

“*But We Argued About Novel-Writing*”:
Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster
and the Art of Fiction

ANN HENLEY

IN HIS “Introductory” to *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster invites his audience to imagine the glorious company of English novelists “seated together in a room, a circular room, a sort of British Museum reading-room — all writing their novels simultaneously” (9). And so I invite you to adopt a similar stratagem and picture the two novelists who are the subject of this study — Forster and Virginia Woolf — seated, as they often were in fact, on either side of a smaller table in a more intimate room, a room in Forster’s Cambridge lodgings, or at tea in a Bloomsbury town-house or at Monk’s House, the Woolfs’ weekend residence in Sussex.

Woolf describes one such session in a letter to Vanessa Bell dated 19 May 1926: “Morgan came to tea yesterday,” she says, “but we argued about novel writing, which I will not fret your ears with” (266). This argument spills far beyond the edges of the 1926 tea table and permeates the novels and critical writings of both Woolf and Forster. One might say that chronologically the argument began in 1908 — when, as a novice reviewer of books, Virginia Stephen applauded “the cleverness, the sheer fun, and the occasional beauty” (221) of E. M. Forster’s latest novel, *A Room with a View* — and ended in 1941 with Forster’s Rede Lecture on Woolf at Cambridge just a few months before her death. In a larger sense, however, the dialogue continues today: not only does it mark off the fields of difference between the two most prominent literary figures in the Bloomsbury coterie and thus illuminate their novels as we read them, but it also isolates the aesthetic issues at stake in the first decades of the twentieth century. Many of the principles of modernism were forged, according to Michael H.

Levenson, in the heat of active debate between certain of its fabricators — T. E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Ford Madox Ford, and T. S. Eliot (x). Woolf and Forster's sparring was the same kind of formative dialogue: each forced the other to clarify his or her conception of the novel, to articulate the essential principles that, in their differing views, made fiction an art. In Forster's responses to Woolf's comments, we find a defence of the novel as a perpetuator of traditional values and a transmitter of belief; while Woolf, in her reactions to Forster's criticism, becomes increasingly the champion of an objective, self-sufficient, endlessly experimental art form.

The verbal duelling increases in interest when we see it in the context of the two novelists' long-standing but problematical friendship. Forster was one of the Cambridge graduates who gravitated to the Stephen siblings' Bloomsbury flat, but his somewhat sporadic association with the "Bloomsberries" was due primarily to his profound admiration for Leonard Woolf. Of Virginia herself Forster was wary: "One waited for her to snap," he said (Furbank II, 18). He confided to Quentin Bell that "she was always very sweet to me, but I don't think she was particularly fond of me, if that's the word" (II, 133). If she was "sweet" to the skittish Forster publicly, privately she was often scathing: the letter to Vanessa Bell quoted earlier, for example, describes Forster as "limp and damp and milder than the breath of a cow." Nonetheless, throughout her twenty-five-year career as a novelist, Woolf's desire for Forster's critical approbation was ardent and undiminished. When he wrote in 1919 that he liked *Night and Day* far less than *The Voyage Out*, Woolf had to struggle to take the criticism philosophically: "This rubbed out all the pleasure of the rest," she says in her diary. The next week, however, she was able to comment, "I see it is not a criticism to discourage. . . . Morgan has the artist's mind; he says the simple things that clever people don't say; I find him the best of critics for that reason" (20). And in 1940, when her fame as a novelist was undisputed, she all but held her breath as she waited for Forster's reaction to the Roger Fry biography: "And I fear Morgan will say — just enough to show he doesn't like, but is kind" (325). For his part Forster admired Woolf both as a novelist whose visionary quality corresponded to

his wishes for his own fiction (Furbank II, 18) and as an authority on British literature. It was, in fact, in this latter capacity that he sought her advice at the contention-riddled tea table. Having been asked to deliver the Clark Lectures at Cambridge, the series subsequently published as *Aspects of the Novel*, Forster came to Woolf to find out how to lecture on novels and what novels he ought to include (Rosenbaum 58). She was to his mind the one member of an extraordinarily learned literary circle best equipped to give sound advice in both areas.

The teapot's lid was blown, in effect, by Woolf's two responses to *Aspects of the Novel* — a review, later entitled "The Art of Fiction," in October 1927; and an essay in *Atlantic Monthly*, "The Novels of E. M. Forster," the next month. These three works — plus Forster's "The Early Novels of Virginia Woolf," his Rede Lecture, and Woolf's "Modern Fiction" and "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" — comprise the ongoing debate. Taken together they abstract the two aspects of novel writing — character and artistic vision — which separate most emphatically the two teacups on the Bloomsbury table.

Having followed Forster's lead and dispensed altogether with chronology, we are free to begin tracing the Woolf-Forster disagreement at its conclusion, the 1941 Rede Lecture, for this is the document that divides the debate most neatly into two spheres. After discussing at some length Woolf's strengths as a novelist, Forster comes to what he calls "her problem's center," that is, "can she create character?" Woolf had, Forster recognizes, some skill in creating characters who were not "unreal . . . who lived well enough on the page"; her great flaw as a novelist was her inability to imbue her characters with "life eternal":

She could seldom so portray a character that it was remembered afterward on its own account. . . . Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay do remain with the reader afterwards and so perhaps do Rachel from *The Voyage Out* and Clarissa Dalloway. For the rest — it is impossible to maintain that here is an immortal portrait gallery. . . . (245)

Woolf's difficulty with character absorbs Forster here as it had sixteen years before in his essay "The Early Novels of Virginia Woolf." Her first four novels had convinced Forster that here was a writer whose technical virtuosity clearly forecast a new era in the

history of the novel. "But," he objects, "what of the subject that she regards as of the highest importance: human beings as a whole and as wholes?" (113). He continues: "The problem that she has set herself and that certainly would inaugurate a new literature if solved — is to retain her own wonderful new method and form, and yet allow her readers to inhabit each character with Victorian thoroughness" (114). Forster invites his readers to consider how difficult "this problem" is (and here he is speaking specifically of *Mrs. Dalloway*):

If you work in a storm of atoms and seconds, if your highest joy is "life; London; this moment in June" and your deepest mystery "here is one room; there another," then how can you construct your human beings so that each shall be not a movable monument but an abiding home, how can you build between them any permanent roads of love and hate? (114)

The image of the novelist as architect or civil engineer is apposite when one considers the two chapters Forster devotes to character in *Aspects of the Novel*, for in this work he makes it clear that characters in a novel, whatever the depth and complexity of their inner lives, function to satisfy the demands of other aspects of the novel. "We are concerned," he says, "with the characters in their relation . . . to a plot, a moral, their fellow characters, atmosphere, etc. They will have to adapt themselves to other requirements of their creator" (65). Again and again the utility of character is stressed. A novelist, Forster tells us, has two "devices" to help him cope with the trials which beset him: one device is point of view, and the other is the "use" of different kinds of characters (67).

Indeed, Forster's characters failed to convince Woolf precisely because they are so tightly hitched to their creator's intentions. Her review of *A Room with a View* expresses her disappointment with Forster's treatment of his characters, their "belittlement," his "cramping of their souls" (222). And while her discussion of *Howards End* in "The Novels of E. M. Forster" praises the reality with which the characters are presented, it also notes the distressing disjunction between the characters "as themselves" and the characters as they are forced to serve the ends of their maker. The reader, Woolf complains, must abandon "the enchanted world of imagination" where all the faculties operate in concert and enter

“the twilight world of theory, where only our intellect functions dutifully” (172). Occasionally Forster forgets his obligation to deliver his “message” and allows certain comic characters—Tibby and Mrs. Munt, for example—to range freely in the imaginary world unshepherded by the author. Such characters are, however, the exception in Forster’s fiction; far more usual are characters pent by purpose. “Margaret, Helen, Leonard Bast, are closely tethered and vigilantly overlooked lest they may take matters into their own hands and upset the theory” (173).

In her own treatise on character, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” Woolf had already alluded to the damage done Forster’s fiction by his subordination of character to theory. Forster’s early work, like D. H. Lawrence’s, Woolf says here, is “spoilt” because, instead of throwing away the tools of the Edwardians and their “enormous stress upon the fabric of things” (112), he attempted to compromise with them. He “tried to combine [his] own direct sense of the oddity and significance of some character with Mr. Galsworthy’s knowledge of the Factory Act, and Mr. Bennett’s knowledge of the Five Towns” (114). And though Woolf suggests that Forster has engaged to some extent in the general Georgian smashing and breaking of convention, she nonetheless finds him cementing his characters too firmly to their surroundings and to his own morals, struggles, and protests.

Nothing could contrast more sharply with Woolf’s vision of character in the novel. Her comments on British and Continental novelists and her notes on her own novels attest to the fact that for her, character depends on no force outside the novel; rather it is the novel’s moment of genesis, the vital centre from which the novel and all its various aspects radiate. All novelists write, she says in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” because “they are lured on to create some character which has . . . imposed itself upon them” (94). The realists fail to capture the will-o’-the-wisp of character because, in their fervour to express it in terms of surroundings or in terms of some doctrine, they are blind to “character in itself.” Laurence Sterne and Jane Austen, who alone among English writers receive unequivocal praise from Woolf, succeeded where her contemporaries fail because they “were interested in things in themselves; in character in itself; in the book in itself. Therefore

everything was inside the book, nothing outside" (105). Russian novelists, however, provided Woolf even sounder models of the proper relationship of character to the novel. Turgenev, for example, "did not see his books as a succession of events; he saw them as a succession of emotions radiating from some character at the centre" ("Novels of Turgenev" 58). And it is thus that many of her own novels were conceived. About *To the Lighthouse* she says, "The centre is father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting *We perished, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel*" (*Diary* 75). Writing a novel then requires dedication to the task of rendering that vision of character as accurately and suggestively as possible: "to try this sentence and that, referring each word to my vision, matching it as exactly as possible" ("Mr. Bennett" 112).

Thus the argument goes. Woolf's characters fail to live, says Forster, because they are too far removed from the flux of daily life; Forster's characters fail, says Woolf, because messages and material surroundings hamper their movement. Character, says Forster, is a device a novelist uses in the service of other aspects of the novel. Character, says Woolf, is the vital principle that calls the rest of the novel into being.

The second sphere of critical difference between Woolf and Forster is not so much an aspect of the novel as it is an aspect of the novelist — artistic vision, the faculty with which the writer selects and shapes the substance of his work. In describing Woolf in the opening paragraphs of the Rede Lecture, Forster mentions two qualities which apparently he feels were peculiarly hers: the first is her receptivity to sensual stimuli; the second is her singleness of vision. Most writers, he remarks,

write with half an eye on their royalties, half an eye on their critics, and a third half-eye on improving the world, which leaves them with only half an eye for the task on which [Woolf] concentrated her entire vision. She would not look elsewhere. . . . (240)

But Forster is at best a grudging admirer of this singleness of purpose, for this fixed vision of Woolf's leads her toward that "dreadful hole" of aestheticism. "She has all the aesthete's characteristics," he complains: she "selects and manipulates her impressions . . . ; enforces patterns on her books; has no great cause at heart"

(240). Indeed Forster trips repeatedly over the fact that Woolf had no great cause at heart, that she felt no responsibility for improving the world. Her art suffered, in his estimation, because her feminism and her detachment from the working classes made her attitude to society "aloof and angular" (251).

To take lack of sympathy with humankind as a basis for a literary judgment appears to be mistaking ethics for aesthetics, but for Forster the two amounted to very nearly the same thing. In *Aspects of the Novel* he insists that

the intensely, stifling human quality of the novel is not to be avoided; the novel is sogged with humanity; there is no escaping the uplift or the downpour. . . . We may hate humanity, but if it is exorcised or purified the novel wilts; little is left but a bunch of words. (24)

The most valuable fiction, Forster feels, is produced not by the writer whose eye is single, trained exclusively upon what Woolf calls "the work itself," but by one whose eye is catholic, eclectic, capable of focusing at the same time upon the work and upon the human issues which surround it.

The conflict between the novel's intensely human quality and its aesthetic exigencies is the subject of the chapter of *Aspects of the Novel* entitled "Pattern," in which Forster recounts the debate between Henry James and H. G. Wells. The exchange figures importantly in our study because it mirrors the Woolf-Forster debate exactly and because Woolf responded to it so pointedly. Forster's objection to James's fiction is that "most of human life has to disappear before he can do us a novel" (160). "There is," he protests,

no philosophy in the novels, no religion . . . no prophecy, no benefit for the superhuman at all. It is for the sake of a particular aesthetic effect which is certainly gained, but at this heavy price. (161-62)

Here in part is Woolf's rejoinder:

For Henry James brought into the novel something besides human beings. He created patterns which, though beautiful in themselves, are hostile to humanity. And for his neglect of life, says Mr. Forster, he will perish.

But at this point the pertinacious pupil may demand: "What is this 'Life' that keeps cropping up so mysteriously and so compla-

cently in books about fiction? Why is it absent in a pattern and present in a tea party?" ("Art of Fiction" 109)

Forster, of course, finds in favour of Wells, who asserts that life "must not be whittled or distended for a pattern's sake" (*Aspects* 163). And this same finding — that a novel must be imbued with its creator's eclectic double vision or it is finally "not worth doing" (164) — is at the heart of Forster's criticism of Woolf.

Perhaps Forster denounced Woolf's singleness of vision in the Rede Lecture because years before in "The Novels of E. M. Forster" she had rather harshly attacked his doubleness. There is, she insists in this essay, "one gift more essential to a novelist than [any other], the power of combination — the single vision" (166). But at the heart of Forster's novels she finds ambiguity supplanting this essential gift: "instead of seeing . . . one single whole we see two separate parts" (169). She finds in *Howards End* all the elements necessary to a masterpiece but finds them in solution. "Elaboration, skill, wisdom, penetration, beauty — they are all there, but they lack fusion; they lack cohesion" (171). *A Passage to India* too fails to live up to its readers' expectations, but it is at least beginning to approach "saturation": in this novel, Woolf says, "the double vision which troubled us in the earlier books was in process of becoming single" (175).

The words "saturation," "fusion," "cohesion" are important critical terms for Woolf; a diary entry penned just a few months after her public responses to *Aspects of the Novel* explains them:

The idea has come to me that what I want now to do is to saturate every atom. I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole. . . . Why admit anything to literature that is not poetry — by which I mean saturated? Is that not my grudge against novelists? that they select nothing? (136)

And her entire career was a series of daring attempts to reproduce luminous moments of human consciousness no matter what conventional paraphernalia she had to eliminate in the process. Forster, like other novelists, fell far short of Woolf's exacting criteria because his double vision muddled his attempts to see and render the moment whole. Indeed the entire Woolf-Forster argument, about character as well as about the artist's vision, is largely an argument about whether a novel is the sum of various quantifiable

parts dictated by material circumstances outside the novel — certainly Forster saw it thus — or whether it is what Woolf, influenced as she was by Coleridge and by G. E. Moore, felt it to be: an organic unit whose parts evolve spontaneously from an original conception of the whole.

As sincerely as Forster admired Woolf's technical achievement in the art of fiction, he nonetheless objected strongly to her apparent preference for the formal over the human elements of the novel. He was, as Mark Goldman points out, "too much the novelist of ideas; too involved, however skeptically, in the liberal tradition" to be completely receptive to Woolf's "novel of sensibility" (391-92). Forster's comments on Woolf sound, in fact, remarkably like the importunate speaker's in Robert Frost's poem:

O Star (the fairest one in sight),
 We grant your loftiness the right
 To some obscurity of cloud. . . .
 But to be wholly taciturn
 In your reserve is not allowed.
 Say something to us we can learn
 By heart and when alone repeat.
 Say something! And it says, "I burn."

To Forster, observing the cultural confusion about him, the situation demanded literary communication of something which resembled, at any rate, the old verities and values. If, as David Daiches was to insist in 1938, the "community of belief" had vanished, if human relationships were forever altered, then the writer was obligated, these two critics felt, to offer something to stand in the place of those beliefs and relationships. Forster most clearly articulates his frustration with Woolf's refusal to "say something we can learn by heart" in his essay on her early novels: one novel is "not explanatory of the universe" (108); the style of another is so elusive that "it cannot say much or be sure of saying anything" (109); and another has no "message" save "'here is one room, there another'" (111). Woolf, he remarked after her death, had no great cause at heart; specifically, she declined to transport inherited beliefs and conventions through the post-World War I desert to whatever Promised Land lay on the other side.

But Woolf was no less sensitive to the seismic shocks of her time

than Forster and Daiches. Observing in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" that "on or about December, 1910, human nature changed," she goes on to acknowledge that such changes are always accompanied by radical changes in "religion, conduct, politics, and literature" (96). She too, she says, cries out "for the old decorums, and envy the indolence of my ancestors who, instead of spinning madly through mid-air, dreamt quietly in the shade with a book" (116). However, though she, like all novelists before and since, was preoccupied with the meaning of being human, she did not see that meaning threatened or obscured by the crashings going on about her. As a woman she had been at best a peripheral participant in the cultural and literary tradition which had preceded the war; thus she saw in the splintering of convention freedom to fashion from "orts, scraps, and fragments" a fuller, more luminous, and finally more accurate rendering of the human condition than had previously been possible. Though convinced that Forster was "the best of critics," she nonetheless clung resolutely to her own evolving methods of reproducing vital experience. "We know," she says in "Modern Fiction," "that certain paths seem to lead to fertile land, others to the dust and the desert" (146).

Forster was deeply stung by Woolf's reactions to *Aspects of the Novel*; her objection to his dismissal of the claims of art in favour of the claims of "life" annoyed him especially, as this vexed letter to Woolf makes clear:

Your article inspires me to the happiest repartee. This vague truth about life. Exactly. But what of the talk about art? Each sentence leads to an exquisitely fashioned casket of which the key has unfortunately been mislaid & until you can find your bunch I shall cease to hunt very anxiously for my own. (Furbank II, 146)

Woolf responded in an impersonal typewritten note that one ought to hunt more diligently than Forster had for the proper relationship of art to life before relegating art to an inferior realm. But then she added in her own hand a note apologizing for hurting or annoying him: "The article was cut down to fit *The Nation*, and the weight all fell in the same place. But I'm awfully sorry if I was annoying" (*Letters* 437).

Thus ended the tempest in the 1927 teapot. However, despite admiration and conciliation, the debate between Woolf and For-

ster was inevitable. Because their verbal duel forced each to articulate critical theories and because it reflects two significant positions in the modernist dilemma, Woolf and Forster continue, in their essays as they once did across their tea tables, to argue about novel writing.

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