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Edwin J. Kenney, Jr.

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The Moment, 1910: Virginia Woolf, Arnold Bennett, and Turn of the Century Consciousness

by EDWIN J. KENNEY, JR.

IN THE YEARS 1923-24 Virginia Woolf was embroiled in an argument with Arnold Bennett about the responsibility of the novelist and the future of the novel. In her famous essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," she observed that "on or about December, 1910, human character changed";¹ and she proceeded to argue, without specifying the causes or nature of that change, that because human character had changed the novel must change if it were to be a true representation of human life. Since that time the at once assertive and vague remark about 1910, isolated, has served as a convenient point of departure for historians now writing about the social and cultural changes occurring during the Edwardian period.² Literary critics have taken the ideas about fiction from "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" and Woolf's other much-anthologized essay "Modern Fiction" as a free-standing "aesthetic manifesto" of the new novel of sensibility;³ and those who have recorded and discussed the "whole contention" between Virginia Woolf and Arnold Bennett have regarded the relation between Woolf's historical observation and her ideas about the novel either as just a rhetorical strategy or a generational disguise for the expression of class bias against Bennett.⁴ Yet few readers have asked what Virginia Woolf might have meant by her remark about 1910 and the novel, or what it might have meant to her. Why did she choose 1910 as the moment of radical change in turn of the century consciousness? What were the connections among history, her own personal history, and the direction of the novel?

The debate with Bennett focuses on the difficult issues of what is real in human life and how the novelist is to represent it. Although Bennett at his

1. *Collected Essays*, I (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), 320. Unless otherwise noted, all future references to the works of Virginia Woolf will be to the uniform edition published by The Hogarth Press and will be given in parentheses in the text.

2. See for example Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (Princeton, 1968); Donald Read, *Edwardian England, 1901-15* (London, 1972); John A. Lester, Jr., *Journey Through Despair, 1880-1914* (Princeton, 1968).

3. Typical examples would include Joseph Warren Beach, *The Twentieth Century Novel* (New York, 1932); William C. Frieron, *The English Novel in Transition, 1885-1940* (Norman, Okla., 1942); Walter Allen, *The English Novel* (New York, 1955) and *The Modern Novel in Britain and the United States* (New York, 1969). A somewhat different approach, based on intellectual history, is taken by William Bellamy, *The Novels of Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy: 1890-1910* (London, 1971).

4. Samuel Hynes, "The Whole Contention Between Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Woolf," *Novel* I (Fall, 1967), 34-44, reprinted in *Edwardian Occasions* (New York, 1972), pp. 24-38; and Margaret Drabble, *Arnold Bennett: A Biography* (New York, 1974), pp. 287ff.

best gives us more of a personal and interior view of individual consciousness and Virginia Woolf at her best gives us more of an insight into society than is usually acknowledged, the two represent the extremes into which the traditional realistic novel split at the beginning of this century: sociological survey and fragments of personal consciousness. In his novels Bennett carefully records and explains observable social data—facts—to define the social reality of his characters; antithetically, Virginia Woolf carefully records consciousness bombarded with atomistic impressions, which cohere only in privileged moments of personal vision, to define the subjective reality of her characters.

In *Cassell's Weekly* of 28 March, 1923, Arnold Bennett published an article, "Is the Novel Decaying?" in which he made one statement of principle and two observations derived from it. He stated that "The foundation of good fiction is character-creating, and nothing else" and noted that the young novelists "display all manner of good qualities—originality of view, ingenuity of presentment, sound common sense, and even style," but they do not create real characters. Therefore, Bennett "cannot yet descry any coming big novelists." He illustrated this argument with only one example of a specifically named writer and book: "I have seldom read a cleverer book than Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, a novel which has made a great stir in a small world. It is packed and bursting with originality, and it is exquisitely written. But the characters do not vitally survive in the mind, because the author has been obsessed by details of originality and cleverness."⁵ On 1 December 1923, Virginia Woolf replied publically in *The Nation and Athenaeum*, for which Leonard Woolf was then the literary editor; her essay was the first and shorter version of the subsequent and better-known work of the same title, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." Within three months she had published it in three places, once in England and twice in the United States, where Bennett's work was also popular. She then expanded and revised it for a lecture to the Heretics Club at Girton College, Cambridge, 19 May 1924; this second version was then published first in T.S. Eliot's *Criterion*, under the title "Character in Fiction," then as the first pamphlet in the Hogarth Essays series, and again in *The New York Herald Tribune*. As Samuel Hynes noted with amused astonishment, "For one paragraph of mixed praise and criticism of *Jacob's Room*, Bennett had reaped six separate published attacks and one lecture."⁶

This excessive reaction suggests that Bennett had touched a sore spot in Virginia Woolf's attitude toward her work and herself: the reality of her fictional characters and, by extension, her own identity. At this critical time in her career, after reading Bennett's review, she confessed to her *Diary*, "I daresay it's true, however, that I haven't that 'reality' gift. I

5. *The Author's Craft and Other Critical Writings of Arnold Bennett*, edited by Samuel Hynes (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1968), pp. 87, 88.

6. *Edwardian Occasions*, p. 32.

insubstantise, willfully to some extent, distrusting reality—its cheapness” (p. 57). In the midst of her vigorous counter-attack Woolf asked herself, “this slight depression—what is it?” (p. 63). I believe the disproportionate and ambivalent response to Bennett’s criticism leads the way to a more comprehensive understanding of her assertion that 1910 marked a change in consciousness which the novel needed to reflect.

In both versions of “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” Virginia Woolf agrees with Bennett’s claims that the novel is distinguished by the creation of character, and that young writers are just not making characters in fiction the way they used to, but she shifts the emphasis of the discussion to the questions that concern and excuse her: “when this change began and what were the reasons behind it.” Her answers to these questions allow her to shift Bennett’s blame from those she includes with herself as Georgians—Forster, Strachey, Eliot, Lawrence, Joyce—back onto those she calls the Edwardians—Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy—using as a lever Bennett’s own declared principle that good fiction depends on the creation of character. She says the novel created real and vivid if sometimes simplified characters (“a character”) up to and especially during the reign of Victoria. She then provides a definition of traditional realistic fiction by pointing out that the Victorian novel represents a broad range of characters and their society, their social institutions, as they interact with one another: “They love, they joke, they hunt, they marry; they lead us from hall to cottage, from field to slum. The whole country, the whole society is revealed to us, and revealed always in the same way, through the astonishing vividness and reality of the characters.” For Virginia Woolf the critical break in the tradition comes during the reign of Edward: “surely that was the fatal age, the age which is just breaking off from our own, the age when character disappeared or was mysteriously engulfed. . . .”

Virginia Woolf’s conclusion in both versions of her essay is that during the reign of Edward character in fiction became generalized by either social or psychological modes of perception and representation, and that the need and goal of the Georgian novelist is to “particularize” character, to “deepen its compass, and so make possible those conflicts between human beings which alone arouse our strongest emotions. . . .” But Woolf is talking about life in historical time as well as character in fiction, and in the second version she extends her complaint that the Edwardians were too concerned with effecting social changes to care sufficiently about character or the art of fiction. She says that Wells’s utopianism, Galsworthy’s moral indignation, and Bennett’s materialism led them to produce such “odd books”: “Sometimes I wonder if we are right to call them books at all. For they leave one with so strange a feeling of incompleteness and dissatisfaction. In order to complete them it seems

7. “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” *Nation and Atheneum*, XXXIV (December 1, 1923), 342-343; reprinted in *The Author’s Craft and Other Critical Writings of Arnold Bennett*, Appendix, pp. 269-273.

necessary to do something—to join a society, or more desperately, to write a cheque. That done, the restlessness is laid, the book is finished; it can be put upon the shelf, and need never be read again” (*Essays*, I, 326). She approves the efforts of the Edwardian novelists and the causes for which they were made, but she now wants to assert that all that is over; her objection to these writers is actually that they still take seriously the issues implicit in the historical relation of an individual character to the social conditions and institutions defining his possibilities in communal life. Her desire to “lay the restlessness” of being consciously alive in an extended human community organized by sex, money, class, and political power is expressed as an aesthetic preference for some eternal conception of “life itself”—the little old lady on the train, Mrs. Brown—and of art. To settle down to personally enriching life and art she feels she must put behind her all the political and personal turmoil associated with the year 1910.

It has generally been assumed that because Virginia Woolf’s observation about 1910 leads to an aesthetic statement it must refer specifically to the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition, which opened at the Grafton Galleries on 8 November of that year and showed to a shocked British public for the first time the innovative work of Cézanne, Matisse, Van Gogh, and Gauguin. There is much to support this view, for the Exhibition, like its successor in 1912 and the Armory Show in New York in 1913, was a significant public event, its impact transcending the bounds of artistic and intellectual activity. Roger Fry, who organized the show, and his secretaries Desmond MacCarthy and Leonard Woolf have all left vivid accounts of day-to-day life in the gallery:⁸ people collapsing with laughter, erupting with rage, freezing in contempt, for the challenge posed by the Post-Impressionists was not merely aesthetic; it was social. Fry saw that the accusations of ‘revolutionary anarchism’ aimed at these painters and himself were based on their threat to conventional notions of what constituted beauty, propriety and decorum.⁹ The sense of a sudden, violent, and definite breakthrough in the arts, a sense that was complemented and reinforced by the appearance of the strange and disturbingly graceful Russian Ballet during the same year, resonates with Woolf’s pronouncement that “on or about December 1910 human character changed.” This point is borne out by her own comment in her biography of Roger Fry that the “awful excitement” aroused in 1910 by the Post-Impressionist Exhibition was “genuine,” that “The works of [these painters] possessed what now seems an astonishing power to enrage the public, the critics and the artists of established reputation” (p. 157).

Roger Fry himself was concerned with the relations between contemporary painting and fiction, and Woolf reports his asking her in 1910 why

8. Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (London, 1920); Desmond MacCarthy, *Memories* (London, 1953); Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again* (London, 1964).

9. *Vision and Design*, p. 44; see also Quentin Bell, *Roger Fry. An Inaugural Lecture* (Leeds, 1964), pp. 11-13.

the then current English novelists were “all engrossed in childish problems of representation?” (p. 164). In his introduction to the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition catalog, Fry argued against representation as a goal of art, calling it merely “a pale reflex of actual appearance.” His praise of the Post-Impressionists was that “they do not seek to imitate form, but to create form, not to imitate life but to find an equivalent for life. By that I mean that they wish to make images which by the clearness of their logical structure, and by their closely-knit unity of texture, shall appeal to our disinterested and contemplative imagination with something of the same vividness as the things of actual life appeal to our practical activities. In fact they aim not at illusion but at reality” (p. 178). At just this time Fry influenced Virginia Woolf’s thinking about her own art and her efforts to seek what was real in order to live by it, in touch with it, and to establish her own reality in personal identity.¹⁰

This is why her view of Fry’s personal life, although not actually written until much later in *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940) is especially significant: it seems to have suggested to Woolf a pattern which does not fit exactly but which illuminates her view of history and her own life around the year 1910. The book cannot be judged a success, and critics do not pay much attention to it, but it is especially compelling at one point, the point of crisis in Fry’s life, the point of 1910, from which Fry emerged a changed and rejuvenated man. Woolf’s selection and treatment of this crisis is, again, what resonates with her own experience centering on the year 1910. Indeed, she recorded in her *Diary* that the early parts of the biography were “largely autobiographical” (p. 313), and in 1938 she felt the crisis of World War II was “not so real as Roger in 1910 at Gordon Square” (p. 302).¹¹

In 1910 Fry was dismissed from his job as a buyer in Europe for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York after quarreling for the last

10. That the Post-Impressionists and Roger Fry influenced Woolf and her confrontation with Bennett can be seen in their first skirmish. In 1917 Woolf reviewed Bennett’s *Books and Persons*, a collection of his journalistic essays and reviews for the *New Age*, which reprinted his own piece on the Post-Impressionist Exhibition, written in 1910. The cosmopolitan Bennett tried to explain the achievements of these painters to his audience and to cajole it into some kind of appreciation. But the essay shows that the Exhibition upset him and that he makes his own connection between what was happening in painting and what might happen in the writing of fiction. Despite the successes of *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902), *The Old Wives Tale* (1908) and *Clayhanger* (1910), Bennett was nervous about being praised for his “photographic” realism and anxious at the thought that “a young writer turned up and forced me, and some of my contemporaries—us who fancy ourselves a bit—to admit that we had been concerning ourselves unduly with essentials, that we had been worrying ourselves to achieve infantile realisms? Well, that day would be a great and disturbing day—for us. And we should see what we should see” (*The Author’s Craft*, p. 244). In her review, Virginia, with the unerring arrogance of youth, selected this essay to praise, adding that were some new writer comparable in his, or her, originality to come along, Bennett, having accepted the achievements of the Post-Impressionists, surely would recognize and accept the achievements of the new writer of fiction (*Contemporary Writers*, p. 62). It was a remarkable, taunting challenge from a young woman, who had at that time produced nothing so markedly original to deserve comparison with the Post-Impressionists, to a man who was at once the writer and critic of “established reputation” and who in his great popular success, embodied the British public. But it shows in a kind of scenario, or fantasy, what Virginia hoped to be, and it shows also whom she felt she had to confront—to affront—to establish herself in the way she wished.

11. In a letter to Fry, September 16, 1925 (Monk’s House Papers, University of Sussex) Virginia Woolf wrote of her feeling of a sympathetic affinity which united them, and while working on Fry’s biography Virginia wrote her autobiographical “A Sketch of the Past” (*Moments of Being*, pp. 61-137).

time with the outrageous and unscrupulous Pierpont Morgan; the loss of this important work and income occurred at the same time that his wife was institutionalized for what turned out to be the rest of her—and his—life, leaving him alone and unemployed with two young children. Fry's life was practically shattered; he returned from New York suffering in a way that he said was "far worse than death" (p. 148). He looked defeated, and at first the reaction of the British public to his Post-Impressionist Exhibition intensified his depression; he was disillusioned and angered especially because he thought he had educated the cultivated classes by his lecture tours and columns in the *Athenaeum*, and now all that work seemed a failure too. But this end of one stage of Fry's life was also the beginning of another. Fry actually made a place for himself in a new community of young English painters, and, in explaining and expounding Post-Impressionism to them, Fry created a new direction for his critical work. Moreover, this transition was signified by Fry's liberation as a painter; his limited accomplishments as an academic painter gave way to new forms and treatment of color that also seemed to justify all those years of apprenticeship work at the same time that he broke away from them. Finally, in reaching his new audience of young painters and his maturity as an artist, Fry met and fell in love with Virginia's sister, Vanessa Stephen Bell, a promising painter herself. He found new work and new love at once, and both together seemed to save his life and make him new.

In the biography Virginia Woolf says in what seems remarkably current diction that Fry had "found himself" (p. 162), and she points out that to all his old friends Fry changed so dramatically about the year 1910 as to look ten years younger. The change was sudden and far-reaching, and she notes that "Such moments of vision, when a new force breaks in, and the gropings of the past suddenly seem to have meaning . . . the origin of these moments of vision lies too deep for analysis" (p. 161). To Fry, "the Post-Impressionist Exhibition was only one sign of the change that was coming over the world." He saw the change in his own life also occurring in the lives of others; as he said, "all the people in this new movement are alive and whatever they do has life and that's new" (p. 182). Woolf concludes, "at last, he felt, after the hypocrisy of the Victorian age, of which he had many anecdotes drawn from his own past, a time was at hand when a real society was possible. It was to be a society of people of moderate means, a society based on the old Cambridge ideal of truth and free speaking, but alive, as Cambridge had never been, to the importance of the arts" (p. 184). That ideal, even at the time, was too limited, too Bloomsburian, but the language—"the time was at hand"—is apocalyptic, and so too was the feeling it expressed. "Civilization, a desire for the things of the spirit, seemed to be taking hold not merely of a small group, but to be breaking through among the poor, among the rich" (p. 199). That moment before the Great War, 1910, seemed a time of change and hope: in the self—in both work and love, in the arts, and in society as a whole. After the

destructive and disillusioning years of World War I, it was the moment that Virginia Woolf and others of her generation remembered.

As in Fry's life, there seems to be a general complementarity between the events of history and Virginia Woolf's life history converging on the year 1910. In her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Woolf assumes a correspondence between private and public life: "All human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about the year 1910" (*Essays*, I, 321). Her emphasis is on personal relations, but her point is that changes in personal relations go on "at the same time" as changes in the more public forms of life, each influencing the other. Woolf is concerned about changes in social convention and related conventions for the representation of reality, of character, in the novel; she assumed that, as Raymond Williams has observed, "Changes in convention only occur when there are radical changes in the general structure of feeling."¹² In 1910, the feelings of the poor, the workers, the Irish and women about themselves and their allotted places in the scheme of things had changed to the extent that ordinary conventions for categorizing and managing them were also being forced to change. These changes converge not only chronologically but also emotionally and strategically in the year 1910, forcing the question of the value of conventional representations of social reality at a time when social conventions were themselves breaking down.

There is a building up of separate pressures that finally combine and burst forth, causing certain apparently stable institutions, compromises, and personalities, including Virginia Woolf's, to break down. There is anxiety, depression, sense of failure, and even despair, but unlike the ideal pattern located in the life of Fry, there is not complete transformation and renovation. In these cases, the crisis takes a slower and more complex turn toward some hopeful new point of communal organization and self-integration, and the feelings of anxiety and depression are not so clearly located on one side of the divide, with the feelings of confidence and optimism clearly on the other. The feelings are mixed, and the alternating confusion between them makes them conflict rather than progress neatly; for even those possibilities that are desired can cause apprehension, and those that are rejected can retain their satisfactions. The ambivalence of what Lawrence would call "the struggle into being" of both individuals and groups is what gives the apparently paradoxical quality of both suspension and embattlement that characterizes the historical and personal conflicts of 1910.

Leaving aside for a moment the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition, the year 1910 is initially significant because it brought the unexpected death

12. *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (New York and London, 1958), p. 39.

of Edward VII and the accession of George V. Although there were many who believed, with varying degrees of hope or despair, that Queen Victoria would never die, there was, after all, something natural about her death at 82, one year after the end of the century she and imperial Britain had dominated. There was also a sense of continuity; Edward was 60 years old when he succeeded his mother, and as heir-apparent for all those years he had, despite his flamboyant adolescent differences, become associated with his mother and her reign. His death and the events surrounding it marked the significant break. As A.R. Orage expressed it in the *New Age*, May 1910:

The last genuine link with the Victorian age has been broken with the death of King Edward VII. . . . The accession of Edward VII was neither felt to be nor in fact was it, a leap in the dark or a plunge into a new period. . . . But the situation is strangely different at this moment, and all the surrounding circumstances mark it off as unique in English history for many a generation. For if it is felt, as it clearly is felt, that the era of Victoria is indeed and at last over, who is so bold as to dare forecast the nature of the epoch that is now opening?¹³

This event provided Woolf with the basis of her generational distinction between Edwardians and Georgians. But the frightening feeling of a new beginning of no one knew what scared Virginia along with everyone else and precipitated the urgent demand, not just the opportunity, for some kind of self-definition to replace social definitions that were breaking down.

Part of the panic associated with the death of Edward derived from his dying during the midst of the most serious and far-ranging dispute of his reign. Some even thought his death was caused by the dispute.¹⁴ Edward's death in 1910 is framed in 1909 by the fight over Lloyd George's controversial "People's Budget" and in 1911 by the subsequent Parliament Bill. These important issues are inextricably bound together, and during 1910 they became linked to the fight over Irish Home Rule, the threats of civil war in Ireland, the beginnings of suffragist militancy under the leadership of the Pankhursts, the mass movement of workers into unions and strikes in the mines and on the docks, and the fear of war with Germany. The connected significance of these events indicates that Virginia Woolf was accurate in her sense that everything suddenly began to change in public and violent ways at once. In her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," when Woolf defines "the prevailing sound of the Georgian age"—her age—as "the sound of breaking and falling, crashing and destruction" (*Essays*, I, 334), she is speaking of the breaking down of literary conventions, but that language has reference to all of the violent expressions of liberation that broke down existing conventions and resistances to change.

The "People's Budget" was based on the *Minority Report of the Poor*

13. Quoted by Hynes in "Introduction: A Note on 'Edwardian.'" *Edwardian Occasions*, p. 4.

14. See Philip Magnus, *King Edward The Seventh* (New York, 1964), pp. 439ff., Elie Halevy, *A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century*, VI, *The Rule of Democracy, 1905-1914* (New York, 1952), 333.

Law Commission (1909), written by the Fabian leaders Sidney and Beatrice Webb; it was the most important piece of legislation of Edward's reign, first "because it declared, for the first time in British history, a government's willingness to use taxation as a means of redistributing wealth."¹⁵ Second, after being passed by the Commons, the Budget was vetoed by the Lords, against whom the taxation was directed, and this veto caused the struggle between the two houses of Parliament that finally brought about the Parliament Bill, which stripped the Lords of their veto and created a balance of power in English politics. The political maneuvering over these two issues caused two general elections in the one year of 1910, the first at the beginning of the year in January, the second at the end in December. The balance of power between the two major parties produced by these elections, which were distinguished by the highest percentages of turnout in election history, allowed the Irish Nationalist and Labour Party members to swing that balance in a coalition with the Liberals. This is what greatly exacerbated the so-called "Irish Problem," for the Irish Nationalists would support the Liberals in their fight for the Budget only with the assurance of a Home Rule Bill for Ireland, and this necessitated stripping the Lords of their veto at the same time that it aroused the Lords to resist any diminution of their powers.

The bitterness of this fight, intensified by secret plots to take over the House of Lords by a massive creation of Liberal peers, later carried over, in the form of a desire for vengeance, into the affairs of Ireland. The Budget was passed in April, 1910; when the Irish Home Rule Bill was introduced in 1912, the Lords who could no longer prevent it—if passed three times by the House of Commons it became law—nevertheless twice rejected it. Finally in 1914 it went through without their sanction, only to be suspended because of the war; but during these two years of 1912-14 a real prospect of civil war developed in Ireland because of Ulster's refusal to be ruled by the South, and this refusal was encouraged and supported by the die-hard Tories of the House of Lords.

The constitutional crisis caused by the Budget, the Parliament Bill, and Irish Home Rule, including the dissolutions of Parliament, the general elections, and the death of the King, made this also the time for the violent movements of the workers and women; and these movements were violent because their resolution seemed to their supporters to be thwarted rather than facilitated by traditional political machinery.

In the same month of November 1910, the time of the Post-Impressionist Exhibition and Asquith's dissolution of Parliament for the general elections of December, the South Wales Miners Federation, the largest of all unions, struck the Cambrian combine for a minimum wage for all workers in abnormal places, and Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union marched on Parliament. Both groups were

15. *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, p. 56

beaten back by troops and police, and their defeat led to increased organized violence. The action of the miners was repeated in the years up until the war, especially in the London Seamen and Firemen's Union, and lighterman, dockers and carters' strikes in 1911-12, and the national coal strike. It was to lead to the creation of the Triple Alliance of the National Union of Railwaymen, The Miners' Federation of Great Britain, and the National Transport Workers Federation, which just before the War was about to proclaim a General Strike for nothing less than a national living wage, showing that trade unionism had discarded earlier "respectable" policies of separate opportunism that had hampered their dealings with big business. At the end of 1912 and the beginnings of 1913, when women's franchise clauses were thrown out—again—from a Government Bill abolishing plural voting and extending the male franchise, the suffragettes began their now famous, well-organized window smashings, burnings, and bombings that led to their arrest, the hunger strikes, and the torture of forced feedings.

The suffragettes especially, in their violence and recklessness, suggested in extreme form the impulses underlying the movement of the time. They shared with the workers, the Irish, and even the houses of Parliament, the representative denial of formerly held conventions and ideals of respectability and security. For each of these movements, or rebellions, there were justifiable political and economic reasons, but they do not always seem adequate explanations of the widespread and correspondent violence of the changes occurring at the end of 1910. There is so much of the irrational and unconscious in these attacks on established authorities and conventions and in the reactions to them that, taken together, they have been seen as resembling some form of neurotic breakdown. Dangerfield's whole argument in *The Strange Death of Liberal England* leads him to ask "was there not evident, horrible but inevitable word, a neurosis?"¹⁶ and J.B. Priestley in his work on the Edwardian years says of the large fearful section of the upper middle class who reacted against the various challenges, denunciations, rebellions, all the attempts to break away from the conformity of Victorian England: "Its denunciation, almost always immediate and loud, of anything new in ideas and the arts was neurotic."¹⁷

From an historical point of view, then, Virginia Woolf's choice of the year 1910 as the time when human character seemed to be changing is a perceptive choice. She is after all, talking about changes of feeling that produce changes of convention, and the year 1910 was a moment of radical changes of long-standing social norms. Looking back from 1923, Woolf would not have chosen either the centurial year 1900, or 1901, the death of Victoria, because, especially for her generation—and generational conflict is the issue of the debate with Bennett—those events are not

16. New York, 1935, p. 139.

17. *The Edwardians* (New York, 1970), p. 87.

expressions of changes in the structure of human feelings. There is too much calendar determinism about them; they are events, beyond human control, to which human beings react, not things people do because they feel a certain way. And although this is not strictly true of World War I, the war in its apocalyptic destruction and disillusionment was felt similarly as being beyond the bounds of life, something, again, to which human beings reacted. As Woolf expresses it in her biography of Roger Fry, the war was a "break" in people's lives (p. 200). The death of Edward allowed for the expectations of change and created a susceptibility, anxious and hopeful, of the new; it marked the changes of 1910 which were humanly created, even or especially if they were irrational. The arguments about the Post-Impressionists, the fights between the poor and the rich, the Commons and the Lords, the Irish and the English, Ulster and the South of Ireland, the workers and the masters, men and women, expressed in large, public and violent terms the changes in feeling that were also being expressed in private life.

II

The changes in Virginia Woolf's life history not only fit this general pattern of movement to new possibilities for the self causing a breakdown and then to some new point of stabilization; they also connect directly at the points of Virginia's early activist experiences as a teacher at Morley College, as a volunteer worker for Women's Suffrage, and even as a participant in the Dreadnought Hoax. At the beginning of the year, the time of the first general election, Virginia was working for the suffragist movement; in February she was part of the Dreadnought Hoax; in March she met Roger Fry; during the spring—before the death of Edward VII—summer, and early fall she suffered a series of apparently inexplicable minor breakdowns that necessitated rest cures. By November, the time of the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition, she was better and resumed her activity on behalf of Women's Suffrage for the second general election; in the following year she met Leonard Woolf. The year 1910 was thus a crucial turning point in the life of Virginia herself, as well as that of Roger Fry and the nation.

Up until 1910, the history of Virginia's life is that of coping with the prevalent experience of loss and bereavement caused first by the death of her mother, Julia Duckworth Stephen, in 1895, when Virginia was thirteen; then in 1897 by the sudden death of her half sister, Stella Duckworth, who had taken her mother's place as the woman in the Stephen household; then the death of her father, Leslie Stephen, of cancer in 1904; and finally, the death of her revered older brother Thoby in 1906. The death of her mother is usually considered most critical; because she did not feel what she considered adequate grief at her mother's death, Virginia's feeling of loss was compounded by an exaggerated feeling of

guilt, and her struggle to come to terms with these intense feelings was thwarted at this time by the ambiguous physical attentions, disguised as consoling gestures, of her half brother George Duckworth.

But I think that the loss of Leslie Stephen was equally critical. Even more than his sons, Virginia was Leslie's child, his favorite. He educated her, gave her the run of his great library, and set high standards of taste in art, human relations, and personal achievement. She in turn was the most literary of all his children, and she accepted his career as a man of letters as a model for her own life (the difficulties of this choice for a woman are expressed in *A Room of One's Own*, 1929). The vocational crisis of Virginia's life was therefore not one of choice, but rather of confidence and achievement: could she be the writer she aspired to be? This crisis, which underlies her breakdown of 1910 and her debate with Arnold Bennett, may be said actually to begin with the death of Leslie Stephen in 1904; this was the loss of another part of herself, and a part she wanted to become in the future. Despite her difficulties with this melancholic, self-pitying, irritable man—not the least of which was hatred for whatever part he played in the death of her mother—he was for her more than any of his other children an ideal for herself, and her grief at his death terrified her. The identification was too complete, and three months after his death Virginia broke down completely, this time hearing voices telling her what to do and attempting suicide; at that moment it must have seemed to her that without Leslie there could be no Virginia.

The death of Thoby was doubly significant because she had come to depend on him in the absence of her parents and because his death also caused her to lose the exclusive intimacy with her sister Vanessa (*Letters*, I, 129). As she recovered from the breakdown after her father's death, she moved with her sister and brothers out of the family home at 22 Hyde Park Gate, where she had lived all of her life, not even being sent away to school, into 46 Gordon Square, Bloomsbury. Although in her debate with Bennett she claimed that the houses in which characters live are not so important, the move to this house was liberating, not only because it was an escape from the horrors of the past, but also because it was an escape from the older generation, which in the imposing form of Duckworth and Stephen aunts still wanted to govern the lives of the Stephen children. As Vanessa put it in March 1905: "it is really very ideal to have to arrange for a household all of much the same age. It makes most things very easy & all the difficulties of trying to meet opposite claims & of different generations are done away with. I only wish we could always go on like this. . . ."¹⁸ From this time, Virginia was going to be impatient in meeting the demands of an older generation (especially of writers), for she had found her own place now, but this place was really a refuge, a place to protect the self, not to experiment with it. From this new home she published her first

18. Quoted by Quentin Bell in *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, I (London, 1972), 96. All future references to this work will be cited in the text.

piece, an unsigned review of William Dean Howells' *The Son of Royal Langbrith* in *The Guardian*. She tried to cope with her feelings of bereavement in the way her father had shown her; as she said after his death, in her attempts at writing she was trying "to prove to myself that there was nothing wrong with me—which I was already beginning to fear there was."¹⁹

"Old Bloomsbury" is said to begin in 1905, with Thoby Stephen's "Thursday Evenings" at 46 Gordon Square; at these informal gatherings Virginia and Vanessa, who because they were women were not sent to a university, began to know Thoby's Cambridge friends and to feel the pervasive influence of G.E. Moore. One can appreciate how Virginia, living in her new sanctuary and beginning her career as a literary critic, would respond to the ideology offered by Moore's *Principia Ethica*, for it extended values she had absorbed from her father:

By far the most valuable things which we can know or can imagine are certain states of consciousness, which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse, and the enjoyment of beautiful objects. No one, probably, who has asked himself the question, has ever doubted that personal affection and the appreciation of what is beautiful in Art or Nature, are good in themselves; nor, if we consider strictly what things are worth having *purely for their own sakes*, does it appear probable that any one will think that anything else has nearly so great a value as the things which are included under these two heads.²⁰

But the supreme importance of personal affection was immediately re-experienced by Virginia not in its fulfillment but in its denial. Thoby died of typhoid fever after the Stephen children's trip to Greece, and, within two days, Vanessa in her own illness and mourning had replaced Thoby with Clive Bell, whom she had before refused but now agreed to marry. The double loss of Thoby and Vanessa was a disaster from which Virginia could not easily recover and really did not (*Letters*, I, 303). She tried to evoke Thoby in Jacob in *Jacob's Room* and Percival in *The Waves*, and at the very end of her own life, before her suicide, she was still thinking about him, about all he might have become, about all he would have unconsciously but tellingly achieved to enrich her life as well as his own. Vanessa's precipitous move into physical love and childbearing left Virginia alone to find her own way, and envious of the sexual and maternal satisfactions of love. Virginia's feelings of bereavement, of self-accusing guilt, of anger, were at this time forestalled by her own self-directed efforts, but they re-emerged during her breakdown of 1910.

In 1907, when Vanessa was married, Virginia was 25 years old and still very much in adolescence, with few identifying commitments or relations in her life. But she set about making them by moving with her brother Adrian to a new home at 29 Fitzroy Square and by beginning work on her

19. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, I (London, 1975), 154. All future references to this work will be cited in the text.

20. Cambridge, 1903, 188-89. When she read *Principia Ethica* she said "the more I understand, the more I admire" (*Letters*, I, 364).

first novel, then called *Melymbrosia*, which became after many revisions *The Voyage Out*. And she also did something different from the rather insulated Thursday evenings and Play Readings Society meetings of Bloomsbury. She resumed her teaching at Morley College, an evening institute for working men and women which had been set up as an adjunct to the Old Vic in the Waterloo Road; in all she taught literature and history at Morley for three years (1905-7). In so doing, she was, I think, trying out the possibility of another vocation for herself as a woman; teaching was the most rapidly increasing profession of the Edwardian decade, and were Virginia to fail as a writer, here was another possibility for herself in work. But the problem of work and vocation was not all that drew her to Morley; she was curious and distantly sympathetic towards the working men and women, even if she was often repelled by the conditions of their lives and its effects on them (*Letters*, I, 173). Within the rather stereotypical observations of class difference reported by Virginia in her comments about this experience, there is an understanding of the people's intelligence and integrity. She asked them to write compositions about themselves and was impressed most of all by the ardor of their desire to learn and to improve themselves and by the way this desire was thwarted both by the conditions of their working lives that left them little opportunity or energy to read and write and by the inappropriate organization of the lecture courses at the college. Here she met people, especially women, who, as she put it in a "Report on Teaching at Morley College," "in other circumstances" could have been writers or anything else they wished (Bell, I, Appendix B, 203). This experience awakened Virginia to the aspirations of the working class and to the economic and social circumstances that narrowly circumscribed the possibilities for their lives and, at the other end of the scale, her own as well.

It is not surprising, then, that in 1910 Virginia volunteered to work for Women's Suffrage. From the restrictions she imposed on her participation—she was not going to write papers or give speeches—it is clear that she was not intending to devote herself full-time to the cause, to seek an identity by identifying herself completely with the movement. But that might have been a possibility for her too, just as it was for many other unlikely volunteers who finally did commit themselves entirely and suffered for it, women like her characters Mary Datchett in *Night and Day* and Rose in *The Years*. And Virginia Woolf did try it out. She wrote to her former Greek tutor and friend Janet Case, who involved her in the movement, "You impressed me so much the other night with the wrongness of the present state of affairs that I feel action is necessary" (*Letters*, I, 421). In 1910, the suffragists were engaged in evaluating and educating candidates standing for election to the House of Commons during the two General Elections, and Virginia's work of stuffing and addressing envelopes connected her personal situation as a woman without a vote, not only to an organized group of women dedicated to changing that form

of political discrimination, but also the complex web of related social, economic and political issues that demanded these elections and dominated the election campaigns.

Another less serious, and perhaps less flattering, illustration of Virginia's involvement in the larger public life around her is her participation in "The Dreadnought Hoax." The prank has been given too much attention in Bloomsbury mythology, but it is emblematic. The feelings of all the opposed camps in Britain at the end of Edward's reign seem cumulatively to have produced and even reflected back a general feeling of anxious embattlement that found expression in the widespread fear of invasion. All of the journalism and literature written about invasion during the period appealed to a mood that was part of but deeper than political, economic, and sexual allegiances. In 1909, H.G. Wells, that tireless and shrill prophet, saw in Bleriot's flight across the Channel a warning of Britain's new technological and military vulnerability, and in the same year a great naval scare swept the country, taking the form of a fear that the Germans had secretly accelerated their ship production so that by 1910 they might enjoy numerical superiority of battleships. "We want eight and we won't wait" became the popular cry for the immediate construction of eight dreadnoughts rather than the four that were planned for construction during 1910.

The Dreadnought Hoax was planned and executed by Adrian Stephen and his friend Horace Cole, who had been successful in a similar prank as undergraduates at Cambridge. This time a fraudulent Emperor of Abyssinia and his attendants were to send up the British Navy by penetrating its security and enjoying an official tour of the most modern and secret warship, the H.M.S. *Dreadnought*. The hoax may be seen as a debunking of the widespread invasion fears, a refusal to share in them, as later many friends of the Stephens refused to be conscripted to fight in the War. But I think the joke was another expression of this anxiety, revealed as an attempt to deal with it by making fun of it. Of course, as often happens in cases such as this, the hoax created more anxiety than it dispelled; the easy penetration of the military security by the dramatic arts of the impersonators caused a scandal that was publicized in the press and indignantly debated in the House of Commons. Virginia, who went along for the fun of it (she got to wear a beard), was disturbed by the publicity and the pursuit of reporters and distressed by the consequences for the men, who were, like Duncan Grant, sought out for retribution by navy officers seeking to redeem the honor of their branch of service. As her fragmentary report of the incident shows, Virginia also "came out of it with a new sense of the brutality and silliness of men" (Bell, I, 161 and Appendix E), a perception that reinforced her feminist and suffragist sentiments. The joke turned serious and scary also contributed to her breakdown in the following months of the year.

Quentin Bell says he does not know which specific cause is responsible

for Virginia's breakdown of 1910: "Whether she addressed too many envelopes, or whether the other effects of the 'Dreadnought Hoax' were to blame, or—and this is more likely—whether she had entered into one of those states of acute nervous tension which usually afflicted her when she was coming to the end of a novel (she was now, she thought, nearing the end of *Melymbrosia*) I do not know. But certainly she fell ill in March and was again on the verge of madness" (I, 162-63). I think that most likely it was not just the contemplated end of her novel, but the combination of all these causes, both inner and outer, which built up and broke her down. The problems of who she was going to be (and how) come out of and return to Virginia Woolf's sexual identity: her fears of having to grow up and out of her childhood with her brothers and sisters, her fears that she might not be able as a woman to become a man of letters, her curious trying out of the woman's vocation of teaching, her cautious suffragist political activity, as well as her early love for Madge Vaughan and Violet Dickinson all reveal this underlying concern. These problems show Virginia struggling to work out her sense of herself through the discovery of her generative powers and remaining suspended by the lack of encouraging, definite achievement. And at this time in her life the problems were seriously compounded by the issue of intimacy, by questions of Virginia's capacity for it.

One of the best parts of Bell's biography is his treatment of the relationship between Virginia and Vanessa, their love for one another, their rivalry which issued in envy and jealousy, and their hostility. This relationship took a peculiar direction when, after Thoby's death, Vanessa married Clive Bell. At this time Virginia's early love for Violet Dickinson subsided, and Virginia in an intrusive and threatening way shared in the marriage of Vanessa by carrying on a flirtation with Clive. As Bell points out, the gratifications of such a relation for Virginia were numerous: obviously by fascinating Clive she got back at Vanessa for abandoning her, at a time of painful need, for him; but also, by detaching Clive, Virginia could feel she was getting Vanessa, whom she loved, back to herself again. Also Virginia probably enjoyed being admired as a woman by a man who was not homosexual and who showed himself capable of making women happy; Bell says Clive succeeded "in making her aware of her own normal proclivities, in making her feel the need, which she had not hitherto felt, for a man" (I, 135).

The point I wish to emphasize is that whatever the exciting potential dangers of the affair—Clive would have made love to her had she let him, and she could irrevocably have alienated Vanessa—this was, after all, a safe erotic experience. She could control Clive's advances, and did not have to give in to his sexual desires, and he was, finally, someone else's husband; he was never to engage Virginia in some long-standing relation of real commitment. At this time he posed no genuine threat to her ambivalent sexual self. If Clive did make Virginia aware of her need for a

man, her relationship with him set a pattern of fundamental unseriousness and especially of sexual distance which was repeated in several affairs around 1910. She enjoyed flirtations with men clearly unacceptable to her as companions and lovers, for one reason or another.²¹

Up until 1910, the most significant of Virginia's affairs was with Lytton Strachey. He was sentimentally associated with Thoby, whom he had loved; as part of the Cambridge set he was in sympathetic accord with Virginia's values and literary aspirations. He, too, was a promising intellectual and writer, and this was the primary bond between them; Virginia needed a man, like her brother and father, whose mind she could respect, and Lytton was the most distinguished of her male acquaintances. His homosexuality was reassuring, and Bell reports that Virginia hoped that "as a husband he would not be sexually exigent and a union with him, almost fraternal in character, might perhaps grow by degrees into something real, solid, and deeply affectionate" (I, 141). In 1909 Lytton did propose, but he was so terrified at the thought of sexual intimacy with a woman that he quickly withdrew his proposal. Virginia, however, continued, for a while, to hope for such a marriage and was disappointed and sad that it did not happen. So by 1910 Virginia's timid experimental relations with men had left her alone, with serious questions about herself.

Quentin Bell has suggested that the entrance of Roger Fry into the lives of Vanessa and Clive Bell and the subsequent dissolution of the Bell marriage freed Virginia to think about a marriage of her own. But I think the point is rather that such "freedom" was not liberating; it was threatening to Virginia who did not actually have a marriage of her own to think about and who had fundamental doubts about her capacity to love and be loved. He says also that there was at just this time a marked change in conduct within Bloomsbury, signalled by Vanessa's affair with Fry and her proposal of a libertarian society with sexual freedom for all: "In 1908 Bloomsbury had become licentious in its speech, by 1910 it was becoming licentious in its conduct, or rather licence was no longer the privilege of its homosexual component. Virginia once said that human nature changed in or about December 1910. She is seldom accurate in her use of dates but it is true that the world (or at least her bit of it) was at this time transformed: things were happening which would very much have astonished the maidenly Miss Stephen of 1907" (I, 170). What Bell does not say, but what seems clear, is that for someone as confused, self-suspecting, and frightened as Virginia, who had already suffered traumatic changes within the personal relations of her life, such "licence" was self-destructive. In important, self-limiting ways, Virginia still was the maidenly Miss Stephen because she hadn't successfully come through that stage of her life to be anything else.

In 1910 Virginia was alone and caught up in questions about herself,

21. During the years 1909-11 she carried on such affairs with Hilton Young and Walter Lamb.

her work and love, and in that critical year she broke down, this time from no apparent single cause, as there were in the previous breakdowns at the times of her mother and father's deaths. She was placed in a "home," "Burley," Cambridge Park, Twickenham, which Quentin Bell describes as "a kind of polite madhouse for female lunatics" (I, 164). Her life seemed a failure; as she expressed it in 1911 in a letter to Vanessa: "I could not write, & all the devils came out—hairy black ones. To be 29 & unmarried—to be a failure—Childless—insane too, no writer" (*Letters*, I, 466). Even the syntax has broken down here, revealing the terrifying desperation of having failed utterly, of having done nothing, of being no one—the prolonged adolescent identity crisis complicating and intensifying the succeeding crises of intimacy and generativity.

Therefore I think Woolf is deady accurate about her choice of the date 1910, for the change in her bit of the world (and here I think Bell is showing the Bloomsbury fault of limiting his vision to Bloomsbury occurrences) corresponded to changes going on within the national public life of Britain, and she knew it. During the year of the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition, women, workers, Irishmen, and members of Parliament were changing their ways of regarding themselves and one another; older conventions of thought, feeling, and politics were breaking down without the immediate creation of new structures to take their place. And this was Virginia Woolf's personal problem exactly; the pressured demand for self-definition at just this time when social definitions of self were changing is what I think caused her breakdown at this time. The loss and breakdown of older dependencies had left her free to be herself—but what was that?

III

Virginia Woolf's debilitating uncertainty at this moment in her life is revealed dramatically in the outbreaks of somber tone and the abrupt ending of *The Voyage Out*, the novel she was trying to complete in 1910 and couldn't. It was not finished until 1913, one year after her marriage to Leonard Woolf, who in 1911 returned from seven years civil service in Ceylon to join his friends from Cambridge up in London. Virginia broke down again when Leonard first proposed to her, and her problems in facing this actual marriage also became a part of the novel, strangely refracted. In what seem to be the reassuring observations of social comedy, the novel appears to be building up to some discovery of the heroine's place in her world, but the discovery turns out to be only and disastrously that there is no identifying discovery. The heroine, Rachel Vinrace, is so ambivalent about what is real in the world, in others and in herself, and so frightened by the possibilities presented by sex and love that she cannot do anything except get sick and die. The problem is not just Rachel's inability to make up her mind, but Woolf's inability to make up her own mind about or for Rachel. So she kills her. For Rachel, as for

Virginia Woolf, there are times when she is so diffused as not to be at all, and Rachel, like Virginia, is ominously attracted to the sea and desires to be overcome by it, to go under, as we say. A few months after finishing *The Voyage Out* with Rachel's death, Virginia broke down again and tried to kill herself.

In retrospect, the difficulties of *The Voyage Out* and the union with Leonard reveal that Virginia Woolf never did resolve the issues of her crisis in 1910, that she only worked out some compromise methods for temporarily stabilizing them. Although she loved Leonard, the marriage took the form of a practical partnership for their separate professional lives and an actual partnership in the founding of The Hogarth Press; she never accepted sexual intimacy with a man, and, although she loved other women, such as V. Sackville-West, she did not enjoy physical sex with them either and continued to feel threatened by it. She never did have children, for which she envied Vanessa, and which she wanted badly for herself, at least in fantasy. She remained uncertain about the efficacy of political activism, gradually withdrawing her own participation as Leonard's increased. Given her subsequent breakdowns and attempts at self-destruction and her death by suicide in 1941, another time of national crisis, one cannot say that she was cured or that her life turned completely around from 1910 with the marriage to Leonard and the publication of her first novel. But I do think these two related events allowed her to gain a sufficient sense of coping directly with immediate problems of love and work to move out of the crisis of suspension and breakdown of 1910 into the life and art she could make for herself with Leonard, a life's work of distinguished achievement against real and great dangers. From the perspective of 1923, the moment of 1910 must have appeared to her as the turning point in her life, as well as that of Roger Fry and her whole generation.

By the time of the publication of *Jacob's Room* and her debate with Arnold Bennett, Virginia Woolf had established herself as an essayist and novelist. In 1917 alone she published 32 reviews, and after *The Voyage Out* (1913-14) she went on to write and publish *Night and Day* (1919), a book she called her novel of "fact." Like its predecessor it was an attempt at a conventional realistic novel, depending for technique primarily on external observations of characters, their homes and places of work, their clothes, gestures, and conversation. These books were well received and Virginia took confidence from the favorable notices; they were more than praise, they were certificates of sanity (Bell, II, 29), and her attempts to present in these books the consensus view of what constituted social reality, at least in fiction, were deliberate efforts to show that she could do it, that she was all right. But undermining the realistic methods of these conventional novels is the persistent question, voiced by both characters and narrator, what is real? As much as she tried for and welcomed the success of the books, Virginia also came to feel that they were false

representations of life as she experienced it: "I am sure the facts of life—the marryings and bearings and burings are the least important and one acts one's drama under the hat. . ." (*Letters*, I, 71).

She felt this way now because for her the events of 1910 implied that conventions for the social representation of character no longer worked: actual social definitions had broken down. She felt guilty of selling out, of betraying what she called her "vision" as opposed to normally accepted "fact." The identity she gained with these books was a lie. I think it is because she wrote these novels, rather than because the Edwardians wrote theirs, that Virginia Woolf set out in her essay "Modern Fiction" (1919) what *she* ought rather to be doing in the form of an attack on Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy. In this essay we can see her sense that social categories were breaking down becoming transformed into a belief that social reality was not real at all, that only personal states of consciousness constituted "reality." Here life is redefined to be not socially observable facts, but the sensations of perception on consciousness, the feel of life as it is experienced by an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. Within this articulation of subjective impressionism (to be distinguished from the objective and scientific goals of the earlier impressionist movement in painting), there is the distinct tone of personal encouragement and even admonition. Woolf, after the general break-up of the Great War, is struggling to make a virtue of what was for her a necessity, to make the weakness of her life into the strength of her art. This is how her experience of 1910 influences directly her "manifesto" for the future of the novel.

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it. (*Essays*, II, 106)²²

In her fight with Bennett, Virginia Woolf was first of all trying to discard a false self, a fake identity, for something more authentic. And she did more than argue; between 1916 and 1920 she began experimenting with representing life in flashes, as it was apprehended within the consciousnesses of her characters. These experiments were in the form of

22. The original version of this essay appeared as "Modern Novels" in *TLS*, April 10, 1919, pp. 189-90; revised, it was reprinted as "Modern Fiction" in *The Common Reader* (1925).

sketches and short stories ("The Mark on the Wall," "Kew Gardens," and "An Unwritten Novel"), eight of which she published in a volume called *Monday or Tuesday* (1921), the title coming directly out of her essay on modern fiction. In seeking to present the human consciousness bombarded with impressions, these stories are technically a better expression of her sense of the confusing way life is perceived as real and familiar one moment, strange and frightening the next; the vision is the same as in the earlier novels, but the effort here is to get beyond accepted formulations of what is out there, formulations that actually prevent people from noticing anything directly, to some confrontation with what is felt to be there as it is apprehended. For Woolf what is real remains elusive, and so elusiveness becomes the definition of what is real; consensus formulations are no longer acceptable—they are regarded, in the novels of the Edwardians and in *Night and Day*, as easy, cheap and false.

In arguing with herself in the person of Arnold Bennett and in working on and off at her short stories, Virginia Woolf prepared herself for the great imaginative effort of *Jacob's Room*, of creating a new form for her novels. In language that repeats the diction of her essay "Modern Fiction," she recorded in her *Diary* that she wanted to "enclose the human heart"; there was to be nothing of material significance, "no scaffolding, scarcely a brick to be seen, all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist" (p. 23). *Jacob's Room* was, then, really an illustration and extension—a realization—of the theoretical argument of Woolf's 1919 essay on fiction. The novel is also about the Edwardian years before the war; Jacob is based on Thoby, who also died young, but Jacob (as the surname Flanders emphasizes) is killed fighting in the war, and once again Virginia's personal feeling, here of loss and the futility of recapturing the reality of a person she loved, merges with the larger public feeling of bereavement for all the young men who never returned from the front, and with the aesthetic problem of character in the novel.

Jacob's Room is precisely about the way Edwardian conventions of "solid" representations of character fail to represent Jacob: Cambridge, his room, his shoes are not Jacob. The play with materialistic and architectural imagery is deliberate; for, as Virginia Woolf said in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," the Edwardians "have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things. They have given us a house in the hope that we may deduce the human beings who live there. . . . But if you hold that novels are in the first place about people, and only second in the houses they live in, that is the wrong way to set about it" (*Essays*, I, 332). One can even sense here the motivating impulse behind *The Waves*, Woolf's later development of the conception of *Jacob's Room*, in which not only houses and furniture, but even bodies are dematerialized, leaving only voices in the air. The point dramatized by the glimpses of Jacob through the moment of vision of other characters is that "It is no use trying to sum

people up" (p. 153): "life is but a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows. And why, if this and much more than this is true, why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us—why indeed? For the moment after we know nothing about him" (p. 71).²³

Jacob's Room is a significant book, marking the beginning of Virginia Woolf's maturity and fame, and it was appropriately the first full-length book, though actually printed in Edinburgh, to be published by her own press, both built up with great determination and effort over the years since 1910. Most of all, as she recorded in her *Diary* when she finished it, she was satisfied and encouraged: "I am on the whole pleased. . . . There's no doubt in my mind that I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice. . . ." (p. 47). Her feelings were confirmed by friends like T.S. Eliot, who best expressed what she wanted to hear: "You have freed yourself from any compromise between the traditional novel and your original gift. It seems to me that you have bridged a certain gap which existed between your other novels and the experimental prose of *Monday or Tuesday* and that you have made a remarkable success" (Bell, II, 88). This is exactly when and what Arnold Bennett criticized, raising up again all of her persistent adolescent uncertainties about herself and her work.²⁴

To survive she had to lash out in protest against his attribution of failure and blame to her; she fought so hard against him in order to resist being reduced, by an older, successful man, to a girl again, as she was after the death of her father, to being nothing but a failure as she felt in 1910. Indeed the causes of Woolf's excessive reaction to Bennett's criticism may lie deeper than the aesthetic and historical. She responded to no other critic as she did to Arnold Bennett because the complexity and persistence of her concern with his judgment seem to be bound up with

23. Lawrence, whose *The Lost Girl* (1920) was a critical re-working of Bennett's *Anna*, had his own argument with what he regarded as Bennett's unheroic acceptance of the facts of oppressive life in the Five Towns. But formally his objection was similar to that of Virginia Woolf: both were objecting to what Lawrence called "the old stable ego of character" (*The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, edited by Aldous Huxley [New York, 1932], pp. 197-98), determined in the novel by either prevailing moral or social formulae. Lawrence was trying to get at what he called "another ego," deeper and unconscious but integrated and stable. Whereas Virginia Woolf was intent on showing that the reality of solid facts is what she called "a procession of shadows" and that the ego is essentially unstable. As she put it in *A Room of One's Own*, "What is meant by 'reality'? It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable—now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now a daffodil in the sun" (165).

24. The time of the publication of *Jacob's Room* was difficult for Arnold Bennett. He, too, had painfully and self-consciously struggled to make his life as a writer, and now his place as what he called a "big novelist" was being threatened just when there was a definite falling off in the quality of his fiction. Walter Allen has pictured him as a kind of "war casualty," saying "In 1914 Bennett was a brilliant novelist, after 1914 he was generally no more than a brilliant journalist" (*Arnold Bennett* [London, 1948], p. 35). In 1921 Bennett was separated from his wife, and in 1922 his successful agent, J.B. Pinker, on whom he was heavily dependent for managing his career, died. And there were all these young novelists challenging his achievements. These were, as he foresaw in his 1910 essay on the Post-Impressionists, "disturbing days."

her submerged conflict with the older generation in her life, especially her father.²⁵ That Bennett was older, coming in the overlapping life span between Leslie Stephen and Virginia Woolf, a man, a success as a writer, and an asserter of facts, made him a convenient substitute for her father, against whom she did not and could not rebel directly to define herself. To see her animus against Bennett as motivated solely by class bias, as Hynes and Margaret Drabble do, is to limit the issues and the passion they evoked in Virginia; that Bennett was from a lower and intellectually less distinguished part of the middle class than Virginia Woolf matters, of course: Bloomsbury never could tolerate ascendant men on the make, and Bennett was unashamedly that. But it matters primarily because it allowed Virginia Woolf to release her repressed anguish and hostilities against her father; it made it all right to do so. This is why we cannot deny her insistence, maintained in both versions of "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," that the issue is fundamentally a generational one.

Leslie Stephen was an eminent Victorian who might well have been included in Lytton Strachey's revisionist attack; his choice of Virginia as the child who would justify him precipitated Virginia's struggle for her own identity, and her loss of his presence as an ideal at a critical time in her life made her reverence rather than criticize him—especially because she had wished he would die and get it over with as he was dying of cancer (*Letters*, I, 75). The portraits of Stephen that Virginia Woolf provided for Maitland's hagiographical study and for a *Times* article in 1932 are full of love and admiration unqualified by any criticism;²⁶ in them Virginia repeats and emphasizes the words of her godfather James Russell Lowell declaring Stephen the "most lovable of men." Even the portrait of Mr. Ramsey in *To The Lighthouse*, telling as it is on particular points of conduct and character, is more reverential than critical; both Virginia and Vanessa thought the portraits of their parents in that novel accurate and loving. Moreover, in marrying Leonard Woolf, Virginia married a man who resembled her father; she described him as a penniless Jew who was going to make her work, as her father had done—who would divorce her if she stopped (*Letters*, II, 500, 502)—and much of her hostility toward Leonard Woolf, which came out during her breakdowns, when Leonard took on the role of an especially stern parent, also gets displaced onto Arnold Bennett.

There are also several key points of comparison between Leslie Stephen and Arnold Bennett that make such a substitution likely: they both came out of the Evangelical tradition; they both saw life as a struggle with little consolation except the effort of the struggle itself; they were both con-

25. When Virginia was struggling unsuccessfully with *The Voyage Out*, she wrote to Clive Bell "I dreamt last night that I was showing father the manuscript of my novel; and he snorted, and dropped it on to a table, and I was very melancholy, and read it this morning, and thought it bad" (*Letters*, I, 325).

26. Francis William Maitland, *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* (New York and London, 1906); "Leslie Stephen, The Philosopher At Home: A Daughter's Memories," *The Times*, 28 November 1932, 15-16 (published on the centenary of Sir Leslie Stephen's birth; reprinted in *Essays*, IV, 76-80).

cerned with money and the cost of things—(this was Leslie Stephen's primary hold on the affection of his family: as he repeatedly told them, but for him they would be "going to the workhouse")²⁷; they were both concerned with empirical evidence, with hard facts; and they both held static views of human character. They were both successful journalists, accepting popular standards as much as they sought to educate their audiences to something better.

As Wells said after his savage and unfair attack on Henry James in *Boon*: "There was no other antagonist possible than yourself."²⁸ Arnold Bennett was the only one who attacked Virginia Woolf to whom she reacted so openly; to become whatever she might she had to fight him however she could. So the conflict cannot be "reduced" to an unconscious struggle with her father, or to any other single cause. It is too complex for that; even Freud, at his most convincing, demonstrates that our intensest impulses are "overdetermined" and therefore must be "over-interpreted."²⁹ Virginia Woolf fought Bennett on all fronts: aesthetically, historically, sociologically, generationally, sexually.³⁰

From our knowledge of the novels Virginia Woolf went on to write after this moment, after *Jacob's Room* and the debate with Bennett, we can see what she sought in consolidating diffused elements of her own life at a time when everyone was going on from destruction and death and bereavement to find what could sustain them in the post-war world. She did not want a socially committed, obligating fiction that reduces human character to "social character," either meticulously described as determined by its environment, as in naturalism, or formulated in rebellious therapy, or revolutionary cause. But neither did she want depth psychology (in art or life, for she was never analyzed), for that too reduced human character to limited types and actions. Coming out of her experiences of 1910, her ambivalence toward radical social change and irrational passion kept Virginia Woolf on the more manageable stream of consciousness, where the isolated and uncertain ego transforms inner and outer forces into personally coherent and meaningful moments of creative vision. Rather than public "character," she sought "personality," that discrete and shapely version of a self, conscious from moment to moment of its differences from nature and others. In this way Woolf embodied all the insecurity and anxiety of her time which found no relief in faith and action, and this is the extent and the limit of her achievement. To Virginia Woolf looking back in 1923 a unified communal life no longer seemed possible after

27. See Noel Gilroy Annan, *Leslie Stephen, His Thought and Character in Relation to His Time* (Cambridge, Ma., 1952), p. 71.

28. Quoted in *Henry James and H.G. Wells, A Record of their Friendship, their Debate on the Art of Fiction, and their Quarrel*, edited by Leon Edel and Gordon N. Ray (London, 1958), p. 224.

29. *Interpretation of Dreams*, VI, B, (Avon Books, New York, 1965), 343.

30. Part of Woolf's argument at this time is that the novel has been a traditionally masculine form and that it must be made over by feminine writers; she makes this point emphatically in a review of Dorothy Richardson's *The Tunnel* (1919; reprinted in *Contemporary Writers*, p. 124) as well as *A Room of One's Own*, where she concludes that "a great mind is androgynous" (p. 147).

December 1910; the issue was the survival of the self. She sought sanctuary in sensibility because she felt the history of her life and times pressing on her with tremendous force, and because the most available and personally suitable ideology was, from her beginnings, that of the cultivated self.

Colby College