literary critic. "What one reads is no less a portion of one's experience than any other activity; of present point is the fact that Virginia Woolf approached her reading, in her criticism, as she approached the whole of experience in her novels: with aggressive curiosity, a refined sensibility, but an exaggerated sense of the relevance of impression. . . . What is lacking, finally, is the sense of value."<sup>7</sup>

It is obvious from the tenor of these critical judgments that the specter of impressionism, the subjective taint of the Pater-Wilde inheritance, still haunts the modern critic's imagination. It is also this fear of impressionism or subjectivity that lies behind the modern critical ideal of scientific objectivity. Yet by this time, of course, both the fear of the disease and the fantasy of the cure should have been dispelled. As a matter of fact, if we look again at that landmark of modern criticism, T. S. Eliot's *The Sacred Wood* (1920), we can now see that Eliot is not merely reacting against the "aesthetic" or impressionistic criticism of the recent past, but is attempting to reconcile impressionism or "appreciation" and a so-called "intellectual" criticism. Almost forty years later, disturbed by the tremendous shift in the direction of objective or scientific criticism, Eliot renewed his plea for a balance or middle way between the extremes of "appreciation" and "understanding."<sup>8</sup>

Virginia Woolf's criticism, it will be seen, reveals a similar attempt to reach a *via media*, a creative balance between reason and emotion, sense and sensibility, the individual critic and the impersonal method. While denying the dichotomy between a so-called objective and subjective literary criticism, Mrs. Woolf's kind of impressionism achieves a critical objectivity, even a structure. As Mrs. Woolf says, at the beginning of her long essay on the novel, "Phases of Fiction": "Yet, if nobody save the professional historian and critic reads to understand a period or to revise a reputation, nobody reads simply by chance or without a definite scale of values. There is, to speak metaphorically, some design that has been traced upon our minds which reading brings to light."<sup>9</sup> Even Allen Tate, one of the leaders of the Southern group of analysts or "New Critics," has emphasized, in the preface to a new collection of his essays, the need to preserve the critic's point of view, which alone can lead to the highest and most genuine kind of literary criticism.

A critical skeptic cannot entirely imagine the use of a criticism in which the critic takes the deistic part of absentee expositor. To take this role is to pretend that a method can accomplish what the responsible intelligence is alone able to do. The act of criticism is

analogous to the peripety of tragedy; it is a crisis of recognition always, and at times also of reversal, in which the whole person is involved. The literary critic is committed, like everybody else, to a particular stance, at a moment of time; he is governed by a point of view that method will not quite succeed in dispensing with. After the natural sciences began to influence literary criticism, scholars held that a point of view without a method led inevitably to impressionism. This need not follow; it is obvious why I prefer to think that it need not. . . . I should like to think that criticism has been written, and may be again, from a mere point of view, such as I suppose myself to be possessed by.<sup>10</sup>

My purpose is to examine Mrs. Woolf's essays on the art of reading rather than her criticism of various writers or specific works of art. This approach is necessary, in view of what has been said earlier, in order to reach some understanding of her aesthetic or critical position; to arrive at a more balanced or complex view of the common reader as literary critic. Though the essays on reading stress the need for sensibility over system, we can see Mrs. Woolf moving quickly from individual perceptions to a critical position, from the stance of a reader to the status of a critic.

As early as 1916, in an essay entitled "Hours in a Library," Mrs. Woolf celebrated the delights of

<sup>7</sup> Mark Schorer, "Virginia Woolf," *The Yale Review*, xxxii (December 1942), 379.

<sup>8</sup> "The Frontiers of Criticism," in *On Poetry and Poets* (London, 1957).

<sup>9</sup> "Phases of Fiction," in *Granite and Rainbow*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London, 1958), p. 93. This series appeared originally in *The Bookman*, April, May, and June, 1929. Though many of Mrs. Woolf's essays are fugitive pieces, or were originally reviews, some of the most important criticism derives from deliberately conceived critical essays (such as "Phases of Fiction," which was originally planned as a book on the novel). One can discover an underlying form or design by tracing dominant themes through the essays, and it is possible to arrange Mrs. Woolf's essays in chronological or historical order so that her experimental interests are seen against a traditional framework, revealing the artist-critic conscious of the need to create from the reality of the present while conservative of the values of the past. Her conception of reality (see n. 15) leads to the concern for a literary form adequate to the modern sensibility, and thus to her many essays on the novel and the art of fiction. Even these essays may be seen in historical sequence, as a kind of survey of the novel. From this larger perspective, one finds that Mrs. Woolf's approach to modern fiction and to her own work is more traditional than has generally been recognized. Her interest in a possible balancing of prose and poetry in fiction is incorporated into a more conservative theory, or a new synthesis for the modern novel. Her own fiction can then be seen as a more comprehensive progress toward this synthesis rather than as an increasingly subjective evolution that reached its climax with *The Waves* and declined steadily thereafter in vain attempts to repeat her earlier performances.

<sup>10</sup> Allen Tate, "Preface" to *The Man of Letters in the Modern World: Selected Essays; 1928-1955* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), p. 7.

reading and proclaimed the freedom of the private reader against the authority of the specialist or man of learning.

Let us begin by clearing up the old confusion between the man who loves learning and the man who loves reading, and the point that there is no connection whatever between the two. A learned man is a sedentary enthusiast, who searches through books to discover some particular grain of truth upon which he has set his heart. If the passion for reading conquers him, his gains dwindle and vanish beneath his fingers. A reader, on the other hand, must check his desire for learning at the outset; if knowledge sticks to him well and good, but to go in pursuit of it, to read on a system, to become a specialist or an authority, is very apt to kill what it suits us to consider the more human passion for pure and disinterested reading.<sup>11</sup>

Her own "pure and disinterested" passion for books began at the age of fifteen, when her father, the Victorian scholar and critic, Sir Leslie Stephen, gave her the run of his large, "quite unexpurgated" library. The pains she takes to preserve her amateur standing and independent spirit as a critic are also an inheritance from her father, as she reveals in her essay "Leslie Stephen." "To read what one liked because one liked it, never to pretend to admire what one did not—that was his only lesson in the art of reading. To write in the fewest possible words, as clearly as possible, exactly what one meant—that was his only lesson in the art of writing."<sup>12</sup>

In an essay simply called "Reading,"<sup>13</sup> Mrs. Woolf again reflects on the strange seductive power of books, this time indulging her impressionist fancy as she rambles over the rich landscape of English literature. Here is the sense of literature as part of the English life and land, as an old house and garden and rolling downs stretching toward the sea where the Elizabethan voyagers took ship and sailed for the new world. The sense of historical tradition runs through Mrs. Woolf's essays, and she sees literary history, from the "Pastons and Chaucer"<sup>14</sup> to the present age, as an evolutionary process in the discovery of reality.<sup>15</sup> It is this historical process or progress that may be foreshortened in the pages of a book, read in an armchair by the window with the light slanting over the shoulder and the sounds of summer drifting in.

These were circumstances, perhaps, to turn the mind to the past. Always behind the voice, the figure, the fountain, there seemed to stretch an immeasurable avenue, that ran to a point of other voices, figures, fountains which tapered out indistinguishably upon the further horizon. I could see Keats and Pope behind him, and then Dryden and Sir Thomas Browne—hosts of them merging in the mass of Shakespeare, behind whom, if one peered long enough, some shapes

of men in pilgrim's dress emerged, Chaucer perhaps, and again—who was it? some uncouth poet scarcely able to syllable his words; and so they died away.<sup>16</sup>

But the art of reading is also a critical matter, as Mrs. Woolf demonstrates in the essay concluding the second *Common Reader*, "How Should One Read a Book?" Originally presented as a talk, the audience must have realized that as readers they were to be created in Mrs. Woolf's image. At the outset, she again admonishes the reader to follow his own critical conscience, in the Cambridge-Bloomsbury tradition of the individual against authority and conformity. To be open-minded, to get rid of all preconceptions about the author and the work when we read, is the first step not merely toward enjoyment but understanding. "Steep yourself in this, acquaint yourself with this, and soon you will find that your author is giving you, or attempting to give you, something far more definite. The thirty-two chapters of a novel—if we consider how to read a novel first—are an attempt to make something as formed and controlled as a building; but words are more impalpable than bricks; reading is a longer and more complex process than seeing."<sup>17</sup> The reading process is intensified, then, as we turn to the familiar question of form. What is clearly revealed here, and implicit throughout her essays, is a creative tension in her criticism between the emotional response, the impression, the experience of the work, and its rational explanation and evaluation—on formal grounds and in terms of traditional standards. As a psychological novelist, Mrs. Woolf was committed to the "unconscious" self, as she describes the creative source, as well as to the equally essential tool

<sup>11</sup> "Hours in a Library," in *Granite and Rainbow*, p. 24. Originally printed in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 November 1916, the title of the essay is taken from her father's collection of essays and reviews.

<sup>12</sup> "Leslie Stephen," in *The Captain's Death Bed*, p. 72.

<sup>13</sup> In *The Captain's Death Bed*.

<sup>14</sup> In *The Common Reader*, first series.

<sup>15</sup> A discussion of Mrs. Woolf's conception of reality would require a separate essay. It would be possible, as a matter of fact, to arrange her own essays chronologically for a survey of literature seen from the perspective of her ideas on reality. Mrs. Woolf's approach to the real in literary history resembles Erich Auerbach's, in his book *Mimesis; The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957). Though much of Mrs. Woolf's criticism is an attempt to deal with a specific work, she is also concerned with the age in which the work was written and how it influenced the author's perspective or view of reality. As an experimental novelist, however, she subscribed to an evolutionary theory of the real leading to the modern triumph of the inner spirit over external matter, the real over the realistic.

<sup>16</sup> "Reading," p. 141.

<sup>17</sup> "How Should One Read a Book?" in *The Common Reader*, second series, p. 259.



for the writer, the critical intelligence. Though her faith in sensibility may also be part of her characteristic feminine protest against masculine, academic authority, the critic's emotional response to the work of art was integral, as we shall see, to the Bloomsbury aesthetic.

Mrs. Woolf's argument is further complicated when the idea of form is associated with feeling or emotion, a point to be explored in connection with her essay "On Re-reading Novels." In "How Should One Read a Book?" she refers to the idea of perspective, a recurrent critical term in her essays related to the writer's approach to reality and thus to the form of his work. If the reader would turn writer, Mrs. Woolf observes, he would realize the difficulty of imposing form on the fleeting impressions of life, of creating art out of the chaos of experience. For the great writers, though they see the world in as many ways as their books suggest, submit to the dimensions of a self-contained, consistent world that is the single work of art. "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 frequently do, by introducing two different kinds of reality into the same book."<sup>18</sup> Mrs. Woolf considers a number of genres in the essay on reading a book, and in her discussion of poetry quotes from a series of poems for purposes of comparison. Reading involves comparison, she says, which leads inevitably to the final act of evaluation or judgment. Merely by giving shape to the book, by imposing form on those emotions experienced by the passive reader, one begins to exercise the function of the critic and the judge. "The first process, to receive impressions with the utmost understanding, is only half the process of reading; it must be completed, if we are to get the whole pleasure from a book, by another. We must pass judgment upon these multitudinous impressions; we must make of these fleeting shapes one that is hard and lasting."<sup>19</sup> The most difficult task for the reader is the necessity to compare and judge; to read, as it were, without the book in front of him in order to pinpoint the qualities of a work and determine its final worth. He must "train his taste" not only to read creatively, with insight and imagination, but to read critically; to evaluate a work in terms of its internal laws and against the great tradition which was the final standard for Virginia Woolf.

It is interesting to compare Mrs. Woolf's critic as impressionist-judge with her father's views on the function of criticism. Though a follower of Arnold, Leslie Stephen wanted to go beyond the critical touchstone in order to incorporate a body

of critical judgments into a kind of literary case-law. Yet even the positivist-minded Stephen reserved a place for the critic's emotional response, as he makes clear in the essay "Thoughts on Criticism by a Critic." "This vivacity and originality of feeling is the first qualification of a critic. Without it no man's judgment is worth having." And again, from the other direction: "A good critic can hardly express his feelings without implicitly laying down a principle."<sup>20</sup> A modern humanist critic, Norman Foerster, has also stressed the twofold response to the work of art, even while stating his case for a revitalized ethical criticism. "He will read it in two ways, first one way and then the other, or else in two ways, simultaneously. One way we may speak of as 'feeling the book,' the other as 'thinking the book'."<sup>21</sup> Leslie Stephen and Norman Foerster may be regarded as humanists making some allowance for impressionism; and Virginia Woolf as an impressionist merely acknowledging the judicial function of the critic. Yet the same conflict between impression and judgment, thought and feeling, has been noted in the early essays of T. S. Eliot. The rejection of Arnold and Pater (and his followers) was behind Eliot's attempt, in *The Sacred Wood*, to deny the dichotomy of thought and feeling (dissociation of sensibility), which he felt encouraged impressionism (and abstract scientism). Eliot's position is actually close to Mrs. Woolf's notion of a fusion of critical functions, though his intention is more rigorous and programmatic in the light of his poetic aims, as we can see from the early essays.

Such considerations, cast in this general form, may appear commonplace. But I believe that it is always opportune to call attention to the torpid superstition that appreciation is one thing, and 'intellectual' criticism something else. Appreciation in popular psychology is one faculty and criticism another, an arid cleverness building theoretical scaffolds upon one's own perceptions or those of others. On the contrary, the true generalization is not something superposed upon an accumulation of perceptions; the perceptions do not, in a really appreciative mind, accumulate as a mass, but form themselves as a structure; and criticism is the statement in language of this structure; it is a development of sensibility.<sup>22</sup>

Paradoxically, for Mrs. Woolf, the reader may

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

<sup>20</sup> "Thoughts on Criticism by a Critic," *Cornhill Magazine*, xxxiv (November 1876), 564.

<sup>21</sup> "The Esthetic Judgment and The Ethical Judgment," in *Modern Literary Criticism*, ed. Ray B. West (New York, 1961), pp. 215-216.

<sup>22</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Perfect Critic," in *The Sacred Wood* (London, 1920; University Paperbacks, 1960), p. 15.

at last turn to the great writers and critics, to authority, after he has served his long apprenticeship in the art of reading. It is only then that he can profit from the decisions of a great judge, a Dryden, a Samuel Johnson, or a Coleridge. "But they are only able to help us if we come 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."<sup>23</sup> Mrs. Woolf's essays, then, reveal a continual effort to resolve the apparent critical conflict between reason and emotion, the individual and authority, abstract rules and the concrete fact of the work of art. And it is clear from the conclusion of her essay that this exacting program for the common reader is essential to her own creativity as novelist, reviewer, or critic. If the reader is not to fall victim to the ordinary reviewer and his weekly abandonment of criticism for advertising,<sup>24</sup> he must be able to maintain those standards which are the result of the profound discipline described in her essay. She aligns herself once more with the private reader rather than the professional critic, but the kind of reader she envisions is one whose influence will be felt by the writer and thus inevitably by literature itself.

We must remain readers; we shall not put on the further glory that belongs to those rare beings who are also critics. But still we have our responsibilities as readers and even our importance. The standards we raise and the judgments we pass steal into the air and become part of the atmosphere which writers breathe as they work. An influence is created which tells upon them even if it never finds its way into print. And that influence, if it were well instructed, vigorous and individual and sincere, might be of great value now when criticism is necessarily in abeyance; when books pass in review like the procession of animals in a shooting gallery, and the critic has only one second in which to load and aim and shoot and may well be pardoned if he mistakes rabbits for tigers, eagles for barndoor fowls, or misses altogether and wastes his shot upon some peaceful cow grazing in a further field. If behind the erratic gunfire of the press the author felt that there was another kind of criticism, 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 his work? And if by our means books were to become stronger, richer, and more varied, that would be an end worth reaching.<sup>25</sup>

## II. Significant Form

The concern for the reader as critic leads inevitably to a discussion of form, though Mrs.

Woolf seems to avoid the dichotomous monster by approaching the question from the point of view of the reader rather than the writer. In her essay "On Re-reading Novels,"<sup>26</sup> Mrs. Woolf gets at the crucial question of form by way of Percy Lubbock's now classic work, *The Craft of Fiction*. Reviewing Lubbock's book when it appeared in 1922, Mrs. Woolf declares that it is a step in the direction of a serious aesthetic for the novel. She agrees with his emphasis on form, on the proper reading of the novel as novel, as pattern, as work of art. But she takes exception to his use of the term "form" itself. It is not only a question of words for Mrs. Woolf, but goes deeper, "into the very process of reading itself." She illustrates her argument with a close reading of Flaubert's "Un Cœur simple." And her sense of the crucial points of the story and the relations set up between these points has to do not with something seen but with something felt. It is the "moments of understanding" that count, even in our second, closer reading of the work. "Therefore, the 'book itself' is not form which you see, but emotion which you feel, and the more intense the writer's feeling the more exact . . . its expression in words." Thus, Mrs. Woolf adds, she has reached her conception of "Un Cœur simple" by working "from the emotion outwards" and "among all this talk of methods, both in writing and in reading it is the emotion that must come first."<sup>27</sup> In "How Should One Read a Book," Mrs. Woolf insisted that reading was a more complex process than seeing. In this essay, "On Re-reading Novels," she clarifies her point by discussing form as an emotional rather than a visual pattern. To better understand Mrs. Woolf's definition of form and her insistence on that definition, it would be instructive to see the connection between Mrs. Woolf's aesthetic and the theories of her Bloomsbury friends, the art critics Clive Bell and Roger Fry.

Clive Bell had formulated his celebrated phrase, "significant form," in 1914, in a book entitled *Art*,<sup>28</sup> though Roger Fry had suggested a similar idea in 1909, in "An Essay in Aesthet-

<sup>23</sup> "How Should One Read A Book?" p. 269.

<sup>24</sup> Mrs. Woolf's thoughts on reviewing, and its relation to criticism, can be found in an essay (originally a pamphlet) called "Reviewing," in *The Captain's Death Bed*.

<sup>25</sup> "How Should One Read A Book?" pp. 269-270.

<sup>26</sup> In *The Moment and Other Essays*.

<sup>27</sup> "On Re-reading Novels," p. 130. In discussing Turgenev's fiction, Mrs. Woolf states that he saw his novels not as a "succession of events; but as a succession of emotions radiating from some character at the centre" ("The Novels of Turgenev," in *The Captain's Death Bed*, p. 58).

<sup>28</sup> London: Chatto and Windus, 1949.

ics."<sup>29</sup> Both critics base their conception of "significant form" on the so-called "aesthetic emotion" which works of art are capable of transmitting. And this emotion is a response to a significant pattern of relations, the form of the work, which is in turn the perfect and complete expression of an idea, an emotion, a "vision of reality," as Mrs. Woolf would say, in the mind of the artist. In maintaining the balance between form and feeling, Bell tries to avoid, as does Mrs. Woolf, the so-called "affective fallacy" on the one hand, and the "intentional fallacy"<sup>30</sup> on the other. "Therefore, when the critic comes across satisfactory form he need not bother about the feelings of the artist; for him to feel the aesthetic significance of the artist's forms suffices. If the artist's state of mind be important, he may be sure that it was right because the forms are right."<sup>31</sup>

In "An Essay In Aesthetics," Roger Fry defines the same relation between form and emotion. "When the artist passes from pure sensations to emotions aroused by means of sensations, he uses natural forms, which, in themselves, are calculated to move our emotions, and he presents these in such a manner that the forms themselves generate in us emotional states."<sup>32</sup> Fry repeats his point about the idea, or state of mind, or emotion behind the "significant form" of the work of art, in "The Artist's Vision." When we contemplate a work of art, he says—a Sung bowl, for example—"there comes to us . . . a feeling of purpose; we feel that all those sensually logical conformities are the outcome of a particular feeling, or of what, for want of a better word, we call an idea; and we may even say that the pot is the expression of the idea in the artist's mind."<sup>33</sup> We can see from this discussion the relation between what Fry calls, in one of his books, "Vision and Design."

Turning again to Mrs. Woolf's essay "On Re-reading Novels," with Bell and Fry in the background, we can understand Mrs. Woolf's insistence on the emotional significance of form. 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. In a great novel, there is a perfect fusion that leaves no "slip or chink"; nothing is left, in fact, but the form of the work entire in the mind. In answer to Lubbock, she repeats: "There is vision and expression. The two blend so perfectly 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, they form a whole which remains in our minds as the book itself."<sup>34</sup>

Once Mrs. Woolf has drawn her fine but necessary distinction between Lubbock's and her own conception of form, she restores the balance between art and emotion. In Bell and Fry, and in her own essays, we have seen that form is the result of, and results in, emotion. Yet, as Mrs. Woolf has also maintained, form is by definition that controlling, ordering process which we call art. On these terms, she is willing to agree with Lubbock. "Is there not something beyond emotion, something which though it is inspired by emotion, tranquillises it, orders it, composes it?—that which Mr. Lubbock calls form, which for simplicity's sake, we call art?"<sup>35</sup> By insisting on a twofold definition of form, Mrs. Woolf seems to be letting in the back door what she has just pushed out the front. Yet we have seen that her criticism involves a basic counterpoint of form and feeling, art and emotion—saving her from a critical nihilism on the one hand and a rigid, systematic aesthetic on the other.

The emotional or impressionistic pattern ascribed to the novel is of course analogous to Mrs. Woolf's experimental structure in her fiction. Though a Jamesian in her demands for an aesthetic novel, she is unwilling to accept Lubbock's visual sense of form, which derives from James.<sup>36</sup> In this context, J. K. Johnstone's attempt to trace a direct line from Fry's aesthetic to Virginia Woolf's theory and practice of fiction,<sup>37</sup> while valid to some extent, ignores Mrs. Woolf's skepticism toward any visual conception of form, and toward Fry's own plastic approach to the verbal art of fiction.

When Mrs. Woolf refers, in her biography of Roger Fry, to his literary criticism, there is a note of professional skepticism in the midst of praise for an astute, persuasive argument. "As a critic of literature, then, he was not what is called a safe guide. He looked at the carpet from the wrong side; but he made it for that reason display unexpected patterns. And many of his theories hold good for both arts. Design, rhythm,

<sup>29</sup> Included in *Vision and Design* (first published in 1920; reprinted by Meridian Books, New York, 1956).

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of these "fallacies," see the first two essays in W. K. Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon* (Noonday edition, 1962).

<sup>31</sup> Bell, *Art*, p. 62.

<sup>32</sup> Fry, p. 37.

<sup>33</sup> Fry, "The Artist's Vision," in *Vision and Design*.

<sup>34</sup> "On Re-reading Novels," p. 130.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>36</sup> See Joseph Warren Beach, *The Method of Henry James* (Philadelphia: Albert Saifer, 1954), p. 31.

<sup>37</sup> See the chapter on Bloomsbury aesthetics in J. K. Johnstone, *The Bloomsbury Group* (New York, 1954).



texture—there they were again—in Flaubert as in Cézanne. And he would hold up a book to the light as if it were a picture and show where in his view—it was a painter's of course—it fell short."<sup>38</sup> Yet Fry's insistence on form, pattern, design—inherent in his admiration for Cézanne and the Post-Impressionists—undoubtedly reinforced Mrs. Woolf's belief, inherited from James and Flaubert, in the aesthetic or "well-made" novel. Mrs. Woolf also tells us in her biography of Fry that he had a theory about the influence of Post-Impressionism on literature, which he never had time to work out. Fry appears to have incorporated part of this theory into his essay, "Some Questions in Esthetics," where he attempts to purify painting by purging it of all but plastic values and, at the same time, to create for literature an equivalent purity of form. Since each art, Fry feels, has its own *raison d'être*, its proper criteria for creating and judging it as art, literature should rid itself of those excrescences which Mrs. Woolf decried in her famous essays on the Edwardians.<sup>39</sup> Fry refers to A. C. Bradley's statement on the autonomy of poetry, and goes on to say: "For poetry in this passage we may, I think, substitute the idea of any literature as pure art. The passage at least suggests to us that the purpose of literature is the creation of structures which have for us the feeling of reality, and these structures are self-contained, self-sufficient and not to be valued by their reference to what lies outside."<sup>40</sup> Here then is the belief in the autonomy of art, which Mrs. Woolf consistently endorses in her essays. Fry's friend, the French aesthete Charles Mauron, had even suggested a way for literature to achieve the formal purity of painting by transposing "the idea of volumes from the dominion of space to the domain of spirit and conceive the literary artist as creating 'psychological volumes'."<sup>41</sup> We can see how the idea of "psychological volumes" fits in with Mrs. Woolf's own subjective novel, which is both formal and psychological.

Mrs. Woolf's insistence on the crucial relation between reason and emotion stems from her role as an artist-critic. Her experiments in the novel, subjective, impressionistic, led paradoxically to a critical struggle with form, and her defense of an emotional structure in the novel—against Lubbock's visual form—parallels her own experience as an intensely subjective yet tenaciously objective literary artist. She was intent upon preserving a balance between form and feeling, and she is careful, as we have noted, to distinguish between the emotional and intellectual or critical basis of form. We have seen that this discussion leads to a denial of the familiar dichotomy of

form and content, to an emphasis on organic form, to the perfect fusion of what Mrs. Woolf calls "vision and expression." This account of organic or expressive form is similar, as we have also seen, to the concept of "significant form" developed by Clive Bell and Roger Fry, and may be traced to Coleridge's famous organic theory, with its subjective appeal to the powers of the imagination and its objective reference to the organic relation between the parts and the whole. Mrs. Woolf's reference to an organic form for the novel reveals her again as a follower of Henry James, whose pioneering interest in the novel as art led to his insistence, in "The Art of Fiction," on the organic nature of the novel. "A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts."<sup>42</sup> The American transcendentalists, Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, stressed the subjective side of Coleridge's theory, using botanical imagery to describe the free or natural development of form out of the artist's vision or inspiration. But for James and Virginia Woolf organic form is an objective pattern of relations, the result not only of emotion or intuition, but of art and the artist's "critical labour," as Eliot terms it in "The Function of Criticism."<sup>43</sup>

### III. The *Via Media*

It is not hard to demonstrate that Virginia Woolf, though 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. Yet it hardly seems necessary any longer to declare one's adherence to some defiantly modern critical standard. It no longer seems meaningful for modern criticism to insist on its freedom from any romantic-impressionist heritage. If the mythic "old" criticism is dead and the new critical horse has been feeding comfortably in the academic stable, why go on beating either? If time has given us new perspec-

<sup>38</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (New York, 1940), p. 240.

<sup>39</sup> See especially "Modern Fiction," in *The Common Reader*, first series; and "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," in *The Captain's Death Bed*.

<sup>40</sup> "Some Questions in Aesthetics," in *Transformations* (first printed in 1926, reprinted in 1956 by Doubleday Anchor Books), p. 11.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. See Charles Mauron's *The Nature of Beauty in Art and Literature* (London, 1927), a book published by the Woolfs and translated by Fry.

<sup>42</sup> In West, *Modern Literary Criticism*, p. 42.

<sup>43</sup> In *Selected Essays: New Edition* (New York, 1950).



tive on the critical propagandists of the recent past, the real value may lie in seeing modern criticism as part of the unending dialectic on classic literary questions.

As Murray Krieger has shown, one crucial dialectic of modern criticism derives from the conflict, first seen in T. E. Hulme and T. S. Eliot, between a belief in the romantic imagination and the classical impersonality of art.<sup>44</sup> Eliot's early emphasis on impersonality, objectivity, and tradition were attempts to resolve the Coleridgean dilemma of subject and object by pretending to ignore the romantic theory of expression in favor of a classical theory of imitation. Among other things, the classical smokescreen of Hulme and Eliot was a way of escaping the stigma of the Pater-Wilde-Symons impressionist school.

Other critics in the Eliot line had to contend with the Italian aesthetician, Benedetto Croce, whose expressionist theory of art seemed to preclude the kind of analysis demanded by the formalist or "New Critics."<sup>45</sup> Croce's expressionist theory appeared to be a neo-romantic philosophy of art, with the artist's intuition-expression inviolate and essentially untranslatable. "Criticism does not require anything else than to know the true sentiment of the poet is the representative form in which he translated it. Any other demand is extraneous to the question."<sup>46</sup> Croce's expressionism resolves the form-content dichotomy, but with a finality that defends the artist's imagination or intuition against the kind of analysis essential to the modern critic.

I. A. Richards, whose pioneering emphasis on a linguistic analysis of literature had such impact on modern criticism, also produced a kind of embarrassing roadblock for the formalist critic, with his psychological or affective theory of literature. As a psychologist, Richards seemed, in his early work, to emphasize the therapeutic value of literature: literature as a way of feeling rather than of knowing. But this concern with the emotional value of art—with the reader's response to the work over the work itself, tends to destroy the very value of art as a self-contained approach to reality.<sup>47</sup> In order to emphasize the complexity of modern criticism in its attempts to answer the classic questions, it is only necessary, finally, to refer to John Crowe Ransom's attack on Richards. Though Ransom reproaches Richards for his psychologism and neglect of the objective work, Ransom's own distinction between "structure," or the logical framework of the poem, and "texture," or the rich local details, does not resolve the form-content dilemma but in fact sustains it.<sup>48</sup>

Without venturing further into this labyrinthine

problem, we may say, then, that modern criticism has not escaped or resolved the imitation-expression, subject-object dilemma inherited from the nineteenth century. And if we turn back to that prototype of impressionist criticism, Walter Pater, we see the same questions raised and an attempt to find a critical *via media* that anticipates the concern of his modern follower, Virginia Woolf. René Wellek tries to reevaluate Pater as a critic in terms of this dual emphasis on subject and object. In correcting the usual interpretation of Pater's Preface to *The Renaissance*, Wellek remarks: "Pater's theory of criticism stresses not only personal impressions but the duty of the critic to grasp the individuality, the unique quality of the work of art. Pater never advocates the impressionist theory of the 'adventures of the soul among masterpieces,' the 'speaking of myself on occasion of Shakespeare,' as it was formulated by Anatole France."<sup>49</sup> Pater's reaction against the moral criticism of Carlyle, Ruskin, and Morris led to a Coleridgean concern with form and an endorsement of art for art which may be related to the non-utilitarian ethics of the Bloomsbury philosopher, G. E. Moore, whose insistence that art is an intrinsic or ethical good influenced Bell and Fry and Virginia Woolf in their faith in the self-contained values of art.<sup>50</sup> Pater's famous assertion that "all art constantly aspires toward the condition of music"<sup>51</sup> has also been misinterpreted as an extreme example of aestheticism. Yet it is only another variation on the notion of organic or expressive form. Pater refers to music because it is the most abstract of the arts and provides the best example of unity or a fusion of form and content. In expanding upon this point in "The School of Giorgione," Pater anticipates Eliot and Mrs. Woolf and their concern for a combining of

<sup>44</sup> See especially the first two chapters of Murray Krieger's *The New Apologists for Poetry* (Minneapolis, 1956).

<sup>45</sup> See Murray Krieger's article, "Benedetto Croce and The Recent Poetics Of Organicism," *Comparative Literature*, vii, No. 3 (1955), 252-258.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Brooks and Wimsatt, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York, 1959), p. 515.

<sup>47</sup> See Allen Tate's article, "The Present Function Of Criticism," in West, *Essays in Modern Literary Criticism*, pp. 145-154.

<sup>48</sup> See the chapter on Richards in John Crowe Ransom's *The New Criticism* (New York, 1941), and Ransom's article, "Criticism as Pure Speculation," in West's anthology, cited above.

<sup>49</sup> René Wellek, "Walter Pater's Literary Theory and Criticism," *Victorian Studies* (September 1957), p. 30.

<sup>50</sup> For a full-scale treatment of the ethical and aesthetic influence of G. E. Moore on Bloomsbury, see J. K. Johnstone, *The Bloomsbury Group*, especially Part I.

<sup>51</sup> Walter Pater, "The School of Giorgione," in *The Renaissance* (Modern Library Edition), p. 111.

thought and feeling, reason and emotion: "but form and matter, in their union or identity, present one single effect to the 'imaginative reason,' that complex faculty for which every thought and feeling is twin-born with its sensible analogue or symbol. It is the art of music which most completely realizes this artistic ideal, this perfect identification of matter and form."<sup>52</sup>

The modern analytical critics, organic and contextual in orientation, have also been, inevitably, art for art; and Mrs. Woolf's persistent regard for the formal problems of prose fiction and poetry has perhaps been ignored because she has neglected the more rigorous tools of the analysts for the form and style of the essayist. 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—in a more rigid age where critics are predominantly teacher-specialists rather than practicing artists or reviewers with a very real stake in the critic as common reader. As an essayist, reviewer, and artist-critic; as a Bloomsbury individualist and feminist sensitive to her own Victorian lack of a university education, she reacted instinctively against all prescriptive or positivist-minded criticism as a product of the uncreative academies and academicians whom she suspected and scorned. Mrs. Woolf's prejudices are apparent in an article on the well-known English scholar and critic, Walter Raleigh, whose comments on literature she compares with those of the great artist-critics. "There is nothing to suggest that literature was a matter of profound interest to him when he was not lecturing about it. When we read the letters of Keats, the diary of the Goncourts, the letters of Lamb, the casual remarks of that unfashionable poet Tennyson, we feel that, waking or sleeping, these men never stopped thinking about literature. . . . Whatever they are doing their minds fill up involuntarily with some aspect of the absorbing question."<sup>53</sup> Mrs. Woolf reflects the impatience and prejudice of the artist-critic, which she shares with T. S. Eliot. Though she was conscious of her own role as a critic and of the formal demands and legitimate aims of literary criticism, there is a growing tendency in her writing to suspect the fallibility of critics and criticism resulting from a too-great dependence upon abstract rules and principles. Her artist soul became skeptical of her critical brain; and though her essays on the novel, for example, reveal a brilliant body of formal criticism, she is conscious of a widening gap between the aesthetic discoveries resulting from her experiments in fiction and the somewhat superficial

conclusions she finds in most literary criticism. As artist and Bloomsbury individualist, she blames the academies for the present state of criticism, as we noted in her treatment of Walter Raleigh. In "How It Strikes A Contemporary," after praising the great artist-critics of the past, she continues the attack: "Men of taste and learning and ability are forever lecturing the young and celebrating the dead. But the too frequent result of their able and industrious pens is a desiccation of the living tissues of literature into a network of little bones."<sup>54</sup> Mrs. Woolf's dual role as artist and critic merged with a third, wider concern for the common reader and the general state of literature. 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. It is against this possibility of what she considered a sterile literary condition that Mrs. Woolf reacted in her attack on the universities and what she thought was academic criticism. And it is against this background that we can see her growing impatience with the more formal criticism she had herself endorsed in her essays, and a new interest in a more experimental, less formal criticism that would be truer to the work in terms of the creative experience.

In assembling some articles for a second *Common Reader*, she refers in her *Diary* to the possibility of a new critical method that will come closer to what she feels is the aesthetic truth. "There must be some simpler, subtler, closer means of writing about books, as about people, could I hit upon it."<sup>55</sup> And while writing an article on Turgenev, she again refers in the *Diary* to the question of a new critical approach, once more from the writer's standpoint. "The difficulty about criticism is that it is so superficial. The writer has gone so much deeper. T. kept a diary for Bazarov: wrote everything from his point of view. We have only 250 short pages. Our criticism is only a bird's eye view of the pinnacle of an iceberg. The rest under water. One might

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114. The phrase "imaginative reason" derives from Matthew Arnold.

<sup>53</sup> "Walter Raleigh," in *The Captain's Death Bed*, p. 85. There is a more sympathetic essay on Raleigh by the Bloomsbury critic Desmond MacCarthy, in *Portraits* (London, 1931).

<sup>54</sup> "How It Strikes A Contemporary," in *The Common Reader*, first series.

<sup>55</sup> *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts From The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York, 1953), Monday, 16 Nov. 1931, p. 172.

begin it in this way. The article might be more broken, less composed than usual."<sup>56</sup> Only a year before her death, when she was considering a critical book on English literature, Mrs. Woolf expresses a kind of final disillusionment with the state of literary criticism, which discouraged her from any experiments as well as from the book itself.

No invasion. High Wind. Yesterday in the Public library I took down a book of X's criticism. This turned me against writing my book. London Library atmosphere effused. Turned me against all literary criticism: these so clever, so airless, so fleshless ingenuities and attempts to prove—that T. S. Eliot for example is a worse critic than X. Is all literary criticism that kind of exhausted air?—a book dust, London Library air. Or is it only that X is a second hand, frozen fingered, university specialist don trying to be creative, don all stuffed with books, writer. Would one say the same of the Common Reader? I dipped for five minutes and put the book back depressed.<sup>57</sup>

But we must see this despair against the background of her growing desolation and illness during the war years and just before her final depression and death. Her intense reaction does point up, however, the creative balance she established in her best criticism, between the extremes of abstract scientism and romantic impressionism. And it is from this latter standpoint that we can refuse to further the image of Virginia Woolf as the epitome of the impressionist critic, as the last pale reflection of the decadent spirit, to which literary historians have subscribed.

A fairer estimate of Mrs. Woolf as a critic must take into account the balance or merging of critical functions which I have tried to trace in this study. Against the background of Mrs. Woolf's critical *via media* and her growing disillusionment with contemporary criticism, we should consider again T. S. Eliot's examination of modern criticism and its dominant tendencies. In terms that echo what Mrs. Woolf thought and wrote about the subject, Eliot's essay, "The Frontiers of Criticism," reveals that he has come full circle from his early reaction against impressionism to his present concern for excesses committed in the name of what he calls "understanding." Eliot wants to re-emphasize the relation between "enjoyment and understanding"; again, as in *The Sacred Wood*, he feels that there can be a fusion of the two terms with respect to the critic's function. He traces the transformation of twentieth-century criticism to Coleridge and his

interest in "philosophy, aesthetics and psychology," as well as (echoing Mrs. Woolf) to the increasing influence of the teaching of literature in the universities. Though there is not space enough to trace Eliot's discussion of the excesses common to the various critical (and scholarly) methods, his concluding statement attempts once more to strike the kind of creative balance or fusion of functions which describes Mrs. Woolf's most characteristic criticism.

If in literary criticism, we place all the emphasis upon *understanding*, we are in danger of slipping from understanding to mere explanation. We are in danger of pursuing criticism as if it was a science, which it can never be. If, on the other hand, we over-emphasize *enjoyment*, we will tend to fall into the subjective and impressionistic, and our enjoyment will profit us no more than mere amusement and pastime. Thirty-three years ago, it seems to have been the latter type of criticism, the impressionistic, that had caused the annoyance I felt when I wrote on the 'function of criticism.' Today it seems to me that we need to be more on guard against the purely explanatory. But I do not want to leave you with the impression that I wish to condemn the criticism of our time. These last thirty years have been, I think, a brilliant period in literary criticism in both Britain and America. It may even come to seem, in retrospect, too brilliant. Who knows?<sup>58</sup>

For a fitting conclusion, it is also necessary to refer to Henry James's famous portrait of the ideal critic. In many ways, Mrs. Woolf is a direct literary descendant of James, and the kind of critic he describes resembles the image I find reflected in her essays.

To lend himself, to project himself and steep himself, to feel and feel till he understands and to understand so well that he can say, to have perception at the pitch of passion and expression as embracing as the air, to be infinitely curious and incorrigibly patient, and yet plastic and inflammable and determinable, stooping to conquer and serving to direct—these are fine chances for an active mind, chances to add the idea of independent beauty to the conception of success.<sup>59</sup>

In the light of T. S. Eliot's analysis of our critical needs and the Jamesian portrait of the ideal critic, this may be the most rewarding moment in which to turn to the essays of Virginia Woolf.

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, Wednesday, 16 August 1933, pp. 203–204.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, Tuesday, 17 Sept. 1940, p. 337.

<sup>58</sup> "The Frontiers of Criticism," pp. 117–118.

<sup>59</sup> Henry James, "Criticism," in *Essays in London and Elsewhere* (London, 1893), pp. 276–277.