

The Essays of Virginia Woolf

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EDITED BY

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Modern Novels

In making any survey, even the freest and loosest, of modern fiction it is difficult not to take it for granted that the modern practice of the art is somehow an improvement upon the old. With their simple tools and

primitive materials, it might be said, Fielding did well and Jane Austen² even better, but compare their opportunities with ours! Their masterpieces certainly have a strange air of simplicity. And yet the analogy between literature and the process, to choose an example, of making bicycles scarcely holds good beyond the first glance. It is doubtful whether in the course of the centuries, though we have learnt much about making machines, we have learnt anything about making literature. We do not come to write better; all that we can be said to do is to keep moving, now a little in this direction, now in that, but with a circular tendency should the whole course of the track be viewed from a sufficiently lofty pinnacle. It need scarcely be said that we make no claim to stand even momentarily upon that vantage ground; we seem to see ourselves on the flat, in the crowd, half blind with dust, and looking back with a sort of envy at those happy warriors whose battle is won and whose achievements wear so serene an air of accomplishment that in our envy we can scarcely refrain from whispering that the prize was not so rare, nor the battle so fierce, as our own. Let the historian of literature decide. It is for him, too, to ascertain whether we are now at the beginning, or middle, or end, of a great period of prose fiction; all that we ourselves can know is that, whatever stage we have reached, we are still in the thick of the battle. This very sense of heights reached by others and unassailable by us, this envious belief that Fielding, Thackeray,³ or Jane Austen were set an easier problem, however triumphantly they may have solved it, is a proof, not that we have improved upon them, still less that we have given up the game and left them the victors, but only that we still strive and press on.

Our quarrel, then, is not with the classics, and if we speak of quarrelling with Mr Wells, Mr Bennett and Mr Galsworthy⁴ it is partly that by the mere fact of their existence in the flesh their work has a living, breathing, everyday imperfection which bids us take what liberties with it we choose. But it is also true that, while we thank them for a thousand gifts, we reserve our unconditional gratitude for Mr Hardy, for Mr Conrad, and in a much lesser degree for the Mr Hudson of *The Purple Land*, *Green Mansions*, and *Far Away and Long Ago*.⁵ The former, differently and in different measures, have excited so many hopes and disappointed them so persistently that our gratitude largely takes the form of thanking them for having shown us what it is that we certainly could not do, but as certainly, perhaps, do not wish to do. No single phrase will sum up the charge or grievance which we have to bring against a mass of work so large in its volume and embodying so many

qualities, both admirable and the reverse. If we tried to formulate our meaning in one word we should say that these three writers are materialists, and for that reason have disappointed us and left us with the feeling that the sooner English fiction turns its back upon them, as politely as may be, and marches, if only into the desert, the better for its soul. Of course, no single word reaches the centre of three separate targets. In the case of Mr Wells it falls notably wide of the mark. And yet even in his case it indicates to our thinking the fatal alloy in his genius, the great clod of clay that has got itself mixed up with the purity of his inspiration. But Mr Bennett is perhaps the worst culprit of the three, inasmuch as he is by far the best workman. He can make a book so well constructed and solid in its craftsmanship that it is difficult for the most exacting of critics to see through what chink or crevice decay can creep in. There is not so much as a draught between the frames of the windows, or a crack in the boards. And yet — if life should refuse to live there? That is a risk which the creator of *The Old Wives' Tale*, George Cannon, Edwin Clayhanger,⁶ and hosts of other figures, may well claim to have surmounted. His characters live abundantly, even unexpectedly, but it still remains to ask how do they live, and what do they live for? More and more they seem to us, deserting even the well-built villa in the Five Towns, to spend their time in some softly padded first-class railway carriage, fitted with bells and buttons innumerable; and the destiny to which they travel so luxuriously becomes more and more unquestionably an eternity of bliss spent in the very best hotel in Brighton. It can scarcely be said of Mr Wells that he is a materialist in the sense that he takes too much delight in the solidity of his fabric. His mind is too generous in its sympathies to allow him to spend much time in making things shipshape and substantial. He is a materialist from sheer goodness of heart, taking upon his shoulders the work that ought to have been discharged by Government officials, and in the plethora of his ideas and facts scarcely having leisure to realise, or forgetting to think important, the crudity and coarseness of his human beings. Yet what more damaging criticism can there be both of his earth and of his Heaven than that they are to be inhabited here and hereafter by his Joans and Peters? Does not the inferiority of their natures tarnish whatever institutions and ideals may be provided for them by the generosity of their Creator? Nor, profoundly though we respect the integrity and humanity of Mr Galsworthy, shall we find what we seek in his pages.

We have to admit that we are exacting, and further, that we find it difficult to justify this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and

"bricks"

F.M.F.
P.C.

How:
materialism →
conscience
elements

refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide. Nevertheless we go on perseveringly, conscientiously, constructing our thirty-two chapters after a design which more and more ceases to resemble the vision in our minds. So much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labour misplaced to the extent of obscuring and blotting out the light of the conception. The mediocrity of most novels seems to arise from a conviction on the part of the writer that unless his plot provides scenes of tragedy, comedy, and excitement, an air of probability, so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button in the fashion of the hour, he has failed in his duty to the public. If this, roughly as we have stated it, represents his vision, his mediocrity may be said to be natural rather than imposed; but as often as not we may suspect some moment of hesitation in which the question suggests itself whether life is like this after all? Is it not possible that the accent falls a little differently, that the moment of importance came before or after, that, if one were free and could set down what one chose, there would be no plot, little probability, and a vague general confusion in which the clear-cut features of the tragic, the comic, the passionate, and the lyrical were dissolved beyond the possibility of separate recognition? The mind, exposed to the ordinary course of life, receives upon its surface a myriad impressions — trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms, composing in their sum what we might venture to call life itself; and to figure further as the semi-transparent envelope, or luminous halo, surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not perhaps the chief task of the novelist to convey this incessantly varying spirit with whatever stress or sudden deviation it may display, and as little admixture of the alien and external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; but suggesting that the proper stuff for fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it.

In some such fashion as this do we seek to define the element which distinguishes the work of several young writers, among whom Mr James Joyce⁷ is the most notable, from that of their predecessors. It attempts to come closer to life, and to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves them by discarding most of the conventions which are commonly observed by the novelists. Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern,

plot probability, form
narrative form (32 chaps)
1919
spiritual vs. fully envelope
double
triple
the better

(15)

however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small. Any one who has read *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or what promises to be a far more interesting work, *Ulysses*, now appearing in the *Little Review*, will have hazarded some theory of this nature as to Mr Joyce's intention.⁸ On our part it is hazarded rather than affirmed; but whatever the exact intention there can be no question but that it is of the utmost sincerity and that the result, difficult or unpleasant as we may judge it, is undeniably distinct. In contrast to those whom we have called materialists Mr Joyce is spiritual; concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its myriad messages through the brain, he disregards with complete courage whatever seems to him adventitious, though it be probability or coherence or any other of the handrails to which we cling for support when we set our imaginations free. Faced, as in the Cemetery scene, by so much that, in its restless scintillations, in its irrelevance, its flashes of deep significance succeeded by incoherent inanities, seems to be life itself, we have to fumble rather awkwardly if we want to say what else we wish; and for what reason a work of such originality yet fails to compare, for we must take high examples, with 'Youth' or *Jude the Obscure*.⁹ It fails, one might say simply, because of the comparative poverty of the writer's mind. But it is possible to press a little further and wonder whether we may not refer our sense of being in a bright and yet somehow strictly confined apartment rather than at large beneath the sky to some limitation imposed by the method as well as by the mind. Is it due to the method that we feel neither jovial nor magnanimous, but centred in a self which in spite of its tremor of susceptibility never reaches out or embraces or comprehends what is outside and beyond? Does the emphasis laid perhaps didactically upon indecency contribute to this effect of the angular and isolated? Or is it merely that in any effort of such courage the faults as well as the virtues are left naked to the view? In any case we need not attribute too much importance to the method. Any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express. This one has the merit of giving closer shape to what we were prepared to call life itself; did not the reading of *Ulysses* suggest how much of life is excluded and ignored, and did it not come with a shock to open *Tristram Shandy* and even *Pendennis*,¹⁰ and be by them convinced that there are other aspects of life, and larger ones into the bargain?

However this may be, the problem before the novelist at present, as we

suppose it to have been in the past, is to contrive a means of being free to set down what he chooses. He has to have the courage to say that what interests him is no longer this, but that; out of 'that' alone must he construct his work. The tendency of the moderns and part of their perplexity is no doubt that they find their interest more and more in [the dark region of psychology.] At once therefore the accent falls a little differently; it becomes apparent that the emphasis is upon something hitherto ignored or unstressed in that relation, a feeling, a point of view suggesting a different and obscure outline of form, incomprehensible to our predecessors. No one but a modern, perhaps no one but a Russian, would have felt the interest of the situation which Tchekov has made into the short story which he calls 'Gusev'.¹¹ Some Russian soldiers are lying ill in the hospital of a ship which is taking them back to Russia. We are given scraps of their talk; a few of their thoughts; then one of the soldiers dies, and is taken away; the talk goes on among the others for a time; until Gusev himself dies and, looking 'like a carrot or a radish',¹² is thrown overboard. The emphasis is laid upon such unexpected places that at first it seems as if there were no emphasis at all; and then, as the eyes accustom themselves to twilight and discern the shapes of things in a room, we see how complete the story is, how profound, and how truly in obedience to his vision Tchekov has chosen this, that, and the other, and placed them together to compose something new. But it is impossible to say that this is humorous or that tragic, or even that it is proper to call the whole a short story, since the writer seems careless of brevity and intensity, and leaves us with the suggestion that the strange chords he has struck sound on and on. There is, perhaps, no need that a short story should be brief and intense, as there is perhaps no answer to the questions which it raises.

The most inconclusive remarks upon modern English fiction can hardly avoid some mention of the Russian influence, and if the Russians are mentioned one runs the risk of feeling that to write of any fiction save theirs is a waste of time. If we want understanding of the soul and heart where else shall we find it of comparable profundity? If we are sick of our own materialism the least considerable of their novelists has by right of birth a natural reverence for the human spirit. 'Learn to make yourself akin to people . . . but let this sympathy be not with the mind – for it is easy with the mind – but with the heart, with love towards them.'¹³ In every great Russian writer we seem to discern the features of a saint, if sympathy for the sufferings of others, love towards them, endeavour to reach some goal worthy of the most exacting demands of the spirit

constitute saintliness. It is the saint in them which confounds us with a feeling of our own irreligious triviality, and turns so many of our famous novels to tinsel and trickery. The conclusions of the Russian mind, thus comprehensive and compassionate, are inevitably perhaps of the utmost sadness. It might indeed be more true to speak of the inconclusiveness of the Russian mind. It is the sense that there is no answer, that if honestly examined life presents question after question which must be left to sound on and on after the story is over in hopeless interrogation that fills us with a deep, and finally it may be with a resentful, despair. They are right perhaps; unquestionably they see further than we do and without our gross impediments of vision. But perhaps we see something that escapes them, or why should this voice of protest mix itself with our gloom? The voice of protest is the voice of another and an ancient civilisation which seems to have bred in us the instinct to enjoy and fight rather than to suffer and understand. English fiction from Sterne to Meredith¹⁴ bears witness to our natural delight in humour and comedy, in the beauty of earth, in the activities of the intellect, and in the splendour of the body. But any deductions that we may draw from the comparison of one fiction with another are futile, save as they flood us with a view of infinite possibilities, assure us that there is no bound to the horizon, and nothing forbidden but falsity and pretence. The proper stuff of fiction' does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction; whatever one honestly thinks, whatever one honestly feels. No perception comes amiss; every good quality whether of the mind or spirit is drawn upon and used and turned by the magic of art to something little or large, but endlessly different, everlastingly new. All that fiction asks of us is that we should break her and bully her, honour and love her, till she yields to our bidding, for so her youth is perpetually renewed and her sovereignty assured.

1—An essay in the *TLS*, 10 April 1919, (Kp C147) which VW substantially revised and included, under the title 'Modern Fiction', in *CR* 1 (see *IV VW Essays*); see Editorial Note, p. xxiii. See also 'On Re-reading Novels', 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' and 'Character in Fiction' below. Reading Notes (Berg, xxxi).

2—Henry Fielding (1707–54); Jane Austen (1775–1817).

3—W. M. Thackeray (1811–63).

4—H. G. Wells (1866–1946), on whose *Joan and Peter* (1918) VW wrote in 'The Rights of Youth', *II VW Essays*; Arnold Bennett (1867–1931); John Galsworthy (1867–1933), on whose *Beyond* (1917) VW wrote in 'Mr Galsworthy's Novel', *II VW Essays*.

5—Thomas Hardy (1840–1928); Joseph Conrad (1857–1924); W. H. Hudson

(1841–1922), *The Purple Land* (1885), *Green Mansions* (1904), and *Far Away and Long Ago* (1918), for VW's review of which see 'Mr Hudson's Childhood' in *II VW Essays*.

6—*The Old Wives' Tale* (1908); George Cannon appears in the 'Clayhanger' trilogy (*Clayhanger*, 1910, *Hilda Lessways*, 1911, *These Twain*, 1916).

7—James Joyce (1882–1941).

8—*Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916–17), *Ulysses* (1922). As early as April 1918 Harriet Weaver had approached the Woolfs in the hope that The Hogarth Press might publish the whole of *Ulysses* (of which the first thirteen episodes, and a part of the fourteenth, had started appearing in the *Little Review* the previous month, continuing until December 1920), but for several reasons, legal and practical, this proved impossible. However, VW made reading notes on those episodes that appeared in the *Little Review* March–October 1918. Reading Notes (Berg xxxi).

9—'Youth' (1902); for VW's views upon it see 'Mr Conrad's Youth', *II VW Essays*. Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1896).

10—*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759–67) by Laurence Sterne and *The History of Pendennis* (1848–50) by W. M. Thackeray.

11—For this story see *The Witch and Other Stories* by Anton Tchekhov (1860–1904), trans. Constance Garnett (Chatto & Windus, 1918), a volume discussed by VW in 'Tchekhov's Questions', *II VW Essays*.

12—*The Witch and Other Stories*, 'Gusev', p. 166: 'Sewn up in the sail cloth he looked like a carrot or a radish: broad at the head and narrow at the feet . . .'

13—*The Village Priest, and Other Stories* by Elena Militsina and Mikhail Saltikov, trans. from the Russian by Beatrix L. Tollemache, with an intro. by C. Hagberg Wright (T. Fisher Unwin, 1918), the title story, by Militsina, p. 34; the ellipsis marks the omission of: 'I would even like to add: make yourself indispensable to them'. The full passage is quoted in 'The Russian View', *II VW Essays*; see also 'The Russian Point of View', *IV VW Essays* and *CR* 1.

14—Laurence Sterne (1713–68); George Meredith (1828–1909).

The Novels of Defoe

VW's essay in the *TLS*, 24 April 1919, (Kp C148) on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the publication of *Robinson Crusoe* was later revised for inclusion, under the title 'Defoe', in *The Common Reader*: 1st series (1925). The reader is referred to *IV VW Essays*, where the revised version, together with variants in the form of footnotes, is reprinted in its place as part of *The Common Reader*.