



Virginia Woolf  
Selected Essays

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OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS



VIRGINIA WOOLF

***Selected Essays***



*Edited with an Introduction and Notes by*  
DAVID BRADSHAW

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## OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS

### SELECTED ESSAYS

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## BIOGRAPHICAL PREFACE

VIRGINIA WOOLF was born Adeline Virginia Stephen on 25 January 1882 at 22 Hyde Park Gate, Kensington. Her father, Leslie Stephen, himself a widower, had married in 1878 Julia Jackson, widow of Herbert Duckworth. Between them they already had four children; a fifth, Vanessa, was born in 1879, a sixth, Thoby, in 1880. There followed Virginia and, in 1883, Adrian.

Both of the parents had strong family associations with literature. Leslie Stephen was the son of Sir James Stephen, a noted historian, and brother of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, a distinguished lawyer and writer on law. His first wife was a daughter of Thackeray, his second had been an admired associate of the Pre-Raphaelites, and also, like her first husband, had aristocratic connections. Stephen himself is best remembered as the founding editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and as an alpinist, but he was also a remarkable journalist, biographer, and historian of ideas; his *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876) is still of great value. No doubt our strongest idea of him derives from the character of Mr Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*; for a less impressionistic portrait, which conveys a strong sense of his centrality in the intellectual life of the time, one can consult Noël Annan's *Leslie Stephen* (revised edition, 1984).

Virginia had the free run of her father's library, a better substitute for the public school and university education she was denied than most women of the time could aspire to; her brothers, of course, were sent to Clifton and Westminster. Her mother died in 1895, and in that year she had her first breakdown, possibly related in some way to the sexual molestation of which her half-brother George Duckworth is accused. By 1897 she was able to read again, and did so voraciously: 'Gracious, child, how you gobble', remarked her father, who, with a liberality and good sense at odds with the age in which they lived, allowed her to choose her reading freely. In other respects her relationship with her father was difficult; his deafness and melancholy, his excessive emotionalism, not helped by successive bereavements, all

increased her nervousness.

Stephen fell ill in 1902 and died in 1904. Virginia suffered another breakdown, during which she heard the birds singing in Greek, a language in which she had acquired some competence. On her recovery she moved, with her brothers and sister, to a house in Gordon Square, Bloomsbury; there, and subsequently at several other nearby addresses, what eventually became famous as the Bloomsbury Group took shape.

Virginia had long considered herself a writer. It was in 1905 that she began to write for publication in the *Times Literary Supplement*. In her circle (more loosely drawn than is sometimes supposed) were many whose names are now half-forgotten, but some were or became famous: J. M. Keynes and E. M. Forster and Roger Fry; also Clive Bell, who married Vanessa, Lytton Strachey, who once proposed marriage to her, and Leonard Woolf. Despite much ill health in these years, she travelled a good deal, and had an interesting social life in London. She did a little adult-education teaching, worked for female suffrage, and shared the excitement of Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist Exhibition in 1910. In 1912, after another bout of nervous illness, she married Leonard Woolf.

She was thirty, and had not yet published a book, though *The Voyage Out* was in preparation. It was accepted for publication by her half-brother Gerald Duckworth in 1913 (it appeared in 1915). She was often ill with depression and anorexia, and in 1913 attempted suicide. But after a bout of violent madness her health seemed to settle down, and in 1917 a printing press was installed at Hogarth House, Richmond, where she and her husband were living. The Hogarth Press, later an illustrious institution, but at first meant in part as therapy for Virginia, was now inaugurated. She began *Night and Day*, and finished it in 1918. It was published by Duckworth in 1919, the year in which the Woolfs bought Monk's House, Rodmell, for £700. There, in 1920, she began *Jacob's Room*, finished, and published by the Woolfs' own Hogarth Press, in 1922. In the following year she began *Mrs Dalloway* (finished in 1924, published 1925), when she was already working on *To the Lighthouse* (finished and published, after intervals of illness, in 1927). *Orlando*, a fantastic 'biography' of a man-woman, and a tribute to Virginia's close friendship with Vita Sackville-West, was written quite rapidly over the winter of 1927-8, and published, with considerable success, in October. *The Waves* was written and rewritten in 1930 and 1931 (published in October of that year). She had already started on *Flush*, the story of Elizabeth Barrett

Browning's pet dog—another success with the public—and in 1932 began work on what became *The Years*.

This brief account of her work during the first twenty years of her marriage is of course incomplete; she had also written and published many shorter works, as well as both series of *The Common Reader*, and *A Room of One's Own*. There have been accounts of the marriage very hostile to Leonard Woolf, but he can hardly be accused of cramping her talent or hindering the development of her career.

*The Years* proved an agonizingly difficult book to finish, and was completely rewritten at least twice. Her friend Roger Fry having died in 1934, she planned to write a biography, but illnesses in 1936 delayed the project; towards the end of that year she began instead the polemical *Three Guineas*, published in 1938. *The Years* had meanwhile appeared in 1937, by which time she was again at work on the Fry biography, and already sketching in her head the book that was to be *Between the Acts*. *Roger Fry* was published in the terrifying summer of 1940. By the autumn of that year many of the familiar Bloomsbury houses had been destroyed or badly damaged by bombs. Back at Monk's House, she worked on *Between the Acts*, and finished it in February 1941. Thereafter her mental condition deteriorated alarmingly, and on 28 March, unable to face another bout of insanity, she drowned herself in the River Ouse.

Her career as a writer of fiction covers the years 1912–41, thirty years distracted by intermittent serious illness as well as by the demands, which she regarded as very important, of family and friends, and by the need or desire to write literary criticism and social comment. Her industry was extraordinary—nine highly-wrought novels, two or three of them among the great masterpieces of the form, along with all the other writings, including the copious journals and letters that have been edited and published in recent years. Firmly set though her life was in the 'Bloomsbury' context—the agnostic ethic transformed from that of her forebears, the influence of G. E. Moore and the Cambridge Apostles, the individual brilliance of J. M. Keynes, Strachey, Forster, and the others—we have come more and more to value the distinctiveness of her talent, so that she seems more and more to stand free of any context that might be thought to limit her. None of that company—except, perhaps, T. S. Eliot, who was on the fringe of it—did more to establish the possibilities of literary innovation, or to demonstrate that such innovation must be brought about by minds familiar with the innovations of

the past. This is true originality. It was Eliot who said of *Jacob's Room* that in that book she had freed herself from any compromise between the traditional novel and her original gift; it was the freedom he himself sought in *The Waste Land*, published in the same year, a freedom that was dependent upon one's knowing with intimacy that with which compromise must be avoided, so that the knowledge became part of the originality. In fact she had 'gobbled' her father's books to a higher purpose than he could have understood.

*Frank Kermode*

# INTRODUCTION

WOOLF'S essays bear no resemblance to a wonky table and worry about wobble was the last thing that prompted the overview that follows. Though these disclaimers may well surprise, even perplex you, they are far from uncalled-for, because, as Woolf puts it rather sharply near the beginning of 'Memories of a Working Women's Guild', 'Books should stand on their own feet ... If they need shoring up by a preface here, an introduction there, they have no more right to exist than a table that needs a wad of paper under one leg in order to stand steady' (p. 146). Thankfully, no such wedge is needed for this selection as all the pieces that it gathers together have the sturdy, stand-alone appeal of Woolf at her most engaging. Her essays, unlike her novels, require relatively little in the way of prefatory or explanatory 'shoring up' for today's reader and they have been left largely to speak for themselves.

Although Woolf's essays are only bite-sized when compared with the rich feast of her celebrated novels and other book-length works, such as *A Room of One's Own* (1929) or *Three Guineas* (1938), they offer plenty to chew on and much to relish. They are best savoured at leisure and should not be viewed as either relatively unappetizing nibbles or mere hors d'oeuvres to be toyed with half-heartedly before the more sumptuous main dishes of the Woolf canon arrive at the table. Indeed, a number of the essays ('Character in Fiction', 'On Being Ill', and 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure', for example) are gourmet concoctions in their own right. Nevertheless, this present selection has been made with at least one eye on helping the reader enrich his or her comprehension of that more renowned body of work, and, in particular, with a view to enabling him or her to achieve a better understanding of Woolf's vision and practice as a writer of fiction; her fascination with (auto) biography; her idiosyncratic commitment to the feminist movement; and her varied and vivacious response to the (increasingly imperilled) world around her. Furthermore, many of these essays are required reading not only for those who wish to deepen their

appreciation of Woolf's *œuvre*, but for students of the Modernist movement as a whole. Accordingly, their arrangement is also intended to underline Woolf's distinctive contribution to four of the key achievements of Modernist literature— its radical reconfiguration of prose forms; its embrace of a new and subversive approach to life-writing; its promotion of feminist discourse; and its responsiveness to the bustle and spectacle of modernity.

In writing essays, Rachel Bowlby has remarked, Woolf 'was directly following her father's footsteps, in a move that was composed of both rivalry and honour; in fact she took over where he left off, quite literally, since she began publishing.... just after he died', in 1904.<sup>1</sup> However, as Andrew McNeillie has observed, Woolf's career as an essayist did not exactly start with a bang.

An unsigned review in a now largely forgotten weekly ... of a still more forgotten work by a forgotten author can hardly be described as an arresting début. It was about as ordinary a beginning, promising nothing, as it is possible to imagine; and as such, as a modestly undertaken professional exercise, it was wholly in character. For Virginia Woolf served an extraordinarily fastidious, self-effacing apprenticeship in what was once called the art of letters.<sup>2</sup>

While a small number of pieces in this volume were in origin reviews ('The Feminine Note in Fiction', 'Women Novelists', 'The Modern Essay', and 'The New Biography'), and others ('Character in Fiction', 'How Should One Read a Book?', 'Professions for Women', and 'Craftsmanship') began life as talks, the main focus is not on the many essays Woolf produced in the form of book appraisals, but on pieces in which we sense most strongly that she is writing uninhibitedly for her own and her readers' delight. As she remarks at three different points in 'The Modern Essay', in words which are applicable to the best of her own contributions to that form:

The principle which controls [the essay] is simply that it should give pleasure; the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure. Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end. It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last. (p. 13)

There is no room for the impurities of literature in an essay. Somehow or other, by dint of labour or bounty of nature, or both combined, the essay must be pure—pure like water or pure like wine, but pure from dullness, deadness, and deposits of extraneous matter. (pp. 14–15)

Vague as all definitions are, a good essay must have this permanent quality about it; it must draw its curtain round us, but it must be a curtain that shuts us in, not out. (p. 22)

None of the essays collected in this edition could be misidentified as the work of any other writer but Woolf and in many of them she achieves a remarkable sense of pleasurable intimacy with the reader, as if she were speaking to us, relaxed and unchivvied, across a recessed and encurtained café table.

At a time when Modernists such as Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot turned their backs on the ‘amiable garrulity’ (‘The Decay of Essay-Writing’, p. 5) of the late-Victorian and Edwardian ‘personal essay’ (p. 3), Woolf embraced this belletristic model as an appealingly ‘egoistical’ (p. 4) template. Indeed, many of the essays in this volume are so enjoyable to read precisely because the ‘personal peculiarities’ (p. 4) of the writer who produced them are so boldly on display. In this respect, the unashamedly idiosyncratic essays of Max Beerbohm (1872–1956) provided Woolf with an enticing pattern for her own, and just as she tells us that Beerbohm gave us ‘himself’ in his essays—‘He was affected by private joys and sorrows, and had no gospel to preach and no learning to impart. He was himself, simply and directly ... the spirit of personality permeates every word that he [wrote]’ (‘The Modern Essay’, pp. 17–18)—so in Woolf’s own essays we find ourselves heart-to-heart with the same engrossing, live-wire ‘personality’ that we also encounter in her letters and diary. T. S. Eliot made a virtue of ‘impersonality’,<sup>3</sup> but for Woolf essay-writing was essentially a sounding-board for the self. As far as she was concerned, an essay might focus on ‘the immortality of the soul, or the rheumatism in your left shoulder, but it is primarily an expression of personal opinion’ (‘The Decay of Essay-Writing’, p. 4) and must be tinged, preferably deep-dyed, with the individuality of the writer. Another essayist who influenced Woolf was Samuel Butler (1835–1902), and in ‘The Modern Essay’ she applauds Butler for having the audacity to write about whatever took his fancy, such as ‘turtles and Cheapside’ (p. 13), just as in her own ‘Oxford Street Tide’ she alights on tortoises for sale amidst the frantic stir of the West End.

Elena Gualtieri has argued that Woolf’s customized embrace of such a conventional mode of essay-writing has shaped

the reception of [her] critical writings in the postwar years. Although during her lifetime the essays enjoyed a wider and, in Leonard Woolf’s term, ‘more catholic’ ... appreciation than Woolf’s novels, in

the years which followed her death and up to the late 1960s this situation was reversed, as critics began to focus almost exclusively on her activity as a novelist and relegated the essays to the traditional role of 'minor' genre, dutifully included in studies of her work, but dismissed as more imperfect and less challenging than her fiction.<sup>4</sup>

However, Gualtieri is one of a number of recent critics to suggest that if we continue to view the essays as marginal to Woolf's achievement we shall fail to do justice to work of central importance to her canon. It would be exaggerating to suggest that any one of Woolf's essays is as demanding as her great novels, but many repay the close attentiveness we normally reserve for her fiction.

For while the form of Woolf's essays may be conventional, what she has to say in them is rather more mould-breaking. By means of the unhurried and elegant prose of 'Modern Fiction', for example, Woolf sets out her own radically liberated vision of the novel in general and the treatment of character in particular. So although her critique of the 'materialism' of Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells, and John Galsworthy is marked by her old-fashioned habit of referring to herself as 'we', the sheer wallop she brings to her account of the novel at a new frontier could not be more memorable:

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 ... 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? (p. 9)

Woolf's now legendary contrast between life as we really experience it in all its fugitive and imponderable inwardness (and which she sought to express in her representation of the roaming thoughts of Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs Ramsay, for example) and 'a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged' has become one of the most quoted tenets of Modernist doctrine, yet it turns on a metaphor—a 'gig' was a two-wheeled, one-horse light carriage—which would have had a distinctly antiquated ring to it even at the time it was written (though, of course, it could not have been more apt for a thrust at the backwardness of Bennett, Wells, and Galsworthy).

Like other Modernists, such as Eliot and D. H. Lawrence, Woolf tended to innovate and explicate in companion texts, the most developed examples of this tendency being *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own* and *The Years* and



*Three Guineas*. Similarly, in the same way that Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' and 'The Metaphysical Poets' essays illumine 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and *The Waste Land*, so Woolf, in such pieces as 'Modern Fiction', 'How it Strikes a Contemporary', 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', 'Character in Fiction', "'Impassioned Prose'", 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future', 'The New Biography', and 'Women and Fiction', helped clear the ground not only for her own *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando*, and *The Waves*, but also for the novels of Jean Rhys, Rosamund Lehmann, Elizabeth Bowen, and the many other writers who came after them, both men and women (such as Jeanette Winterson), who all, in their different ways, register their affinity with the more singular and unshackled novel Woolf had helped to free from the stranglehold of tradition. In 'How it Strikes a Contemporary', Woolf refers to her own time as 'an age of fragments' (p. 26), but her tone is neither despondent nor defeatist. Instead, she is invigorated by the sound of disintegration all around her, stimulated by the possibility of artistic renewal, and this exultation comes out in her essays, where she rejoices in the possibility of new beginnings, pleading only for tolerance and imagination in the face of almost unprecedented cultural upheaval. 'We are sharply cut off from our predecessors,' she writes. 'A shift in the scale—the war, the sudden slip of masses held in position for ages—has shaken the fabric from top to bottom, alienated us from the past and made us perhaps too vividly conscious of the present. Every day we find ourselves doing, saying, or thinking things that would have been impossible for our fathers' (p. 27). This loosening-up of the mental, moral, and material conditions of life is experienced by both Peter Walsh and Elizabeth Dalloway in *Mrs Dalloway*. When Elizabeth walks down the Strand, for example, she senses that the 'accumulated robustness' of both the sky and society have been shifted by the First World War, whereas Peter Walsh reflects that the 'five years—1918 to 1923—had been ... somehow very important. People looked different. Newspapers seemed different. Now, for instance, there was a man writing quite openly in the respectable weeklies about water-closets.'<sup>5</sup>

A similar spirit pervades one of Woolf's most iconic essays, 'Character in Fiction' (1924), in which she remarks that 'All human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children' (p. 38), having just made her much-quoted assertion 'that on or about December 1910 human character changed' (p. 38). Once again, Woolf

insists that from amidst the ‘smashing and crashing ... the sound of breaking and falling, crashing and destruction’ (p. 51) which is all too audible in the 1920s, a new, more truthful, and so more credible and creditable form of the novel will arise; it will be peopled with characters that are psychologically true to life and not just with regard to their apparel and/or domestic settings. ‘I believe that all novels ... deal with character, and that it is to express character—not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic and alive, has been evolved’ (p. 42). Similarly, at the end of the equally famous ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’ Woolf prophesies that ‘One of these days Mrs Brown will be caught’ (p. 36), perhaps sensing even then that shortly afterwards she herself would help to capture her and rename her Mrs Ramsay or Mrs Dalloway or Lily Briscoe. James Joyce called her Molly Bloom.

“‘Impassioned Prose’” was written while Woolf was at work on *To the Lighthouse* and there are intriguing connections between what she has to say in her essay about the current state of prose in England and what she achieves in her fifth novel. For in *To the Lighthouse*, as in De Quincey’s autobiographical writings, ‘Scenes come together ... like congregations of clouds which gently join and slowly disperse or hang solemnly still’ (p. 60). And what Woolf writes further on in this essay about De Quincey’s method is equally applicable to her own: ‘his most perfect passages are not lyrical but descriptive. ... they are descriptions of states of mind in which, often, time is miraculously prolonged and space miraculously expanded’ (p. 61). As she phrases it in ‘Poetry, Fiction and the Future’:

It may be possible that prose is going to take over—has, indeed, already taken over—some of the duties which were once discharged by poetry. ... and that in ten or fifteen years’ time prose will be used for purposes for which prose has never been used before. That cannibal, the novel, which has devoured so many forms of art will by then have devoured even more. We shall be forced to invent new names for the different books which masquerade under this one heading. And it is possible that there will be among the so-called novels one which we shall scarcely know how to christen. It will be written in prose, but in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry. It will have something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose. It will be dramatic, and yet not a play. (pp. 79–80)

This essay first appeared in 1927, and within four years (not the ‘ten or fifteen’ that Woolf thought would need to elapse) she had published *The Waves*, her own consummate ‘play-poem’,<sup>6</sup> which magisterially brings to fulfilment her predictions for the novel of the future. The free-ranging,

commodious style of 'On Being Ill', written around the same time as 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future', also looks forward to the poetic fluidity of *The Waves*.

Modernism's 'smashing and crashing' also impacted on the life-writing of the period, and 'The New Biography' and 'The Art of Biography' are two essays in which Woolf turns her attention to the new approach to the genre instigated by Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918). In between these two essays, published in 1927 and 1939 respectively, Woolf brought to completion the mischievous and unprecedented *Orlando* (1928), and *Flush* (1933), her biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's pet dog. But her earlier *Night and Day* (1919) is no less clearly indebted to Strachey's inspiring overhaul of life-writing, and what Woolf has to say in 'The New Biography' about the Victorian biographer 'toiling ... slavishly in the footsteps of his hero' (p. 97) could not be more applicable to Mrs Hilbery's pious, unending, and unfinishable life of her father, the great Victorian poet Richard Alardyce, in Woolf's second novel: 'The conscientious biographer may not tell a fine tale with a flourish, but must toil through endless labyrinths and embarrass himself with countless documents' (p. 97). Indeed, it is the discovery of 'documents' revealing that her father and mother were not as happily married as she had imagined them to be that completely throws Mrs Hilbery and ensures that her life of her father will always remain an 'amorphous mass' (p. 97). Likewise, the gaping lacunae of *Jacob's Room* (1922) are Stracheyan to the letter: 'Many of the old chapter headings—life at college, marriage, career—are shown to be very arbitrary and artificial distinctions,' Woolf writes in 'The Art of Biography'. 'The real current of the hero's existence took, very likely, a different course' (p. 121), the truth of which the brief and largely undocumented life of the prodigiously elusive Jacob Flanders bears out to the full.

Written at the height of her powers as a Modernist and with Modernism's banging and crashing continuing to resound in her ears, 'Leslie Stephen' is marked by love and reverence rather than any anti-Victorian desire to smear her father or his milieu. Many of the most prominent essayists of the Victorian age had been either friends or acquaintances of her father's and many had visited Woolf's house during her childhood. As mentioned above, her essays have a close affinity with those of Beerbohm and Butler, but other exponents of the form, such as George Eliot, Macaulay, J. A. Froude, and Walter Pater, and before them Montaigne, Hazlitt, and above all Charles

Lamb, all left their mark on Woolf's conception of the essay. Yet her

approach to the history and to the nature of the genre was always marked by an attempt to identify within what she saw as a male tradition an alternative line of descent to which she could affiliate herself. This she outlined by stressing the connection between the essay and autobiography, but a type of autobiography which she insisted was essentially non-narrative and presented the self as a conglomeration of moments of perception and reflection.<sup>7</sup>

This is particularly evident in such essays as 'On Being Ill' and 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure', but it is perhaps most conspicuous in the autobiographical pieces posthumously gathered together as *Moments of Being* (first published in 1976).

Woolf was a stupendous observer not just of herself but also her environment and her culture at large, and the essays in the 'Looking On' section of this collection reveal her pleasure in being part of the vivid, often dazzling kaleidoscope of the inter-war period. 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure', 'The Docks of London', 'Oxford Street Tide', 'Thunder at Wembley', and 'Flying over London', in particular, show her rapturous immersion in the everyday world of the capital. Urban 'rambling' (p. 177) offered Woolf deliverance from the bookish captivation she so deeply loved but from which she occasionally felt the need to escape. However, although wandering the streets of London enabled Woolf to shed the restrictive harness of her gender and the handicap of her class—in exactly the same way as Clarissa does when she steps outside her imposing house at the beginning of *Mrs Dalloway* to buy the party flowers herself—this does not mean that she ever switched off as a writer. Quite the contrary: Woolf walked the streets of London on the qui vive and wrote the essays in the 'Looking On' section both to keep up with the pace of the city and also, for her reader, as a kind of vade mecum to a world of flux and change.

In the same way that Woolf felt the 'materialist' novelists were missing the essence of life with their emphasis on external reality and that fiction needed to reorient itself if it was to stand any chance of keeping abreast of modernity, so the thrust of these later essays is on the commercial hustle and bustle of Oxford Street, the unceasing activity of the London docks, and other aspects of what Woolf called elsewhere 'the crowded dance of modern life'.<sup>8</sup> As she puts it at the beginning of the same essay from which this quote is taken (a review-essay which is not of sufficiently high quality overall to be included in this volume) when writing about the novelist:

The novelist—it is his distinction and his danger—is terribly exposed to life. Other artists, partially, at least, withdraw; they shut themselves up for weeks alone with a dish of apples and a paint box, or a roll of music paper and a piano. When they emerge it is to forget and distract themselves. But the novelist never forgets and is seldom distracted. He fills his glass and lights his cigarette, he enjoys presumably all the pleasures of talk and table, but always with a sense that he is being stimulated and played on by the subject matter of his art. Taste, sound, movement, a few words here, a gesture there, a man coming in, a woman going out, even the motor that passes in the street or the beggar who shuffles along the pavement, and all the reds and blues and lights and shades of the scene claim his attention and rouse his curiosity. He can no more cease to receive impressions than a fish in mid-ocean can cease to let the water rush through his gills.<sup>9</sup>

Deborah Parsons and other critics have likened this all-seeing, pavement-tramping Woolf to a *flâneuse*, free to roam, observe, and write about whatever takes her fancy.<sup>10</sup> And the connection is clearly compelling—especially when Woolf writes, as she does in ‘Oxford Street Tide’, that the ‘charm of modern London is that it is not built to last; it is built to pass. Its glassiness, its transparency, its surging waves of coloured plaster give a different pleasure and achieve a different end from that which was desired and attempted by the old builders and their patrons, the nobility of England’ (p. 201). Rather than a highbrow’s disdain for ‘the garishness and gaudiness of the great rolling ribbon of Oxford Street’ (p. 199), Woolf is uplifted by the transitory ebb and flow of the London crowd and the shiny, gaudy thoroughfares through which they surge. All is laid bare to her gaze, and in looking about her the writer cannot help but act as ‘a glutinous slab that takes impressions’ (p. 200) of London’s restless cavalcade of ever-changing colours—‘the glossy brilliance of the motor omnibuses; the carnal splendour of the butchers’ shops with their yellow flanks and purple steaks; the blue and red bunches of flowers burning so bravely through the plate glass of the florists’ windows’ (p. 179).

As in Woolf’s novels, aesthetics and politics go hand in hand in these essays. The ephemeral and the momentary catch Woolf’s eye in the capital, but so do the age-old problems of poverty and misfortune. She refers to her ‘comfortable capitalistic head’ in ‘Memories of a Working Women’s Guild’ and calls herself ‘a benevolent spectator ... irretrievably cut off’ (p. 148) from the great mass of her less fortunate fellow citizens. However, although for the time being ‘the barrier is impassable’ between the privileged elite and those below them on the social and economic scales, Woolf is inspired by the thought that the ardour of working women, which she witnessed herself in 1913 at a Women’s Co-operative Guild congress and has subsequently heard

echoed in their writings, may be 'about to break through and melt us together so that life will be richer and books more complex and society will pool its possessions instead of segregating them' (p. 153). And it is for its ability to erase divisions and provide a sense of community, albeit temporarily, that Woolf, above all, relishes 'the sociability of the streets' (p. 177) of London. 'As we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six,' she says soon after the beginning of 'Street Haunting', 'we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one's own room' (p. 177). London's streets are great obliterators of difference, great conduits of diversity, where the poor and the outcast, 'the humped, the twisted, the deformed' (p. 180) live cheek by jowl with their better-off fellow citizens. And it is her contact with this 'maimed company of the halt and the blind' (p. 181) that occasions some of Woolf's most lyrical and powerful, if conflicted, writing:

They do not grudge us, we are musing, our prosperity; when, suddenly, turning the corner, we come upon a bearded Jew, wild, hunger-bitten, glaring out of his misery; or pass the humped body of an old woman flung abandoned on the step of a public building with a cloak over her like the hasty covering thrown over a dead horse or donkey. At such sights the nerves of the spine seem to stand erect; a sudden fire is brandished in our eyes; a question is asked which is never answered. Often enough these derelicts choose to lie not a stone's throw from theatres, within hearing of barrel organs, almost, as night draws on, within touch of the sequined cloaks and bright legs of diners and dancers. They lie close to those shop windows where commerce offers to a world of old women laid on doorsteps, of blind men, of hobbling dwarfs, sofas which are supported by the gilt necks of proud swans; tables inlaid with baskets of many coloured fruit; sideboards paved with green marble the better to support the weight of boars' heads, gilt baskets, candelabra; and carpets so softened with age that their carnations have almost vanished in a pale green sea. (p. 181)

What Woolf calls further on in this essay 'the splendours and miseries of the streets' (p. 183) always caught her eye, but her language in this extract shows just how profoundly her conscience was also engaged: her writing is both class-bound yet deeply humanitarian, detached yet passionately connected:

‘And what greater delight and wonder can there be’, she asks towards the end of the essay, ‘than to leave the straight lines of personality and deviate into those footpaths that lead beneath brambles and thick tree trunks into the heart of the forest where live those wild beasts, our fellow men? (p. 187). The ‘fascination of contemporary life’ (p. 173) had no more eager literary chronicler between the wars, and in essays such as ‘The Cinema’, ‘The Sun and the Fish’, her account of an excursion to the Yorkshire moors to witness the solar eclipse of 1927, ‘Flying over London’, and ‘Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car’, Woolf responded with equal gusto to what she calls in ‘Street Haunting’ ‘the velocity and abundance of life’ (p. 185).

In *Jacob’s Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Years*, and other novels, Woolf exposes the coercive force of patriarchy, militarism, and imperialism in British society. Yet at the end of ‘Thunder at Wembley’ (1924), Woolf’s account of the vast and spectacular British Empire Exhibition of 1924–5, where a myriad imperial fruits were laid out for Londoners to admire and consume, a fierce squall, which seems to have its source in the furthest reaches of the Empire, is taken as a sign that the Colonies may be on the verge of reasserting themselves and breaking free:

The sky is livid, lurid, sulphurine. It is in violent commotion. It is whirling water-spouts of cloud into the air; of dust in the Exhibition. Dust swirls down the avenues, hisses and hurries like erected cobras round the corners. Pagodas are dissolving in dust. Ferro-concrete is fallible. Colonies are perishing and dispersing in spray of inconceivable beauty and terror which some malignant power illuminates. Ash and violet are the colours of its decay. From every quarter human beings come flying ... They fly with outstretched arms, and a vast sound of wailing rolls before them, but there is neither confusion nor dismay ... Cracks like the white roots of trees spread themselves across the firmament. The Empire is perishing; the bands are playing; the Exhibition is in ruins. (p. 171)

In future, Woolf seems to be saying in this visionary essay, the globe will no longer be so easily conquered, tamed, exhibited, and exploited as it has been in the past.

Woolf’s prose in ‘Thunder at Wembley’ seems as far from the sober reflectiveness of the conventional essay as it is possible to get, while a piece like ‘Flying over London’ has a clear affinity with a short story like ‘An Unwritten Novel’, in that both end with a dramatic twist when what has been offered to us with authority turns out to be a tissue of fabrication.<sup>11</sup> Yet even though it transpires that the detailed aerial perspectives and ‘air values’ (p. 210) of ‘Flying over London’ are all made up, plucked out of the blue by Woolf’s roller-coaster imagination, it is an utterly convincing ‘factual’ essay



until she suddenly lets us fall back to earth with a bump.

Some of the most important essays in this collection are those in which Woolf writes about living and writing as a woman. In works such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–2), Woolf argues in 'Women and Fiction' (a companion piece to *A Room of One's Own*), there is a strident element—the voice 'of someone resenting the treatment of her sex and pleading for its rights'—which linked the woman writer with other downtrodden and afflicted types of human being such as 'a working man, a negro, or one who for some other reason is conscious of disability' (p. 135), whereas nowadays:

The woman writer is no longer bitter. She is no longer angry. She is no longer pleading and protesting as she writes. We are approaching, if we have not yet reached, the time when her writing will have little or no foreign influence to disturb it. She will be able to concentrate upon her vision without distraction from outside. The aloofness that was once within the reach of genius and originality is only now coming within the reach of ordinary women. Therefore the average novel by a woman is far more genuine and far more interesting today than it was a hundred or even fifty years ago. (pp. 135–6)

This now sounds as premature as it was ecstatic, and not long after writing it, in 'Professions for Women' (1931), Woolf took a decidedly less euphoric view of the woman writer's situation, arguing that she still had many obstacles to contend with. 'Professions for Women' is a kind of sequel to *A Room of One's Own* and in it Woolf writes of her need, every woman's need, to slay 'The Angel in the House': 'it will be a long time still, I think, before a woman can sit down to write a book without finding a phantom to be slain, a rock to be dashed against' (p. 144). Another barrier to free expression for the woman writer was the burden of having to frame her thoughts in a language and style developed by men for the use of men. As Woolf argues in 'Women and Fiction', the conventional sentence is 'too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman's use':

in a novel, which covers so wide a stretch of ground, an ordinary and usual type of sentence has to be found to carry the reader on easily and naturally from one end of the book to the other. And this a woman must make for herself, altering and adapting the current sentence until she writes one that takes the natural shape of her thought without crushing or distorting it. (p. 136)

These comments of 1929 are closely linked to those she makes about language and style in "'Impassioned Prose'" and 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future', published in 1926 and 1927 respectively, and these, too, form part of the great creative surge which concluded with *The Waves*.

'As the conditions change so the essayist, most sensitive of all plants to



public opinion, adapts himself' (p. 17), Woolf writes in 'The Modern Essay', and her essays from the late 1930s and the early years of the Second World War—here represented by 'Why Art Today Follows Politics' (1936) and 'Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid' (1940)—show how Woolf responded first to the looming threat of fascism and then to the awful reality of total war. Cultural enlightenment and the feminist movement might have been slowly making a kind of Flaubertian 'aloofness' a possibility for the woman novelist, but the threat posed by Nazi Germany made any notion of detachment unconscionable. The writer had to become committed and this partly explains why Woolf's last two novels, *The Years* and *Between the Acts* (1941), are more polemical than any of those that preceded them.

Woolf wrote a good many essays and what is sure to become the standard edition of them, begun by Andrew McNeillie and soon to be completed by Stuart N. Clarke, will comprise no fewer than six meaty volumes. What we have in this present selection is only a fraction of those she penned, but, within the confines of space, we have, arguably, thirty of her best. She wonders, in 'How it Strikes a Contemporary' (1923), how much of the writing produced in her own age will still be in print a century hence. Though there are still a few years to go until the centenary of that essay we can be fairly sure that it and the rest of Woolf's most acute, visionary, and intimate essays will still be on the shelves in 2023 and beyond, and not least because Woolf, as she puts it in 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future', so expertly and memorably 'clasp[ed] to [her] breast the precious prerogatives of the democratic art of prose; its freedom; its fearlessness, its flexibility' (p. 81).

## NOTE ON THE TEXT

REFERENCES to Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925) have been abbreviated to *CR*; references to Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader: Second Series* (London: Hogarth Press, 1932) have been abbreviated to *CR*<sub>2</sub>; and references to *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays by Virginia Woolf* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942) have been abbreviated to *DM*.

The versions of the essays reprinted in this volume are as follows:

### *Reading and Writing*

‘The Decay of Essay-Writing’, *Academy and Literature* (25 Feb. 1905), 165–6; ‘Modern Fiction’, *CR*, 184–95, first published in 1919 in a significantly different form as ‘Modern Novels’; ‘The Modern Essay’, *CR*, 267–8, first published in 1922 in a slightly different form as ‘Modern Essays’; ‘How it Strikes a Contemporary’, *CR*, 292–305, first published in April 1923 in a slightly different form; ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’, *Nation and Athenaeum* (1 Dec. 1923), 342–3: see note to ‘Character in Fiction’; ‘Character in Fiction’, *Criterion*, 2/8 (July 1924), 409–30. This essay evolved from ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’ (see previous entry) and was itself reprinted as Virginia Woolf, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown* (London: Hogarth Press) on 30 Oct. 1924, vol. i of *The Hogarth Essays: First Series*; “‘Impassioned Prose’”, *Times Literary Supplement* (16 Sept. 1926), 601–2; ‘How Should One Read a Book?’, *Yale Review*, NS 16/1 (Oct. 1926), 32–44, reprinted in a considerably revised form in *CR*<sub>2</sub>, 258–70; ‘Poetry, Fiction and the Future’, *New York Herald Tribune* (14 Aug. 1927), Section 6, ‘Books’, pp. 1, 6–7 and (21 Aug. 1927), Section 6, ‘Books’, pp. 1, 6, reprinted with minor variations as ‘The Narrow Bridge of Art’ in *Granite and Rainbow: Essays by Virginia Woolf* (London: Hogarth Press, 1958); ‘Craftsmanship’, *Listener* (5 May 1937), 868–9, first broadcast as a BBC talk in the series ‘Words Fail Me’ on 29

April 1937.

### ***Life-Writing***

‘The New Biography’ first appeared as a review of *Some People* by Harold Nicolson in the *New York Herald Tribune* (30 Oct. 1927), Section 7, ‘Books’, pp. 1, 6; ‘On Being Ill’, Virginia Woolf, *On Being Ill* (London: Hogarth Press, 1930), first published in a different form in the January 1926 number of the *New Criterion*; ‘Leslie Stephen’ was first published in *The Times* (28 Nov. 1932), 15–16 under the full title of ‘Leslie Stephen. The Philosopher at Home. A Daughter’s Memories’; ‘The Art of Biography’, *Atlantic Monthly*, 163/4 (Apr. 1939), 506–10.

### ***Women and Fiction***

‘The Feminine Note in Fiction’ first appeared as a review of *The Feminine Note in Fiction* by W. L. Courtney in the *Guardian* (25 Jan. 1905), 168; ‘Women Novelists’ first appeared as a review of *The Women Novelists* by R. Brimley Johnson in the *Times Literary Supplement* (17 Oct. 1918), 495; ‘Women and Fiction’, *Forum* (New York), 81/3 (Mar. 1929), 149–50; ‘Professions for Women’, *DM*, 149–54; ‘Memories of a Working Women’s Guild’ originally appeared as an introductory letter to Co-operative Working Women, in Margaret Llewellyn Davies (ed.), *Life as We Have Known It* (London: Hogarth Press, 1931), pp. xv–xxxix, a revised version of an essay which first appeared in the September 1930 number of the *Yale Review*; ‘Why?’, *Lysistrata* (Oxford), 1/2 (May 1934), 5–12.

### ***Looking On***

‘Thunder at Wembley’, *Nation and Athenaeum* (28 June 1924), 409–10; ‘The Cinema’, *Arts* (New York), 9/6 (June 1926), 314–16; ‘Street Haunting: A London Adventure’, *Yale Review*, NS 17 (Oct. 1927), 49–62; ‘The Sun and the Fish’, *Time and Tide* (3 Feb. 1928), 99–100; ‘The Docks of London’, *Good Housekeeping*, 20/4 (Dec. 1931), 16–17, 114, 116–17; ‘Oxford Street Tide’, *Good Housekeeping*, 20/5 (Jan. 1932), 18–19, 120; ‘Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car’, *DM*, 11–14; ‘Flying over London’, *Vogue* (New York) (1 Mar. 1950), 132–3; ‘Why Art Today Follows Politics’,

*Daily Worker* (14 Dec. 1936), 4; ‘Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid’, *New Republic* (New York) (21 Oct. 1940), 549–51.

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# A CHRONOLOGY OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

<i>Life</i>	<i>Historical and Cultural Background</i>
(25 Jan.) Adeline Virginia	Deaths of Darwin, Trollope, D. G.
1882 Stephen (VW) born at 22 Hyde Park Gate, London.	Rossetti; Joyce born; Stravinsky born; Married Women's Property Act; Society for Psychical Research founded.
(5 May) Death of mother, Julia	Death of T. H. Huxley; X-rays discovered; invention of the cinematograph; wireless telegraphy invented; arrest, trials, and conviction of Oscar Wilde.
1895 Stephen; VW's first breakdown occurs soon afterwards.	Wilde, <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i> and <i>An Ideal Husband</i>
	Wells, <i>The Time Machine</i>
	Death of William Morris; <i>Daily Mail</i> started.
1896 (Nov.) Travels in France with sister Vanessa.	Hardy, <i>Jude the Obscure</i>
	Housman, <i>A Shropshire Lad</i>
(10 April) Marriage of half-sister Stella; (19 July) death of	Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee; Tate Gallery opens.
1897 Stella; (Nov.) VW learning Greek and history at King's College, London.	Stoker, <i>Dracula</i>
	James, <i>What Maisie Knew</i>
	Deaths of Gladstone and Lewis Carroll; radium and plutonium discovered.
1898	

		Wells, <i>The War of the Worlds</i>
	(30 Oct.) VW's brother Thoby goes up to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he forms friendships with Lytton	Boer War begins. Births of Bowen and Coward.
1899	Strachey, Leonard Woolf, Clive Bell, and others of the future Bloomsbury Group (VW's younger brother Adrian follows him to Trinity in 1902).	Symons, <i>The Symbolist Movement in Literature</i> James, <i>The Awkward Age</i> Freud, <i>The Interpretation of Dreams</i>
1900		Deaths of Nietzsche, Wilde, and Ruskin; <i>Daily Express</i> started; Planck announces quantum theory; Boxer Rising. Conrad, <i>Lord Jim</i>
1901		Death of Queen Victoria; accession of Edward VII; first wireless communication between Europe and USA; 'World's Classics' series begun. Kipling, <i>Kim</i>
1902	VW starts private lessons in Greek with Janet Case.	End of Boer War; British Academy founded; <i>Encyclopaedia Britannica</i> (10th edn.); <i>TLS</i> started Bennett, <i>Anna of the Five Towns</i> James, <i>The Wings of the Dove</i>
1903		Deaths of Gissing and Spencer; <i>Daily Mirror</i> started; Wright brothers make their first aeroplane flight; Emmeline Pankhurst founds Women's Social and Political Union. Butler, <i>The Way of All Flesh</i> James, <i>The Ambassadors</i> Moore, <i>Principia Ethica</i>

1904	(22 Feb.) Death of father, Sir Leslie Stephen. In spring, VW travels to Italy with Vanessa and friend Violet Dickinson. (10 May) VW has second nervous breakdown and is ill for three months. Moves to 46, Gordon Square. (14 Dec.) VW's first publication appears.	Deaths of Christina Rossetti and Chekhov; Russo-Japanese War; <i>Entente Cordiale</i> between Britain and France. Chesterton, <i>The Napoleon of Notting Hill</i> Conrad, <i>Nostromo</i> James, <i>The Golden Bowl</i>
1905	(March, April) Travels in Portugal and Spain. Writes reviews and teaches once a week at Morley College, London.	Einstein, <i>Special Theory of Relativity</i> ; Sartre born Shaw, <i>Major Barbara</i> and <i>Man and Superman</i> Wells, <i>Kipps</i> Forster, <i>Where Angels Fear to Tread</i>
1906	(Sept. and Oct.) Travels in Greece. (20 Nov.) Death of Thoby Stephen.	Death of Ibsen; Beckett born; Liberal Government elected; Campbell-Bannerman Prime Minister; launch of HMS <i>Dreadnought</i> .
1907	(7 Feb.) Marriage of Vanessa to Clive Bell. VW moves with Adrian to 29 Fitzroy Square. At work on her first novel, 'Melymbrosia' (working title for <i>The Voyage Out</i> ).	Auden born; Anglo-Russian Entente. Synge, <i>The Playboy of the Western World</i> Conrad, <i>The Secret Agent</i> Forster, <i>The Longest Journey</i>
1908	(Sept.) Visits Italy with the Bells.	Asquith Prime Minister; Old Age Pensions Act; Elgar's First Symphony. Bennett, <i>The Old Wives' Tale</i> Forster, <i>A Room with a View</i> Chesterton, <i>The Man Who Was</i>

		<i>Thursday</i>
	(17 Feb.) Lytton Strachey proposes marriage. (30 March) First meets Lady Ottoline Morrell. (April) Visits Florence. (Aug.) Visits Bayreuth and Dresden.	Death of Meredith; 'People's Budget'; English Channel flown by Blériot. Wells, <i>Tono-Bungay</i> Masterman, <i>The Condition of England</i> Marinetti, <i>Futurist Manifesto</i>
1909		Deaths of Edward VII, Tolstoy, and Florence Nightingale; accession of George V; <i>Encyclopaedia Britannica</i> (11th edn.); Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist Exhibition. Bennett, <i>Clayhanger</i> Forster, <i>Howards End</i> Yeats, <i>The Green Helmet</i> Wells, <i>The History of Mr Polly</i>
1910	(Jan.) Works for women's suffrage. (June–Aug.) Spends time in a nursing home at Twickenham	
	(April) Travels to Turkey, where Vanessa is ill. (Nov.) Moves to 38 Brunswick Square, sharing house with Adrian, John Maynard Keynes, Duncan Grant, and Leonard Woolf.	National Insurance Act; Suffragettes active.
1911		Conrad, <i>Under Western Eyes</i> Wells, <i>The New Machiavelli</i> Lawrence, <i>The White Peacock</i>
	Rents Asheham House. (Feb.) Spends some days in Twickenham nursing home. (10 Aug.) Marriage to Leonard Woolf. Honeymoon in Provence, Spain, and Italy. (Oct.) Moves to 13 Clifford's Inn, London.	Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition; Suffragettes active; strikes by dockers, coal-miners, and transport workers; Irish Home Rule Bill again rejected by Lords; sinking of SS <i>Titanic</i> ; death of Scott in the Antarctic; <i>Daily Herald</i> started. English translations of Chekhov and Dostoevsky begin to appear.
1912		
	(March) MS of <i>The Voyage Out</i>	

	delivered to publisher. Unwell	<i>New Statesman</i> started; Suffragettes
1913	most of summer. (9 Sept.) Suicide attempt. Remains under care of nurses and husband for rest of year.	active. Lawrence, <i>Sons and Lovers</i>
		Irish Home Rule Bill passed by Parliament; First World War begins (4 Aug.); Dylan Thomas born.
1914	(16 Feb.) Last nurse leaves. Moves to Richmond, Surrey.	Lewis, <i>Blast</i> Joyce, <i>Dubliners</i> Yeats, <i>Responsibilities</i> Hardy, <i>Satires of Circumstance</i> Bell, <i>Art</i>
	Purchase of Hogarth House, Richmond. (26 March) <i>The Voyage Out</i>	Death of Rupert Brooke; Einstein, <i>General Theory of Relativity</i> ; Second Battle of Ypres; Dardanelles Campaign; sinking of SS <i>Lusitania</i> ; air attacks on London.
1915	published. (April, May) Bout of violent madness; under care of nurses until November.	Ford, <i>The Good Soldier</i> Lawrence, <i>The Rainbow</i> Brooke, <i>1914 and Other Poems</i> Richardson, <i>Pointed Roofs</i>
1916	(17 Oct.) Lectures to Richmond branch of the Women's Co- operative Guild. Regular work for <i>TLS</i> .	Death of James; Lloyd George Prime Minister; First Battle of the Somme; Battle of Verdun; Gallipoli Campaign; Easter Rising in Dublin. Joyce, <i>Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man</i>
1917	(July) Hogarth Press commences publication with <i>The Mark on the Wall</i> . VW begins work on	Death of Edward Thomas. Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele); T. E. Lawrence's campaigns in Arabia; USA enters the War; Revolution in Russia (Feb., Oct.); Balfour

	<i>Night and Day</i> .	Declaration.
		Eliot, <i>Prufrock and Other Observations</i>
		Death of Owen; Second Battle of the Somme; final German offensive collapses; Armistice with Germany (11 Nov.); Franchise Act grants vote to women over 30; influenza pandemic kills millions.
1918	Writes reviews and <i>Night and Day</i> ; also sets type for the Hogarth Press. (15 Nov.) First meets T. S. Eliot.	Lewis, <i>Tarr</i> Hopkins, <i>Poems</i> Strachey, <i>Eminent Victorians</i>
1919	(1 July) Purchase of Monk's House, Rodmell, Sussex. (20 Oct.) <i>Night and Day</i> published.	Treaty of Versailles; Alcock and Brown fly the Atlantic; National Socialists founded in Germany. Sinclair, <i>Mary Olivier</i> Shaw, <i>Heartbreak House</i>
1920	Works on journalism and <i>Jacob's Room</i> .	League of Nations established. Pound, <i>Hugh Selwyn Mauberley</i> Lawrence, <i>Women in Love</i> Eliot, <i>The Sacred Wood</i> Fry, <i>Vision and Design</i>
1921	Ill for summer months. (4 Nov.) Finishes <i>Jacob's Room</i> .	Irish Free State founded. Huxley, <i>Crome Yellow</i>
		Bonar Law Prime Minister; Mussolini forms Fascist Government in Italy; death of Proust; <i>Encyclopaedia Britannica</i> (12th edn.); <i>Criterion</i> founded; BBC founded; Irish Free State proclaimed.
1922	(Jan. to May) Ill. (24 Oct.) <i>Jacob's Room</i> published. (14 Dec.) First meets Vita Sackville-West.	Eliot, <i>The Waste Land</i> Galsworthy, <i>The Forsyte Saga</i> Joyce, <i>Ulysses</i>



	Mansfield, <i>The Garden Party</i> Wittgenstein, <i>Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus</i>
(March, April) Visits Spain. 1923 Works on 'The Hours', the first version of <i>Mrs Dalloway</i> .	Baldwin Prime Minister; BBC radio begins broadcasting (Nov.); death of K. Mansfield.
Purchase of lease on 52 Tavistock Square, Bloomsbury. 1924 Gives lecture that becomes 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown'. (8 Oct.) Finishes <i>Mrs Dalloway</i> .	First (minority) Labour Government; Ramsay MacDonald Prime Minister; deaths of Lenin, Kafka, and Conrad. Ford, <i>Some Do Not</i> Forster, <i>A Passage to India</i> O'Casey, <i>Juno and the Paycock</i> Coward, <i>The Vortex</i>
(23 April) <i>The Common Reader</i> published. (14 May) <i>Mrs Dalloway</i> published. Ill during summer. 1925	Gerhardie, <i>The Polyglots</i> Ford, <i>No More Parades</i> Huxley, <i>Those Barren Leaves</i> Whitehead, <i>Science and the Modern World</i>
(Jan.) Unwell with German measles. Writes <i>To the Lighthouse</i> . 1926	General Strike (3–12 May); <i>Encyclopaedia Britannica</i> (13th edn.); first television demonstration. Ford, <i>A Man Could Stand Up</i> Tawney, <i>Religion and the Rise of Capitalism</i>
(March, April) Travels in France and Italy. (5 May) <i>To the Lighthouse</i> published. (5 Oct.) Begins <i>Orlando</i> . 1927	Lindburgh flies solo across the Atlantic; first 'talkie' films.
(11 Oct.) <i>Orlando</i> published.	Death of Hardy; votes for women over 21. Yeats, <i>The Tower</i> Lawrence, <i>Lady Chatterley's Lover</i>

1928	Delivers lectures at Cambridge on which she bases <i>A Room of One's Own</i> .	Waugh, <i>Decline and Fall</i> Sherriff, <i>Journey's End</i> Ford, <i>Last Post</i> Huxley, <i>Point Counter Point</i> Bell, <i>Civilization</i>
(Jan.)	Travels to Berlin. (24	2nd Labour Government, MacDonald
1929	Oct.) <i>A Room of One's Own</i> published.	Prime Minister; collapse of New York Stock Exchange; start of world economic depression.
		Graves, <i>Goodbye to All That</i> Aldington, <i>Death of a Hero</i> Green, <i>Living</i>
		Mass unemployment; television starts in USA; deaths of Lawrence and Conan Doyle.
(20 Feb.)	First meets Ethel	Auden, <i>Poems</i>
1930	Smyth; (29 May) Finishes first version of <i>The Waves</i> .	Eliot, <i>Ash Wednesday</i> Waugh, <i>Vile Bodies</i> Coward, <i>Private Lives</i> Lewis, <i>Apes of God</i>
	(April) Car tour through France.	Formation of National Government;
1931	(8 Oct.) <i>The Waves</i> published. Writes <i>Flush</i> .	abandonment of Gold Standard; death of Bennett; Japan invades China.
	(21 Jan.) Death of Lytton Strachey. (13 Oct.)	
1932	<i>The Common Reader</i> , 2nd series, published.	Roosevelt becomes President of USA; hunger marches start in Britain; <i>Scrutiny</i> starts.
	Begins <i>The Years</i> , at this point called 'The Pargiters'.	Huxley, <i>Brave New World</i>
		Deaths of Galsworthy and George Moore; Hitler becomes Chancellor of

1933 (May) Car tour of France and Italy. (5 Oct.) <i>Flush</i> published.	Germany. Orwell, <i>Down and Out in Paris and London</i> Wells, <i>The Shape of Things to Come</i> Waugh, <i>A Handful of Dust</i>
1934 Works on <i>The Years</i> . (9 Sept.) Death of Roger Fry.	Graves, <i>I, Claudius</i> Beckett, <i>More Pricks than Kicks</i> Toynbee, <i>A Study of History</i> George V's Silver Jubilee; Baldwin Prime Minister of National Government; Germany re-arms; Italian invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia). Isherwood, <i>Mr Norris Changes Trains</i> T. S. Eliot, <i>Murder in the Cathedral</i>
Rewrites <i>The Years</i> . (May) 1935 Car tour of Holland, Germany, and Italy.	Death of George V; accession of Edward VIII; abdication crisis; accession of George VI; Civil War breaks out in Spain; first of the Moscow show trials; Germany re-occupies the Rhineland; BBC television begins (2 Nov.); deaths of Chesterton, Kipling, and Housman. Orwell, <i>Keep the Aspidistra Flying</i>
1936 (May–Oct.) Ill. Finishes <i>The Years</i> . Begins <i>Three Guineas</i> .	Chamberlain Prime Minister; destruction of Guernica; death of Barrie. Orwell, <i>The Road to Wigan Pier</i>
(15 March) <i>The Years</i> published. Begins <i>Roger Fry: A Biography</i> . 1937 (18 July) Death in Spanish Civil War of Julian Bell, son of Vanessa.	German <i>Anschluss</i> with Austria; Munich agreement; dismemberment of Czechoslovakia; first jet engine.
(2 June) <i>Three Guineas</i> published. Works on <i>Roger Fry</i> ,	

1938	and begins to envisage <i>Between the Acts</i> .	Beckett, <i>Murphy</i> Bowen, <i>The Death of the Heart</i> Greene, <i>Brighton Rock</i>
	VW moves to 37 Mecklenburgh Square, but lives mostly at Monk's House. Works on <i>Between the Acts</i> . Meets Freud in London.	End of Civil War in Spain; Russo-German pact; Germany invades Poland (Sept.); Britain and France declare war on Germany (3 Sept.); deaths of Freud, Yeats, and Ford. Joyce, <i>Finnegans Wake</i> Isherwood, <i>Goodbye to Berlin</i>
	(25 July) <i>Roger Fry</i> published. (10 Sept.) Mecklenburgh Square house bombed. (18 Oct.)	Germany invades north-west Europe; fall of France; evacuation of British troops from Dunkirk; Battle of Britain; beginning of 'the Blitz'; National Government under Churchill.
1940	witnesses the ruins of 52 Tavistock Square, destroyed by bombs. (23 Nov.) Finishes <i>Between the Acts</i> .	
	(26 Feb.) Revises <i>Between the Acts</i> . Becomes ill. (28 March)	Germany invades USSR; Japanese destroy US Fleet at Pearl Harbor; USA enters war; death of Joyce.
1941	Drowns herself in River Ouse, near Monk's House. (July) <i>Between the Acts</i> published.	

# **READING AND WRITING**

## THE DECAY OF ESSAY-WRITING

THE spread of education and the necessity which haunts us to impart what we have acquired have led, and will lead still further, to some startling results. We read of the over-burdened British Museum\*—how even its appetite for printed matter flags, and the monster pleads that it can swallow no more. This public crisis has long been familiar in private houses. One member of the household is almost officially deputed to stand at the hall door with flaming sword and do battle with the invading armies. Tracts, pamphlets, advertisements, gratuitous copies of magazines, and the literary productions of friends come by post, by van, by messenger—come at all hours of the day and fall in the night, so that the morning breakfast-table is fairly snowed up with them.

This age has painted itself more faithfully than any other in a myriad of clever and conscientious though not supremely great works of fiction; it has tried seriously to liven the faded colours of bygone ages; it has delved industriously with spade and axe in the rubbish-heaps and ruins; and, so far, we can only applaud our use of pen and ink. But if you have a monster like the British public to feed, you will try to tickle its stale palate in new ways; fresh and amusing shapes must be given to the old commodities—for we really have nothing so new to say that it will not fit into one of the familiar forms. So we confine ourselves to no one literary medium; we try to be new by being old; we revive mystery-plays and affect an archaic accent; we deck ourselves in the fine raiment of an embroidered style; we cast off all clothing and disport ourselves nakedly. In short, there is no end to our devices, and at this very moment probably some ingenious youth is concocting a fresh one which, be it ever so new, will grow stale in its turn. If there are thus an infinite variety of fashions in the external shapes of our wares, there are a certain number—naturally not so many—of wares that are new in substance and in form which we have either invented or very much developed. Perhaps the most significant of these literary inventions is the invention of the personal essay. It is true that it is at least as old as Montaigne,\* but we may count him the first of the moderns. It has been used with considerable

frequency since his day, but its popularity with us is so immense and so peculiar that we are justified in looking upon it as something of our own—typical, characteristic, a sign of the times which will strike the eye of our great-great-grandchildren. Its significance, indeed, lies not so much in the fact that we have attained any brilliant success in essay-writing—no one has approached the essays of Elia\*—but in the undoubted facility with which we write essays as though this were beyond all others our natural way of speaking. The peculiar form of an essay implies a peculiar substance; you can say in this shape what you cannot with equal fitness say in any other. A very wide definition obviously must be that which will include all the varieties of thought which are suitably enshrined in essays; but perhaps if you say that an essay is essentially egoistical you will not exclude many essays and you will certainly include a portentous number. Almost all essays begin with a capital I—‘I think’, ‘I feel’—and when you have said that, it is clear that you are not writing history or philosophy or biography or anything but an essay, which may be brilliant or profound, which may deal with the immortality of the soul, or the rheumatism in your left shoulder, but is primarily an expression of personal opinion.

We are not—there is, alas! no need to prove it—more subject to ideas than our ancestors; we are not, I hope, in the main more egoistical; but there is one thing in which we are more highly skilled than they are; and that is in manual dexterity with a pen. There can be no doubt that it is to the art of penmanship that we owe our present literature of essays. The very great of old—Homer and Aeschylus\*—could dispense with a pen; they were not inspired by sheets of paper and gallons of ink; no fear that their harmonies, passed from lip to lip, should lose their cadence and die. But our essayists write because the gift of writing has been bestowed on them. Had they lacked writing-masters we should have lacked essayists. There are, of course, certain distinguished people who use this medium from genuine inspiration because it best embodies the soul of their thought. But, on the other hand, there is a very large number who make the fatal pause, and the mechanical act of writing is allowed to set the brain in motion which should only be accessible to a higher inspiration.

The essay, then, owes its popularity to the fact that its proper use is to express one’s personal peculiarities, so that under the decent veil of print one can indulge one’s egoism to the full. You need know nothing of music, art, or literature to have a certain interest in their productions, and the great burden

of modern criticism is simply the expression of such individual likes and dislikes—the amiable garrulity of the tea-table—cast into the form of essays. If men and women must write, let them leave the great mysteries of art and literature unassailed; if they told us frankly not of the books that we can all read and the pictures which hang for us all to see, but of that single book to which they alone have the key and of that solitary picture whose face is shrouded to all but one gaze—if they would write of themselves—such writing would have its own permanent value. The simple words ‘I was born’ have somehow a charm beside which all the splendours of romance and fairy-tale turn to moonshine and tinsel. But though it seems thus easy enough to write of one’s self, it is, as we know, a feat but seldom accomplished. Of the multitude of autobiographies that are written, one or two alone are what they pretend to be. Confronted with the terrible spectre of themselves, the bravest are inclined to run away or shade their eyes. And thus, instead of the honest truth which we should all respect, we are given timid side-glances in the shape of essays, which, for the most part, fail in the cardinal virtue of sincerity. And those who do not sacrifice their beliefs to the turn of a phrase or the glitter of paradox think it beneath the dignity of the printed word to say simply what it means; in print they must pretend to an oracular and infallible nature. To say simply ‘I have a garden, and I will tell you what plants do best in my garden’ possibly justified its egoism; but to say ‘I have no sons, though I have six daughters, all unmarried, but I will tell you how I should have brought up my sons had I had any’ is not interesting, cannot be useful, and is a specimen of the amazing and unclothed egoism for which first the art of penmanship and then the invention of essay-writing are responsible.



## MODERN FICTION

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 Austen\* 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 motor cars 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. On the flat, in the crowd, half blind with dust, we look back with envy to those happier warriors, whose battle is won and whose achievements wear so serene an air of accomplishment that we can scarcely refrain from whispering that the fight was not so fierce for them as for us. It is for the historian of literature to decide; for him to say if we are now beginning or ending or standing in the middle of a great period of prose fiction, for down in the plain little is visible. We only know that certain gratitudes and hostilities inspire us; that certain paths seem to lead to fertile land, others to the dust and the desert; and of this perhaps it may be worth while to attempt some account.

Our quarrel, then, is not with the classics, and if we speak of quarrelling with Mr Wells, Mr Bennett, and Mr Galsworthy,\* 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*.\* Mr Wells, Mr Bennett, and Mr Galsworthy 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 they might have done but have not done; what 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. It is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they 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. Naturally, 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 with him 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,\* and hosts of other figures, may well claim to have surmounted. His characters live abundantly, even unexpectedly, but it 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, pressing 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 his 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.

If we fasten, then, one label on all these books, on which is one word materialists, we mean by it that they write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring.

We have to admit that we are exacting, and, further, that we find it difficult to justify our discontent by explaining what it is that we exact. We frame our question differently at different times. But it reappears most persistently as we drop the finished novel on the crest of a sigh—Is it worth while? What is the point of it all? Can it be that, owing to one of those little deviations which the human spirit seems to make from time to time, Mr Bennett has come down with his magnificent apparatus for catching life just an inch or two on the wrong side? Life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worth while. It is a confession of vagueness to have to make use of such a figure as this, but we scarcely better the matter by speaking, as critics are prone to do, of reality. Admitting the vagueness which afflicts all criticism of novels, let us hazard the opinion that for us at this moment the form of fiction most in vogue more often misses than secures the thing we seek. Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide. Nevertheless, we go on perseveringly, conscientiously, constructing our two and thirty 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 writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccably that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour. The tyrant is obeyed; the novel is done to a turn. But sometimes, more and more often as time goes by, we suspect a momentary doubt, a spasm of rebellion, as the

pages fill themselves in the customary way. Is life like this? Must novels be like this?

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being 'like this'. 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.

It is, at any rate, in some such fashion as this that we seek to define the quality which distinguishes the work of several young writers, among whom Mr James Joyce is the most notable, from that of their predecessors. They attempt to come closer to life, and to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves them, even if to do so they must discard most of the conventions which are commonly observed by the novelist. Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, 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 fully 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. On our part, with such a fragment before us, it is hazarded rather than affirmed; but whatever the intention of the whole, 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 important. In contrast with those whom we have called materialists, Mr Joyce is spiritual; he is concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain, and in order to preserve it he disregards with complete courage whatever seems to him adventitious, whether it be probability, or coherence, or any other of these signposts which for generations have served to support the imagination of a reader when called upon to imagine what he can neither touch nor see. The scene in the cemetery,\* for instance, with its brilliancy, its sordidity, its incoherence, its sudden lightning flashes of significance, does undoubtedly come so close to the quick of the mind that, on a first reading at any rate, it is difficult not to acclaim a masterpiece. If we want life itself, here surely we have it. Indeed, we find ourselves fumbling rather awkwardly if we try 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 *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.\* It fails because of the comparative poverty of the writer's mind, we might say simply and have done with it. But it is possible to press a little further and wonder whether we may not refer our sense of being in a bright yet narrow room, confined and shut in, rather than enlarged and set free, to some limitation imposed by the method as well as by the mind. Is it the method that inhibits the creative power? 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 embraces or creates what is outside itself and beyond? Does the emphasis laid, perhaps didactically, upon indecency, contribute to the effect of something angular and isolated? Or is it merely that in any effort of such originality it is much easier, for contemporaries especially, to feel what it lacks than to name what it gives? In any case it is a mistake to stand outside examining 'methods'. Any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express, if we are writers; that brings us closer to the novelist's intention if we are readers. This method has the merit of bringing us closer to what we were prepared to call life itself; did not the reading of *Ulysses* suggest how much of life is excluded or ignored, and did it not come with a shock to open *Tristram Shandy* or even *Pendennis*\* and be by them convinced that there are not only other aspects of life, but more important 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 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. For the moderns 'that', the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology. At once, therefore, the accent falls a little differently; the emphasis is upon something hitherto ignored; at once a different outline of form becomes necessary, difficult for us to grasp, incomprehensible to our predecessors. No one but a modern, no one perhaps but a Russian, would have felt the interest of the situation which Tchekov has made into the short story which he calls 'Gusev'.\* Some Russian soldiers lie ill on board a ship which is taking them back to Russia. We are given a few scraps of their talk and some of their thoughts; then one of them dies and is carried away; the talk goes on among the others for a time, until Gusev himself dies, and looking 'like a carrot or a radish' 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 'this is comic', or 'that is tragic', nor are we certain, since short stories, we have been taught, should be brief and conclusive, whether this, which is vague and inconclusive, should be called a short story at all.

The most elementary 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 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.'\* 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. More accurately indeed we might 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 Meredith\* 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 two fictions so immeasurably far apart are futile save indeed as they flood us with a view of the infinite possibilities of the art and remind us that there is no limit to the horizon, and that nothing—no ‘method’, no experiment, even of the wildest—is forbidden, but only falsity and pretence. ‘The proper stuff of fiction’ does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss. And if we can imagine the art of fiction come alive and standing in our midst, she would undoubtedly bid us break her and bully her, as well as honour and love her, for so her youth is renewed and her sovereignty assured.



## THE MODERN ESSAY

As Mr Rhys truly says, it is unnecessary to go profoundly into the history and origin of the essay—whether it derives from Socrates or Siranney the Persian—since, like all living things, its present is more important than its past.\* Moreover, the family is widely spread; and while some of its representatives have risen in the world and wear their coronets with the best, others pick up a precarious living in the gutter near Fleet Street. The form, too, admits variety. The essay can be short or long, serious or trifling, about God and Spinoza, or about turtles and Cheapside.\* But as we turn over the pages of these five little volumes, containing essays written between 1870 and 1920, certain principles appear to control the chaos, and we detect in the short period under review something like the progress of history.

Of all forms of literature, however, the essay is the one which least calls for the use of long words. The principle which controls it is simply that it should give pleasure; the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure. Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end. It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last. In the interval we may pass through the most various experiences of amusement, surprise, interest, indignation; we may soar to the heights of fantasy with Lamb or plunge to the depths of wisdom with Bacon,\* but we must never be roused. The essay must lap us about and draw its curtain across the world.

So great a feat is seldom accomplished, though the fault may well be as much on the reader's side as on the writer's. Habit and lethargy have dulled his palate. A novel has a story, a poem rhyme; but what art can the essayist use in these short lengths of prose to sting us wide awake and fix us in a trance which is not sleep but rather an intensification of life—a basking, with every faculty alert, in the sun of pleasure? He must know—that is the first essential—how to write. His learning may be as profound as Mark Pattison's, but in an essay it must be so fused by the magic of writing that not a fact juts out, not a dogma tears the surface of the texture. Macaulay in one way, Froude in another, did this superbly over and over again. They have blown



more knowledge into us in the course of one essay than the innumerable chapters of a hundred text-books. But when Mark Pattison has to tell us, in the space of thirty-five little pages, about Montaigne, we feel that he had not previously assimilated M. Grün.\* M. Grün was a gentleman who once wrote a bad book. M. Grün and his book should have been embalmed for our perpetual delight in amber. But the process is fatiguing; it requires more time and perhaps more temper than Pattison had at his command. He served M. Grün up raw, and he remains a crude berry among the cooked meats, upon which our teeth must grate for ever. Something of the sort applies to Matthew Arnold and a certain translator of Spinoza. Literal truth-telling and finding fault with a culprit for his good are out of place in an essay, where everything should be for our good and rather for eternity than for the March number of the *Fortnightly Review*.\* But if the voice of the scold should never be heard in this narrow plot, there is another voice which is as a plague of locusts—the voice of a man stumbling drowsily among loose words, clutching aimlessly at vague ideas, the voice, for example, of Mr Hutton in the following passage:

Add to this that his married life was very brief, only seven years and a half, being unexpectedly cut short, and that his passionate reverence for his wife's memory and genius—in his own words, 'a religion'—was one which, as he must have been perfectly sensible, he could not make to appear otherwise than extravagant, not to say an hallucination, in the eyes of the rest of mankind, and yet that he was possessed by an irresistible yearning to attempt to embody it in all the tender and enthusiastic hyperbole of which it is so pathetic to find a man who gained his fame by his 'dry-light' a master, and it is impossible not to feel that the human incidents in Mr Mill's career are very sad.\*

A book could take that blow, but it sinks an essay. A biography in two volumes is indeed the proper depository, for there, where the licence is so much wider, and hints and glimpses of outside things make part of the feast (we refer to the old type of Victorian volume), these yawns and stretches hardly matter, and have indeed some positive value of their own. But that value, which is contributed by the reader, perhaps illicitly, in his desire to get as much into the book from all possible sources as he can, must be ruled out here.

There is no room for the impurities of literature in an essay. Somehow or

other, by dint of labour or bounty of nature, or both combined, the essay must be pure—pure like water or pure like wine, but pure from dullness, deadness, and deposits of extraneous matter. Of all writers in the first volume, Walter Pater best achieves this arduous task, because before setting out to write his essay ('Notes on Leonardo da Vinci')\* he has somehow contrived to get his material fused. He is a learned man, but it is not knowledge of Leonardo that remains with us, but a vision, such as we get in a good novel where everything contributes to bring the writer's conception as a whole before us. Only here, in the essay, where the bounds are so strict and facts have to be used in their nakedness, the true writer like Walter Pater makes these limitations yield their own quality. Truth will give it authority; from its narrow limits he will get shape and intensity; and then there is no more fitting place for some of those ornaments which the old writers loved and we, by calling them ornaments, presumably despise. Nowadays nobody would have the courage to embark on the once famous description of Leonardo's lady who has

learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary ...\*

The passage is too thumb-marked to slip naturally into the context. But when we come unexpectedly upon 'the smiling of women and the motion of great waters', or upon 'full of the refinement of the dead, in sad, earth-coloured raiment, set with pale stones', we suddenly remember that we have ears and we have eyes, and that the English language fills a long array of stout volumes with innumerable words, many of which are of more than one syllable. The only living Englishman who ever looks into these volumes is, of course, a gentleman of Polish extraction.\* But doubtless our abstention saves us much gush, much rhetoric, much high-stepping and cloud-prancing, and for the sake of the prevailing sobriety and hard-headedness we should be willing to barter the splendour of Sir Thomas Browne and the vigour of Swift.\*

Yet, if the essay admits more properly than biography or fiction of sudden boldness and metaphor, and can be polished till every atom of its surface shines, there are dangers in that too. We are soon in sight of ornament. Soon the current, which is the life-blood of literature, runs slow; and instead of sparkling and flashing or moving with a quieter impulse which has a deeper

excitement, words coagulate together in frozen sprays which, like the grapes on a Christmas-tree, glitter for a single night, but are dusty and garish the day after. The temptation to decorate is great where the theme may be of the slightest. What is there to interest another in the fact that one has enjoyed a walking tour, or has amused oneself by rambling down Cheapside and looking at the turtles in Mr Sweeting's shop window? Stevenson and Samuel Butler chose very different methods of exciting our interest in these domestic themes. Stevenson, of course, trimmed and polished and set out his matter in the traditional eighteenth-century form. It is admirably done, but we cannot help feeling anxious, as the essay proceeds, lest the material may give out under the craftsman's fingers. The ingot is so small, the manipulation so incessant. And perhaps that is why the peroration—

To sit still and contemplate—to remember the faces of women without desire, to be pleased by the great deeds of men without envy, to be everything and everywhere in sympathy and yet content to remain where and what you are—\*

has the sort of insubstantiality which suggests that by the time he got to the end he had left himself nothing solid to work with. Butler adopted the very opposite method. Think your own thoughts, he seems to say, and speak them as plainly as you can. These turtles in the shop window which appear to leak out of their shells through heads and feet suggest a fatal faithfulness to a fixed idea. And so, striding unconcernedly from one idea to the next, we traverse a large stretch of ground; observe that a wound in the solicitor is a very serious thing; that Mary Queen of Scots wears surgical boots and is subject to fits near the Horse Shoe in Tottenham Court Road;\* take it for granted that no one really cares about Aeschylus; and so, with many amusing anecdotes and some profound reflections, reach the peroration, which is that, as he had been told not to see more in Cheapside than he could get into twelve pages of the *Universal Review*,\* he had better stop. And yet obviously Butler is at least as careful of our pleasure as Stevenson; and to write like oneself and call it not writing is a much harder exercise in style than to write like Addison\* and call it writing well.

But, however much they differ individually, the Victorian essayists yet had something in common. They wrote at greater length than is now usual, and they wrote for a public which had not only time to sit down to its magazine seriously, but a high, if peculiarly Victorian, standard of culture by which to judge it. It was worth while to speak out upon serious matters in an

essay; and there was nothing absurd in writing as well as one possibly could when, in a month or two, the same public which had welcomed the essay in a magazine would carefully read it once more in a book. But a change came from a small audience of cultivated people to a larger audience of people who were not quite so cultivated. The change was not altogether for the worse. In volume iii. we find Mr Birrell and Mr Beerbohm.\* It might even be said that there was a reversion to the classic type, and that the essay by losing its size and something of its sonority was approaching more nearly the essay of Addison and Lamb. At any rate, there is a great gulf between Mr Birrell on Carlyle\* and the essay which one may suppose that Carlyle would have written upon Mr Birrell. There is little similarity between 'A Cloud of Pinafores', by Max Beerbohm, and 'A Cynic's Apology', by Leslie Stephen.\* But the essay is alive; there is no reason to despair. As the conditions change so the essayist, most sensitive of all plants to public opinion, adapts himself, and if he is good makes the best of the change, and if he is bad the worst. Mr Birrell is certainly good; and so we find that, though he has dropped a considerable amount of weight, his attack is much more direct and his movement more supple. But what did Mr Beerbohm give to the essay and what did he take from it? That is a much more complicated question, for here we have an essayist who has concentrated on the work and is without doubt the prince of his profession.

What Mr Beerbohm gave was, of course, himself. This presence, which has haunted the essay fitfully from the time of Montaigne, had been in exile since the death of Charles Lamb. Matthew Arnold was never to his readers Matt, nor Walter Pater affectionately abbreviated in a thousand homes to Wat. They gave us much, but that they did not give. Thus, some time in the nineties, it must have surprised readers accustomed to exhortation, information, and denunciation to find themselves familiarly addressed by a voice which seemed to belong to a man no larger than themselves. He was affected by private joys and sorrows, and had no gospel to preach and no learning to impart. He was himself, simply and directly, and himself he has remained. Once again we have an essayist capable of using the essayist's most proper but most dangerous and delicate tool. He has brought personality into literature, not unconsciously and impurely, but so consciously and purely that we do not know whether there is any relation between Max the essayist and Mr Beerbohm the man. We only know that the spirit of personality permeates every word that he writes. The triumph is the triumph of style. For

it is only by knowing how to write that you can make use in literature of your self; that self which, while it is essential to literature, is also its most dangerous antagonist. Never to be yourself and yet always—that is the problem. Some of the essayists in Mr Rhys' collection, to be frank, have not altogether succeeded in solving it. We are nauseated by the sight of trivial personalities decomposing in the eternity of print. As talk, no doubt, it was charming, and certainly the writer is a good fellow to meet over a bottle of beer. But literature is stern; it is no use being charming, virtuous, or even learned and brilliant into the bargain, unless, she seems to reiterate, you fulfil her first condition—to know how to write.

This art is possessed to perfection by Mr Beerbohm. But he has not searched the dictionary for polysyllables. He has not moulded firm periods or seduced our ears with intricate cadences and strange melodies. Some of his companions—Henley\* and Stevenson, for example—are momentarily more impressive. But 'A Cloud of Pinafores' has in it that indescribable inequality, stir, and final expressiveness which belong to life and to life alone. You have not finished with it because you have read it, any more than friendship is ended because it is time to part. Life wells up and alters and adds. Even things in a book-case change if they are alive; we find ourselves wanting to meet them again; we find them altered. So we look back upon essay after essay by Mr Beerbohm, knowing that, come September or May, we shall sit down with them and talk. Yet it is true that the essayist is the most sensitive of all writers to public opinion. The drawing-room is the place where a great deal of reading is done nowadays, and the essays of Mr Beerbohm lie, with an exquisite appreciation of all that the position exacts, upon the drawing-room table. There is no gin about; no strong tobacco; no puns, drunkenness, or insanity. Ladies and gentlemen talk together, and some things, of course, are not said.

But if it would be foolish to attempt to confine Mr Beerbohm to one room, it would be still more foolish, unhappily, to make him, the artist, the man who gives us only his best, the representative of our age. There are no essays by Mr Beerbohm in the fourth or fifth volumes of the present collection. His age seems already a little distant, and the drawing-room table, as it recedes, begins to look rather like an altar where, once upon a time, people deposited offerings—fruit from their own orchards, gifts carved with their own hands. Now once more the conditions have changed. The public needs essays as much as ever, and perhaps even more. The demand for the light middle not

exceeding fifteen hundred words, or in special cases seventeen hundred and fifty, much exceeds the supply. Where Lamb wrote one essay and Max perhaps writes two, Mr Belloc\* at a rough computation produces three hundred and sixty-five. They are very short, it is true. Yet with what dexterity the practised essayist will utilise his space—beginning as close to the top of the sheet as possible, judging precisely how far to go, when to turn, and how, without sacrificing a hair's-breadth of paper, to wheel about and alight accurately upon the last word his editor allows! As a feat of skill it is well worth watching. But the personality upon which Mr Belloc, like Mr Beerbohm, depends suffers in the process. It comes to us not with the natural richness of the speaking voice, but strained and thin and full of mannerisms and affectations, like the voice of a man shouting through a megaphone to a crowd on a windy day. 'Little friends, my readers', he says in the essay called 'An Unknown Country', and he goes on to tell us how—

There was a shepherd the other day at Findon Fair who had come from the east by Lewes with sheep, and who had in his eyes that reminiscence of horizons which makes the eyes of shepherds and of mountaineers different from the eyes of other men. ... I went with him to hear what he had to say, for shepherds talk quite differently from other men.

Happily this shepherd had little to say, even under the stimulus of the inevitable mug of beer, about the Unknown Country, for the only remark that he did make proves him either a minor poet, unfit for the care of sheep, or Mr Belloc himself masquerading with a fountain pen.\* That is the penalty which the habitual essayist must now be prepared to face. He must masquerade. He cannot afford the time either to be himself or to be other people. He must skim the surface of thought and dilute the strength of personality. He must give us a worn weekly halfpenny instead of a solid sovereign once a year.

But it is not Mr Belloc only who has suffered from the prevailing conditions. The essays which bring the collection to the year 1920 may not be the best of their authors' work, but, if we except writers like Mr Conrad and Mr Hudson, who have strayed into essay writing accidentally, and concentrate upon those who write essays habitually, we shall find them a good deal affected by the change in their circumstances. To write weekly, to write daily, to write shortly, to write for busy people catching trains in the morning or for tired people coming home in the evening, is a heart-breaking task for men who know good writing from bad. They do it, but instinctively draw out of harm's way anything precious that might be damaged by contact with the public, or anything sharp that might irritate its skin. And so, if one



reads Mr Lucas, Mr Lynd, or Mr Squire\* in the bulk, one feels that a common greyness silvers everything. They are as far removed from the extravagant beauty of Walter Pater as they are from the intemperate candour of Leslie Stephen. Beauty and courage are dangerous spirits to bottle in a column and a half; and thought, like a brown paper parcel in a waistcoat pocket, has a way of spoiling the symmetry of an article. It is a kind, tired, apathetic world for which they write, and the marvel is that they never cease to attempt, at least, to write well.

But there is no need to pity Mr Clutton Brock for this change in the essayist's conditions. He has clearly made the best of his circumstances and not the worst. One hesitates even to say that he has had to make any conscious effort in the matter, so naturally has he effected the transition from the private essayist to the public, from the drawing-room to the Albert Hall.\* Paradoxically enough, the shrinkage in size has brought about a corresponding expansion of individuality. We have no longer the 'I' of Max and of Lamb, but the 'we' of public bodies and other sublime personages. It is 'we' who go to hear *The Magic Flute*;\* 'we' who ought to profit by it; 'we', in some mysterious way, who, in our corporate capacity, once upon a time actually wrote it. For music and literature and art must submit to the same generalisation or they will not carry to the farthest recesses of the Albert Hall. That the voice of Mr Clutton Brock, so sincere and so disinterested, carries such a distance and reaches so many without pandering to the weakness of the mass or its passions must be a matter of legitimate satisfaction to us all. But while 'we' are gratified, 'I', that unruly partner in the human fellowship, is reduced to despair. 'I' must always think things for himself, and feel things for himself. To share them in a diluted form with the majority of well-educated and well-intentioned men and women is for him sheer agony; and while the rest of us listen intently and profit profoundly, 'I' slips off to the woods and the fields and rejoices in a single blade of grass or a solitary potato.

In the fifth volume of modern essays, it seems, we have got some way from pleasure and the art of writing. But in justice to the essayists of 1920 we must be sure that we are not praising the famous because they have been praised already and the dead because we shall never meet them wearing spats in Piccadilly. We must know what we mean when we say that they can write and give us pleasure. We must compare them; we must bring out the quality. We must point to this and say it is good because it is exact, truthful, and

imaginative:

Nay, retire men cannot when they would; neither will they, when it were Reason; but are impatient of Privateness, even in age and sickness, which require the shadow: like old Townsmen: that will still be sitting at their street door, though thereby they offer Age to Scorn ...\*

and to this, and say it is bad because it is loose, plausible, and commonplace:

With courteous and precise cynicism on his lips, he thought of quiet virginal chambers, of waters singing under the moon, of terraces where taintless music sobbed into the open night, of pure maternal mistresses with protecting arms and vigilant eyes, of fields slumbering in the sunlight, of leagues of ocean heaving under warm tremulous heavens, of hot ports, gorgeous and perfumed. ...\*

It goes on, but already we are bemused with sound and neither feel nor hear. The comparison makes us suspect that the art of writing has for backbone some fierce attachment to an idea. It is on the back of an idea, something believed in with conviction or seen with precision and thus compelling words to its shape, that the diverse company which includes Lamb and Bacon, and Mr Beerbohm and Hudson, and Vernon Lee\* and Mr Conrad, and Leslie Stephen and Butler and Walter Pater reaches the farther shore. Very various talents have helped or hindered the passage of the idea into words. Some scrape through painfully; others fly with every wind favouring. But Mr Belloc and Mr Lucas and Mr Squire are not fiercely attached to anything in itself. They share the contemporary dilemma—that lack of an obstinate conviction which lifts ephemeral sounds through the misty sphere of anybody's language to the land where there is a perpetual marriage, a perpetual union. Vague as all definitions are, a good essay must have this permanent quality about it; it must draw its curtain round us, but it must be a curtain that shuts us in, not out.



## HOW IT STRIKES A CONTEMPORARY

IN the first place a contemporary can scarcely fail to be struck by the fact that two critics at the same table at the same moment will pronounce completely different opinions about the same book. Here, on the right, it is declared a masterpiece of English prose; on the left, simultaneously, a mere mass of waste-paper which, if the fire could survive it, should be thrown upon the flames. Yet both critics are in agreement about Milton and about Keats.\* They display an exquisite sensibility and have undoubtedly a genuine enthusiasm. It is only when they discuss the work of contemporary writers that they inevitably come to blows. The book in question, which is at once a lasting contribution to English literature and a mere farrago of pretentious mediocrity, was published about two months ago. That is the explanation; that is why they differ.

The explanation is a strange one. It is equally disconcerting to the reader who wishes to take his bearings in the chaos of contemporary literature and to the writer who has a natural desire to know whether his own work, produced with infinite pains and in almost utter darkness, is likely to burn for ever among the fixed luminaries of English letters or, on the contrary, to put out the fire. But if we identify ourselves with the reader and explore his dilemma first, our bewilderment is short-lived enough. The same thing has happened so often before. We have heard the doctors disagreeing about the new and agreeing about the old twice a year on the average, in spring and autumn, ever since *Robert Elsmere*, or was it Stephen Phillips,\* somehow pervaded the atmosphere, and there was the same disagreement among grown-up people about these books too. It would be much more marvellous, and indeed much more upsetting, if, for a wonder, both gentlemen agreed, pronounced Blank's book an undoubted masterpiece, and thus faced us with the necessity of deciding whether we should back their judgement to the extent of ten and sixpence. Both are critics of reputation; the opinions tumbled out so spontaneously here will be starched and stiffened into columns of sober prose which will uphold the dignity of letters in England and America.

It must be some innate cynicism, then, some ungenerous distrust of

contemporary genius, which determines us automatically as the talk goes on that, were they to agree—which they show no signs of doing—half a guinea is altogether too large a sum to squander upon contemporary enthusiasms, and the case will be met quite adequately by a card to the library. Still the question remains, and let us put it boldly to the critics themselves. Is there no guidance nowadays for a reader who yields to none in reverence for the dead, but is tormented by the suspicion that reverence for the dead is vitally connected with understanding of the living? After a rapid survey both critics are agreed that there is unfortunately no such person. For what is their own judgement worth where new books are concerned? Certainly not ten and sixpence. And from the stores of their experience they proceed to bring forth terrible examples of past blunders; crimes of criticism which, if they had been committed against the dead and not against the living, would have lost them their jobs and imperilled their reputations. The only advice they can offer is to respect one's own instincts, to follow them fearlessly and, rather than submit them to the control of any critic or reviewer alive, to check them by reading and reading again the masterpieces of the past.

Thanking them humbly, we cannot help reflecting that it was not always so. Once upon a time, we must believe, there was a rule, a discipline, which controlled the great republic of readers in a way which is now unknown. That is not to say that the great critic—the Dryden, the Johnson, the Coleridge, the Arnold\*—was an impeccable judge of contemporary work, whose verdicts stamped the book indelibly and saved the reader the trouble of reckoning the value for himself. The mistakes of these great men about their own contemporaries are too notorious to be worth recording. But the mere fact of their existence had a centralising influence. That alone, it is not fantastic to suppose, would have controlled the disagreements of the dinner-table and given to random chatter about some book just out an authority now entirely to seek. The diverse schools would have debated as hotly as ever, but at the back of every reader's mind would have been the consciousness that there was at least one man who kept the main principles of literature closely in view: who, if you had taken to him some eccentricity of the moment, would have brought it into touch with permanence and tethered it by his own authority in the contrary blasts of praise and blame.<sup>1</sup> But when it comes to the making of a critic, nature must be generous and society ripe. The scattered dinner-tables of the modern world, the chase and eddy of the various currents which compose the society of our time, could only be dominated by a giant of

fabulous dimensions. And where is even the very tall man whom we have the right to expect? Reviewers we have but no critic; a million competent and incorruptible policemen but no judge. Men of taste and learning and ability are for ever lecturing the young and celebrating the dead. But the too frequent result of their able and industrious pens is a desiccation of the living tissues of literature into a network of little bones. Nowhere shall we find the downright vigour of a Dryden, or Keats with his fine and natural bearing, his profound insight and sanity, or Flaubert\* and the tremendous power of his fanaticism, or Coleridge, above all, brewing in his head the whole of poetry and letting issue now and then one of those profound general statements which are caught up by the mind when hot with the friction of reading as if they were of the soul of the book itself.

And to all this, too, the critics generously agree. A great critic, they say, is the rarest of beings. But should one miraculously appear, how should we maintain him, on what should we feed him? Great critics, if they are not themselves great poets, are bred from the profusion of the age. There is some great man to be vindicated, some school to be founded or destroyed. But our age is meagre to the verge of destitution. There is no name which dominates the rest. There is no master in whose workshop the young are proud to serve apprenticeship. Mr Hardy has long since withdrawn from the arena, and there is something exotic about the genius of Mr Conrad\* which makes him not so much an influence as an idol, honoured and admired, but aloof and apart. As for the rest, though they are many and vigorous and in the full flood of creative activity, there is none whose influence can seriously affect his contemporaries, or penetrate beyond our day to that not very distant future which it pleases us to call immortality. If we make a century our test, and ask how much of the work produced in these days in England will be in existence then, we shall have to answer not merely that we cannot agree upon the same book, but that we are more than doubtful whether such a book there is. It is an age of fragments. A few stanzas, a few pages, a chapter here and there, the beginning of this novel, the end of that, are equal to the best of any age or author. But can we go to posterity with a sheaf of loose pages, or ask the readers of those days, with the whole of literature before them, to sift our enormous rubbish heaps for our tiny pearls? Such are the questions which the critics might lawfully put to their companions at table, the novelists and poets.

At first the weight of pessimism seems sufficient to bear down all

opposition. Yes, it is a lean age, we repeat, with much to justify its poverty; but, frankly, if we pit one century against another the comparison seems overwhelmingly against us. *Waverley*, *The Excursion*, 'Kubla Khan', *Don Juan*, Hazlitt's essays, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Hyperion*, and *Prometheus Unbound*\* were all published between 1800 and 1821. Our century has not lacked industry; but if we ask for masterpieces it appears on the face of it that the pessimists are right. It seems as if an age of genius must be succeeded by an age of endeavour; riot and extravagance by cleanliness and hard work. All honour, of course, to those who have sacrificed their immortality to set the house in order. But if we ask for masterpieces, where are we to look? A little poetry, we may feel sure, will survive; a few poems by Mr Yeats, by Mr Davies, by Mr de la Mare. Mr Lawrence, of course, has moments of greatness, but hours of something very different. Mr Beerbohm, in his way, is perfect, but it is not a big way. Passages in *Far Away and Long Ago* will undoubtedly go to posterity entire. *Ulysses*\* was a memorable catastrophe—immense in daring, terrific in disaster. And so, picking and choosing, we select now this, now that, hold it up for display, hear it defended or derided, and finally have to meet the objection that even so we are only agreeing with the critics that it is an age incapable of sustained effort, littered with fragments, and not seriously to be compared with the age that went before.

But it is just when opinions universally prevail and we have added lip service to their authority that we become sometimes most keenly conscious that we do not believe a word that we are saying. It is a barren and exhausted age, we repeat; we must look back with envy to the past. Meanwhile it is one of the first fine days of spring. Life is not altogether lacking in colour. The telephone, which interrupts the most serious conversations and cuts short the most weighty observations, has a romance of its own. And the random talk of people who have no chance of immortality and thus can speak their minds out has a setting, often, of lights, streets, houses, human beings, beautiful or grotesque, which will weave itself into the moment for ever. But this is life; the talk is about literature. We must try to disentangle the two, and justify the rash revolt of optimism against the superior plausibility, the finer distinction, of pessimism.

Our optimism, then, is largely instinctive. It springs from the fine day and the wine and the talk; it springs from the fact that when life throws up such treasures daily, daily suggests more than the most voluble can express, much though we admire the dead, we prefer life as it is. There is something about

the present which we would not exchange, though we were offered a choice of all past ages to live in. And modern literature, with all its imperfections, has the same hold on us and the same fascination. It is like a relation whom we snub and scarify daily, but, after all, cannot do without. It has the same endearing quality of being that which we are, that which we have made, that in which we live, instead of being something, however august, alien to ourselves and beheld from the outside. Nor has any generation more need than ours to cherish its contemporaries. We are sharply cut off from our predecessors. A shift in the scale—the war, the sudden slip of masses held in position for ages—has shaken the fabric from top to bottom, alienated us from the past and made us perhaps too vividly conscious of the present. Every day we find ourselves doing, saying, or thinking things that would have been impossible to our fathers. And we feel the differences which have not been noted far more keenly than the resemblances which have been very perfectly expressed. New books lure us to read them partly in the hope that they will reflect this re-arrangement of our attitude—these scenes, thoughts, and apparently fortuitous groupings of incongruous things which impinge upon us with so keen a sense of novelty—and, as literature does, give it back into our keeping, whole and comprehended. Here indeed there is every reason for optimism. No age can have been more rich than ours in writers determined to give expression to the differences which separate them from the past and not to the resemblances which connect them with it. It would be invidious to mention names, but the most casual reader dipping into poetry, into fiction, into biography can hardly fail to be impressed by the courage, the sincerity, in a word, by the widespread originality of our time. But our exhilaration is strangely curtailed. Book after book leaves us with the same sense of promise unachieved, of intellectual poverty, of brilliance which has been snatched from life but not transmuted into literature. Much of what is best in contemporary work has the appearance of being noted under pressure, taken down in a bleak shorthand which preserves with astonishing brilliance the movements and expressions of the figures as they pass across the screen. But the flash is soon over, and there remains with us a profound dissatisfaction. The irritation is as acute as the pleasure was intense.

After all, then, we are back at the beginning, vacillating from extreme to extreme, at one moment enthusiastic, at the next pessimistic, unable to come to any conclusion about our contemporaries. We have asked the critics to help us, but they have deprecated the task. Now, then, is the time to accept

their advice and correct these extremes by consulting the masterpieces of the past. We feel ourselves indeed driven to them, impelled not by calm judgement but by some imperious need to anchor our instability upon their security. But, honestly, the shock of the comparison between past and present is at first disconcerting. Undoubtedly there is a dullness in great books. There is an unabashed tranquillity in page after page of Wordsworth and Scott and Miss Austen which is sedative to the verge of somnolence. Opportunities occur and they neglect them. Shades and subtleties accumulate and they ignore them. They seem deliberately to refuse to gratify those senses which are stimulated so briskly by the moderns; the senses of sight, of sound, of touch—above all, the sense of the human being, his depth and the variety of his perceptions, his complexity, his confusion, his self, in short. There is little of all this in the works of Wordsworth and Scott and Jane Austen. From what, then, arises that sense of security which gradually, delightfully, and completely overcomes us? It is the power of their belief—their conviction, that imposes itself upon us. In Wordsworth, the philosophic poet, this is obvious enough. But it is equally true of the careless Scott, who scribbled masterpieces to build castles before breakfast, and of the modest maiden lady who wrote furtively and quietly simply to give pleasure. In both there is the same natural conviction that life is of a certain quality. They have their judgement of conduct. They know the relations of human beings towards each other and towards the universe. Neither of them probably has a word to say about the matter outright, but everything depends on it. Only believe, we find ourselves saying, and all the rest will come of itself. Only believe, to take a very simple instance which the recent publication of *The Watsons*\* brings to mind, that a nice girl will instinctively try to soothe the feelings of a boy who has been snubbed at a dance, and then, if you believe it implicitly and unquestioningly, you will not only make people a hundred years later feel the same thing, but you will make them feel it as literature. For certainty of that kind is the condition which makes it possible to write. To believe that your impressions hold good for others is to be released from the cramp and confinement of personality. It is to be free, as Scott was free, to explore with a vigour which still holds us spell-bound the whole world of adventure and romance. It is also the first step in that mysterious process in which Jane Austen was so great an adept. The little grain of experience once selected, believed in, and set outside herself, could be put precisely in its place, and she was then free to make it, by a process which never yields its secrets to the

analyst, into that complete statement which is literature.

So then our contemporaries afflict us because they have ceased to believe. The most sincere of them will only tell us what it is that happens to himself. They cannot make a world, because they are not free of other human beings. They cannot tell stories because they do not believe that stories are true. They cannot generalise. They depend on their senses and emotions, whose testimony is trustworthy, rather than on their intellects whose message is obscure. And they have perforce to deny themselves the use of some of the most powerful and some of the most exquisite of the weapons of their craft. With the whole wealth of the English language at the back of them, they timidly pass about from hand to hand and book to book only the meanest copper coins. Set down at a fresh angle of the eternal prospect they can only whip out their notebooks and record with agonised intensity the flying gleams, which light on what? and the transitory splendours, which may, perhaps, compose nothing whatever. But here the critics interpose, and with some show of justice.

If this description holds good, they say, and is not, as it may well be, entirely dependent upon our position at the table and certain purely personal relationships to mustard pots and flower vases, then the risks of judging contemporary work are greater than ever before. There is every excuse for them if they are wide of the mark; and no doubt it would be better to retreat, as Matthew Arnold advised, from the burning ground of the present to the safe tranquillity of the past. 'We enter on burning ground,' wrote Matthew Arnold, 'as we approach the poetry of times so near to us, poetry like that of Byron, Shelley, and Wordsworth, of which the estimates are so often not only personal, but personal with passion,' and this, they remind us, was written in the year 1880.\* Beware, they say, of putting under the microscope one inch of a ribbon which runs many miles; things sort themselves out if you wait; moderation, and a study of the classics are to be recommended. Moreover, life is short; the Byron centenary is at hand; and the burning question of the moment is, did he, or did he not, marry his sister?\*

To sum up, then—if indeed any conclusion is possible when everybody is talking at once and it is time to be going—it seems that it would be wise for the writers of the present to renounce the hope of creating masterpieces. Their poems, plays, biographies, novels are not books but notebooks, and Time, like a good schoolmaster, will take them in his hands, point to their blots and scrawls and erasures, and tear them across; but he will not throw them into the waste-



paper basket. He will keep them because other students will find them very useful. It is from notebooks of the present that the masterpieces of the future are made. Literature, as the critics were saying just now, has lasted long, has undergone many changes, and it is only a short sight and a parochial mind that will exaggerate the importance of these squalls, however they may agitate the little boats now tossing out at sea. The storm and the drenching are on the surface; continuity and calm are in the depths.

As for the critics whose task it is to pass judgement upon the books of the moment, whose work, let us admit, is difficult, dangerous, and often distasteful, let us ask them to be generous of encouragement, but sparing of those wreaths and coronets which are so apt to get awry, and fade, and make the wearers, in six months time, look a little ridiculous. Let them take a wider, a less personal view of modern literature, and look indeed upon the writers as if they were engaged upon some vast building, which being built by common effort, the separate workmen may well remain anonymous. Let them slam the door upon the cosy company where sugar is cheap and butter plentiful, give over, for a time at least, the discussion of that fascinating topic—whether Byron married his sister—and, withdrawing, perhaps, a handsbreadth from the table where we sit chattering, say something interesting about literature. Let us buttonhole them as they leave, and recall to their memory that gaunt aristocrat, Lady Hester Stanhope,\* who kept a milk-white horse in her stable in readiness for the Messiah and was for ever scanning the mountain tops, impatiently but with confidence, for signs of his approach, and ask them to follow her example; scan the horizon; see the past in relation to the future; and so prepare the way for masterpieces to come.



## MR BENNETT AND MRS BROWN

THE other day Mr Arnold Bennett, himself one of the most famous of the Edwardians, surveyed the younger generation and said: 'I admit that for myself I cannot yet descry any coming big novelist'.\* And that, let us say in passing, is all to the good—a symptom of the respectful hostility which is the only healthy relation between old and young. But then he went on to give his reasons for this lamentable fact, and his reasons, which lie deep, deserve much more consideration than his impatience, which lies on the surface. The Georgians\* fail as novelists, he said, because 'they are interested more in details than in the full creation of their individual characters ... The foundation of good fiction is character-creating, and nothing else. To render secure the importance of a novel it is necessary, further, that the characters should clash with one another,' or, of course, they will excite no emotion in the breast of the author or anybody else. None of this is new; all of it is true; yet here we have one of those simple statements which are no sooner taken into the mind than they burst their envelopes and flood us with suggestions of every kind.

The novel is a very remarkable machine for the creation of human character, we are all agreed. Directly it ceases to create character, its defects alone are visible. And it is because this essence, this character-making power, has evaporated that novels are for the most part the soulless bodies we know, cumbering our tables and clogging our minds. That, too, may pass. Few reviewers at least are likely to dispute it. But if we go on to ask when this change began, and what were the reasons behind it, then agreement is much more difficult to come by. Mr Bennett blames the Georgians. Our minds fly straight to King 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, and the culprits, happily still alive, active, and unrepentant, are Mr Wells, Mr Galsworthy, and Mr Bennett\* himself.

But in lodging such a charge against so formidable a library we must do as painters do when they wish to reduce the innumerable details of a crowded landscape to simplicity—step back, half shut the eyes, gesticulate a little

vaguely with the fingers, and reduce Edwardian fiction to a view. Thus treated, one strange fact is immediately apparent. Every sort of town is represented, and innumerable institutions; we see factories, prisons, workhouses, law courts, Houses of Parliament; a general clamour, the voice of aspiration, indignation, effort and industry, rises from the whole; but in all this vast conglomeration of printed pages, in all this congeries of streets and houses, there is not a single man or woman whom we know. Figures like Kipps or the sisters (already nameless) in *The Old Wives' Tale*\* attempt to contradict this assertion, but with how feeble a voice and how flimsy a body is apparent directly they are stood beside some character from that other great tract of fiction which lies immediately behind them in the Victorian age. For there, if we follow the same process, but recall one novel, and that —*Pendennis*\*—not one of the most famous, at once start out, clear, vigorous, alive from the curl of their eyelashes to the soles of their boots, half a dozen characters whose names are no sooner spoken than we think of scene after scene in which they play their parts. We see the Major sitting in his club window, fresh from the hands of Morgan; Helen nursing her son in the Temple and suspecting poor Fanny; Warrington grilling chops in his dressing-gown; Captain Shandon scribbling leaders for the *Pall Mall Gazette* —Laura, Blanche Amory, Foker;\* the procession is endless and alive. And so it goes on from character to character all through the splendid opulence of the Victorian age. 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.

And it was perhaps on that very account that the Edwardians changed their tactics. Such triumphs could scarcely be rivalled; and, moreover, triumphs once achieved seem to the next generation always a little uninteresting. There was, too (if we think ourselves into the mind of a writer contemplating fiction about the year 1900), something plausible, superficial, unreal in all this abundance. No sooner had the Victorians departed than Samuel Butler, who had lived below-stairs, came out, like an observant bootboy, with the family secrets in *The Way of All Flesh*.\* It appeared that the basement was really in an appalling state. Though the saloons were splendid and the dining rooms portentous, the drains were of the most primitive description. The social state was a mass of corruption. A sensitive man like Mr Galsworthy could scarcely step out of doors without barking his shins upon some social iniquity. A

generous mind which knew the conditions in which the Kippses and the Lewishams\* were born and bred must try at least to fashion the world afresh. So the young novelist became a reformer, and thought with pardonable contempt of those vast Victorian family parties, where the funny man was always funny, the good woman always good, and nobody seemed aware, as they pursued their own tiny lives, that society was rotten and Christianity itself at stake. But there was another force which made much more subtly against the creation of character, and that was Mrs Garnett and her translations from Dostoevsky. After reading *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot*,\* how could any young novelist believe in ‘characters’ as the Victorians had painted them? For the undeniable vividness of so many of them is the result of their crudity. The character is rubbed into us indelibly because its features are so few and so prominent. We are given the keyword (Mr Dick has King Charles’s head; Mr Brooke, ‘I went into that a great deal at one time’; Mrs Micawber, ‘I will never desert Mr Micawber’),\* and then, since the choice of the keyword is astonishingly apt, our imaginations swiftly supply the rest. But what keyword could be applied to Raskolnikov, Mishkin, Stavrogin, or Alyosha?\* These are characters without any features at all. We go down into them as we descend into some enormous cavern. Lights swing about; we hear the boom of the sea; it is all dark, terrible, and uncharted. So we need not be surprised if the Edwardian novelist scarcely attempted to deal with character except in its more generalised aspects. The Victorian version was discredited; it was his duty to destroy all those institutions in the shelter of which character thrives and thickens; and the Russians had shown him—everything or nothing, it was impossible as yet to say which. The Edwardian novelists therefore give us a vast sense of things in general; but a very vague one of things in particular. Mr Galsworthy gives us a sense of compassion; Mr Wells fills us with generous enthusiasm; Mr Bennett (in his early work) gave us a sense of time. But their books are already a little chill, and must steadily grow more distant, for ‘the foundation of good fiction is character-creating, and nothing else’, as Mr Bennett says; and in none of them are we given a man or woman whom we know.

The Georgians had, therefore, a difficult task before them, and if they have failed, as Mr Bennett asserts, there is nothing to surprise us in that. To bring back character from the shapelessness into which it has lapsed, to sharpen its edges, deepen its compass, and so make possible those conflicts between human beings which alone rouse our strongest emotions—such was their

problem. It was the consciousness of this problem and not the accession of King George, which produced, as it always produces, the break between one generation and the next. Here, however, the break is particularly sharp, for here the dispute is fundamental. In real life there is nothing that interests us more than character, that stirs us to the same extremes of love and anger, or that leads to such incessant and laborious speculations about the values, the reasons, and the meaning of existence itself. To disagree about character is to differ in the depths of the being. It is to take different sides, to drift apart, to accept a purely formal intercourse for ever. That is so in real life. But the novelist has to go much further and to be much more uncompromising than the friend. When he finds himself hopelessly at variance with Mr Wells, Mr Galsworthy, and Mr Bennett about the character—shall we say?—of Mrs Brown, it is useless to defer to their superior genius. It is useless to mumble the polite agreements of the drawing-room. He must set about to remake the woman after his own idea. And that, in the circumstances, is a very perilous pursuit.

For what, after all is character—the way that Mrs Brown, for instance, reacts to her surroundings—when we cease to believe what we are told about her, and begin to search out her real meaning for ourselves? In the first place, her solidity disappears; her features crumble; the house in which she has lived so long (and a very substantial house it was) topples to the ground. She becomes a will-o'-the-wisp, a dancing light, an illumination gliding up the wall and out of the window, lighting now in freakish malice upon the nose of an archbishop, now in sudden splendour upon the mahogany of the wardrobe. The most solemn sights she turns to ridicule; the most ordinary she invests with beauty. She changes the shape, shifts the accent, of every scene in which she plays her part. And it is from the ruins and splinters of this tumbled mansion that the Georgian writer must somehow reconstruct a habitable dwelling-place; it is from the gleams and flashes of this flying spirit that he must create solid, living, flesh-and-blood Mrs Brown. Sadly he must allow that the lady still escapes him. Dismally he must admit bruises received in the pursuit. But it is because the Georgians, poets and novelists, biographers and dramatists, are so hotly engaged each in the pursuit of his own Mrs Brown that theirs is at once the least successful, and the most interesting, generation that English literature has known for a hundred years. Moreover, let us prophesy: Mrs Brown will not always escape. One of these days Mrs Brown will be caught. The capture of Mrs Brown is the title of the next chapter in

the history of literature; and, let us prophesy again, that chapter will be one of the most important, the most illustrious, the most epochmaking of them all.

## CHARACTER IN FICTION

It seems to me possible, perhaps desirable, that I may be the only person in this room\* who has committed the folly of writing, trying to write, or failing to write, a novel. And when I asked myself, as your invitation to speak to you about modern fiction made me ask myself, what demon whispered in my ear and urged me to my doom, a little figure rose before me—the figure of a man, or of a woman, who said, ‘My name is Brown. Catch me if you can.’

Most novelists have the same experience. Some Brown, Smith, or Jones comes before them and says in the most seductive and charming way in the world, ‘Come and catch me if you can.’ And so, led on by this will-o’-the-wisp, they flounder through volume after volume, spending the best years of their lives in the pursuit, and receiving for the most part very little cash in exchange. Few catch the phantom; most have to be content with a scrap of her dress or a wisp of her hair.

My belief that men and women write novels because they are lured on to create some character which has thus imposed itself upon them has the sanction of Mr Arnold Bennett. In an article from which I will quote he says: ‘The foundation of good fiction is character-creating and nothing else ... Style counts; plot counts; originality of outlook counts. But none of these counts anything like so much as the convincingness of the characters. If the characters are real the novel will have a chance; if they are not, oblivion will be its portion...’\* And he goes on to draw the conclusion that we have no young novelists of first-rate importance at the present moment, because they are unable to create characters that are real, true, and convincing.

These are the questions that I want with greater boldness than discretion to discuss tonight. I want to make out what we mean when we talk about ‘character’ in fiction; to say something about the question of reality which Mr Bennett raises; and to suggest some reasons why the younger novelists fail to create characters, if, as Mr Bennett asserts, it is true that fail they do. This will lead me, I am well aware, to make some very sweeping and some very vague assertions. For the question is an extremely difficult one. Think how

little we know about character—think how little we know about art. But, to make a clearance before I begin, I will suggest that we range Edwardians and Georgians into two camps; Mr Wells, Mr Bennett, and Mr Galsworthy I will call the Edwardians; Mr Forster, Mr Lawrence, Mr Strachey, Mr Joyce, and Mr Eliot I will call the Georgians.\* And if I speak in the first person, with intolerable egotism, I will ask you to excuse me. I do not want to attribute to the world at large the opinions of one solitary, ill-informed, and misguided individual.

My first assertion is one that I think you will grant—that every one in this room is a judge of character. Indeed it would be impossible to live for a year without disaster unless one practised character-reading and had some skill in the art. Our marriages, our friendships depend on it; our business largely depends on it; every day questions arise which can only be solved by its help. And now I will hazard a second assertion, which is more disputable perhaps, to the effect that on or about December 1910 human character changed.\*

I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; and, since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910. The first signs of it are recorded in the books of Samuel Butler, in *The Way of All Flesh* in particular; the plays of Bernard Shaw continue to record it.\* In life one can see the change, if I may use a homely illustration, in the character of one's cook. The Victorian cook lived like a leviathan in the lower depths, formidable, silent, obscure, inscrutable; the Georgian cook is a creature of sunshine and fresh air; in and out of the drawing room, now to borrow the *Daily Herald*,\* now to ask advice about a hat. Do you ask for more solemn instances of the power of the human race to change? Read the *Agamemnon*, and see whether, in process of time, your sympathies are not almost entirely with Clytemnestra. Or consider the married life of the Carlyles,\* and bewail the waste, the futility, for him and for her, of the horrible domestic tradition which made it seemly for a woman of genius to spend her time chasing beetles, scouring saucepans, instead of writing books. 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.

I have said that people have to acquire a good deal of skill in character-

reading if they are to live a single year of life without disaster. But it is the art of the young. In middle age and in old age the art is practised mostly for its uses, and friendships and other adventures and experiments in the art of reading character are seldom made. But novelists differ from the rest of the world because they do not cease to be interested in character when they have learnt enough about it for practical purposes. They go a step further; they feel that there is something permanently interesting in character in itself. When all the practical business of life has been discharged, there is something about people which continues to seem to them of overwhelming importance, in spite of the fact that it has no bearing whatever upon their happiness, comfort, or income. The study of character becomes to them an absorbing pursuit; to impart character an obsession. And this I find it very difficult to explain: what novelists mean when they talk about character, what the impulse is that urges them so powerfully every now and then to embody their view in writing.

So, if you will allow me, instead of analysing and abstracting, I will tell you a simple story which, however pointless, has the merit of being true, of a journey from Richmond to Waterloo,\* in the hope that I may show you what I mean by character in itself; that you may realise the different aspects it can wear; and the hideous perils that beset you directly you try to describe it in words.

One night some weeks ago, then, I was late for the train and jumped into the first carriage I came to. As I sat down I had the strange and uncomfortable feeling that I was interrupting a conversation between two people who were already sitting there. Not that they were young or happy. Far from it. They were both elderly, the woman over sixty, the man well over forty. They were sitting opposite each other, and the man, who had been leaning over and talking emphatically to judge by his attitude and the flush on his face, sat back and became silent. I had disturbed him, and he was annoyed. The elderly lady, however, whom I will call Mrs Brown, seemed rather relieved. She was one of those clean, threadbare old ladies whose extreme tidiness—everything buttoned, fastened, tied together, mended and brushed up—suggests more extreme poverty than rags and dirt. There was something pinched about her—a look of suffering, of apprehension, and, in addition, she was extremely small. Her feet, in their clean little boots, scarcely touched the floor. I felt that she had nobody to support her; that she had to make up her mind for herself; that, having been deserted, or left a widow, years ago, she



had led an anxious, harried life, bringing up an only son, perhaps, who, as likely as not, was by this time beginning to go to the bad. All this shot through my mind as I sat down, being uncomfortable, like most people, at travelling with fellow passengers unless I have somehow or other accounted for them. Then I looked at the man. He was no relation of Mrs Brown's I felt sure; he was of a bigger, burlier, less refined type. He was a man of business I imagined, very likely a respectable corn-chandler from the North, dressed in good blue serge with a pocket-knife and a silk handkerchief, and a stout leather bag. Obviously, however, he had an unpleasant business to settle with Mrs Brown; a secret, perhaps sinister business, which they did not intend to discuss in my presence.

'Yes, the Crofts have had very bad luck with their servants,' Mr Smith (as I will call him) said in a considering way, going back to some earlier topic, with a view to keeping up appearances.

'Ah, poor people,' said Mrs Brown, a trifle condescendingly. 'My grandmother had a maid who came when she was fifteen and stayed till she was eighty' (this was said with a kind of hurt and aggressive pride to impress us both perhaps).

'One doesn't often come across that sort of thing nowadays,' said Mr Smith in conciliatory tones.

Then they were silent.

'It's odd they don't start a golf club there—I should have thought one of the young fellows would,' said Mr Smith, for the silence obviously made him uneasy.

Mrs Brown hardly took the trouble to answer.

'What changes they're making in this part of the world,' said Mr Smith looking out of the window, and looking furtively at me as he did do.

It was plain, from Mrs Brown's silence, from the uneasy affability with which Mr Smith spoke, that he had some power over her which he was exerting disagreeably. It might have been her son's downfall, or some painful episode in her past life, or her daughter's. Perhaps she was going to London to sign some document to make over some property. Obviously against her will she was in Mr Smith's hands. I was beginning to feel a great deal of pity for her, when she said, suddenly and inconsequently,

'Can you tell me if an oak tree dies when the leaves have been eaten for two years in succession by caterpillars?'

She spoke quite brightly, and rather precisely, in a cultivated, inquisitive voice.

Mr Smith was startled, but relieved to have a safe topic of conversation given him. He told her a great deal very quickly about plagues of insects. He told her that he had a brother who kept a fruit farm in Kent. He told her what fruit farmers do every year in Kent, and so on, and so on. While he talked a very odd thing happened. Mrs Brown took out her little white handkerchief and began to dab her eyes. She was crying. But she went on listening quite composedly to what he was saying, and he went on talking, a little louder, a little angrily, as if he had seen her cry often before; as if it were a painful habit. At last it got on his nerves. He stopped abruptly, looked out of the window, then leant towards her as he had been doing when I got in, and said in a bullying, menacing way, as if he would not stand any more nonsense,

‘So about that matter we were discussing. It’ll be all right? George will be there on Tuesday?’

‘We shan’t be late,’ said Mrs Brown, gathering herself together with superb dignity.

Mr Smith said nothing. He got up, buttoned his coat, reached his bag down, and jumped out of the train before it had stopped at Clapham Junction. He had got what he wanted, but he was ashamed of himself; he was glad to get out of the old lady’s sight.

Mrs Brown and I were left alone together. She sat in her corner opposite, very clean, very small, rather queer, and suffering intensely. The impression she made was overwhelming. It came pouring out like a draught, like a smell of burning. What was it composed of—that overwhelming and peculiar impression? Myriads of irrelevant and incongruous ideas crowd into one’s head on such occasions; one sees the person, one sees Mrs Brown, in the centre of all sorts of different scenes. I thought of her in a seaside house, among queer ornaments: sea-urchins, models of ships in glass cases. Her husband’s medals were on the mantelpiece. She popped in and out of the room, perching on the edges of chairs, picking meals out of saucers, indulging in long, silent stares. The caterpillars and the oak trees seemed to imply all that. And then, into this fantastic and secluded life, in broke Mr Smith. I saw him blowing in, so to speak, on a windy day. He banged, he slammed. His dripping umbrella made a pool in the hall. They sat closeted together.

And then Mrs Brown faced the dreadful revelation. She took her heroic

decision. Early, before dawn, she packed her bag and carried it herself to the station. She would not let Smith touch it. She was wounded in her pride, unmoored from her anchorage; she came of gentle folks who kept servants—but details could wait. The important thing was to realise her character, to steep oneself in her atmosphere. I had no time to explain why I felt it somewhat tragic, heroic, yet with a dash of the flighty, and fantastic, before the train stopped, and I watched her disappear, carrying her bag, into the vast blazing station. She looked very small, very tenacious; at once very frail and very heroic. And I have never seen her again, and I shall never know what became of her.

The story ends without any point to it. But I have not told you this anecdote to illustrate either my own ingenuity or the pleasure of travelling from Richmond to Waterloo. What I want you to see in it is this. Here is a character imposing itself upon another person. Here is Mrs Brown making someone begin almost automatically to write a novel about her. I believe that all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite. I believe that all novels, that is to say, deal with character, and that it is to express character—not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved. To express character, I have said; but you will at once reflect that the very widest interpretation can be put upon those words. For example, old Mrs Brown's character will strike you very differently according to the age and country in which you happen to be born. It would be easy enough to write three different versions of that incident in the train, an English, a French, and a Russian. The English writer would make the old lady in to a 'character'; he would bring out her oddities and mannerisms; her buttons and wrinkles; her ribbons and warts. Her personality would dominate the book. A French writer would rub out all that; he would sacrifice the individual Mrs Brown to give a more general view of human nature; to make a more abstract, proportioned, and harmonious whole. The Russian would pierce through the flesh; would reveal the soul—the soul alone, wandering out into the Waterloo Road, asking of life some tremendous question which would sound on and on in our ears after the book was finished. And then there is the writer's temperament to be considered. You see one thing in character, and I another. You say it means this, and I that. And when it comes to writing each makes a further selection on principles of his own. Thus Mrs Brown can be treated in an infinite variety of ways,

according to the age, country, and temperament of the writer.

But now I must recall what Mr Arnold Bennett says. He says that it is only if the characters are real that the novel has any chance of surviving. Otherwise, die it must. But, I ask myself, what is reality? And who are the judges of reality? A character may be real to Mr Bennett and quite unreal to me. For instance, in this article he says that Dr Watson in *Sherlock Holmes* is real to him: \* to me Dr Watson is a sack stuffed with straw, a dummy, a figure of fun. And so it is with character after character—in book after book. There is nothing that people differ about more than the reality of characters, especially in contemporary books. But if you take a larger view I think that Mr Bennett is perfectly right. If, that is, you think of the novels which seem to you great novels—*War and Peace*, *Vanity Fair*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Madame Bovary*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Villette* \*—if you think of these books, you do at once think of some character who has seemed to you so real (I do not by that mean so lifelike) that it has the power to make you think not merely of it itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes—of religion, of love, of war, of peace, of family life, of balls in county towns, of sunsets, moonrises, the immortality of the soul. There is hardly any subject of human experience that is left out of *War and Peace* it seems to me. And in all these novels all these great novelists have brought us to see whatever they wish us to see through some character. Otherwise, they would not be novelists; but poets, historians, or pamphleteers.

But now let us examine what Mr Bennett went on to say—he said that there was no great novelist among the Georgian writers because they cannot create characters who are real, true, and convincing. And there I cannot agree. There are reasons, excuses, possibilities which I think put a different colour upon the case. It seems to me at least, but I am well aware that this is a matter about which I am likely to be prejudiced, sanguine, and near-sighted. I will put my view before you in the hope that you will make it impartial, judicial, and broadminded. Why, then, is it so hard for novelists at present to create characters which seem real, not only to Mr Bennett, but to the world at large? Why, when October comes round, do the publishers always fail to supply us with a masterpiece?

Surely one reason is that the men and women who began writing novels in 1910 or thereabouts had this great difficulty to face—that there was no English novelist living from whom they could learn their business. Mr Conrad is a Pole; which sets him apart, and makes him, however admirable,

not very helpful. Mr Hardy has written no novel since 1895.\* The most prominent and successful novelists in the year 1910 were, I suppose, Mr Wells, Mr Bennett, and Mr Galsworthy. Now it seems to me that to go to these men and ask them to teach you how to write a novel—how to create characters that are real—is precisely like going to a bootmaker and asking him to teach you how to make a watch. Do not let me give you the impression that I do not admire and enjoy their books. They seem to me of great value, and indeed of great necessity. There are seasons when it is more important to have boots than to have watches. To drop metaphor, I think that after the creative activity of the Victorian age it was quite necessary, not only for literature but for life, that someone should write the books that Mr Wells, Mr Bennett, and Mr Galsworthy have written. Yet what odd books they are! 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 necessary to do something—to join a society, or, more desperately, to write a cheque. That done, the restlessness is laid, the book finished; it can be put upon the shelf, and need never be read again. But with the work of other novelists it is different. *Tristram Shandy* or *Pride and Prejudice*\* is complete in itself; it is self-contained; it leaves one with no desire to do anything, except indeed to read the book again, and to understand it better. The difference perhaps is that both Sterne and Jane Austen were interested in things in themselves; in character in itself; in the book in itself. Therefore everything was inside the book, nothing outside. But the Edwardians were never interested in character in itself; or in the book in itself. They were interested in something outside. Their books, then, were incomplete as books, and required that the reader should finish them, actively and practically, for himself.

Perhaps we can make this clearer if we take the liberty of imagining a little party in the railway carriage—Mr Wells, Mr Galsworthy, Mr Bennett are travelling to Waterloo with Mrs Brown. Mrs Brown, I have said, was poorly dressed and very small. She had an anxious, harassed look. I doubt whether she was what you call an educated woman. Seizing upon all these symptoms of the unsatisfactory condition of our primary schools with a rapidity to which I can do no justice, Mr Wells would instantly project upon the window-pane a vision of a better, breezier, jollier, happier, more adventurous and gallant world, where these musty railway carriages and fusty old women do not exist; where miraculous barges bring tropical fruit to Camberwell by

eight o'clock in the morning; where there are public nurseries, fountains, and libraries, dining-rooms, drawing-rooms, and marriages; where every citizen is generous and candid, manly and magnificent, and rather like Mr Wells himself. But nobody is in the least like Mrs Brown. There are no Mrs Browns in Utopia.\* Indeed I do not think that Mr Wells, in his passion to make her what she ought to be, would waste a thought upon her as she is. And what would Mr Galsworthy see? Can we doubt that the walls of Doulton's factory would take his fancy? There are women in that factory who make twenty-five dozen earthenware pots every day. There are mothers in the Mile End Road\* who depend upon the farthings which those women earn. But there are employers in Surrey who are even now smoking rich cigars while the nightingale sings. Burning with indignation, stuffed with information, arrainging civilisation, Mr Galsworthy would only see in Mrs Brown a pot broken on the wheel and thrown into the corner.

Mr Bennett, alone of the Edwardians, would keep his eyes in the carriage. He, indeed, would observe every detail with immense care. He would notice the advertisements; the pictures of Swanage and Portsmouth; the way in which the cushion bulged between the buttons; how Mrs Brown wore a brooch which had cost three-and-ten-three at Whitworth's bazaar; and had mended both gloves—indeed the thumb of the left-hand glove had been replaced. And he would observe, at length, how this was the non-stop train from Windsor which calls at Richmond for the convenience of middle-class residents, who can afford to go to the theatre but have not reached the social rank which can afford motor cars, though it is true, there are occasions (he would tell us what), when they hire them from a company (he would tell us which). And so he would gradually sidle sedately towards Mrs Brown, and would remark how she had been left a little copyhold, not freehold, property at Datchet, which, however, was mortgaged to Mr Bungay the solicitor—but why should I presume to invent Mr Bennett? Does not Mr Bennett write novels himself? I will open the first book that chance puts in my way—*Hilda Lessways*. Let us see how he makes us feel that Hilda is real, true, and convincing, as a novelist should. She shut the door in a soft, controlled way, which showed the constraint of her relations with her mother. She was fond of reading *Maud*;\* she was endowed with the power to feel intensely. So far, so good; in his leisurely, surefooted way Mr Bennett is trying in these first pages, where every touch is important, to show us the kind of girl she was.

But then he begins to describe, not Hilda Lessways, but the view from her

bedroom window, the excuse being that Mr Skellorn, the man who collects rents, is coming along that way. Mr Bennett proceeds:

The bailiwick of Turnhill lay behind her; and all the murky district of the Five Towns, of which Turnhill is the northern outpost, lay to the south. At the foot of Chatterley Wood the canal wound in large curves on its way towards the undefiled plains of Cheshire and the sea. On the canal-side, exactly opposite to Hilda's window, was a flour-mill, that sometimes made nearly as much smoke as the kilns and the chimneys closing the prospect on either hand. From the flour-mill a bricked path, which separated a considerable row of new cottages from their appurtenant gardens, led straight into Lessways Street, in front of Mrs Lessways' house. By this path Mr Skellorn should have arrived, for he inhabited the farthest of the cottages.\*

One line of insight would have done more than all those lines of description; but let them pass as the necessary drudgery of the novelist. And now—where is Hilda? Alas. Hilda is still looking out of the window. Passionate and dissatisfied as she was, she was a girl with an eye for houses. She often compared this old Mr Skellorn with the villas she saw from her bedroom window. Therefore the villas must be described. Mr Bennett proceeds:

The row was called Freehold Villas: a consciously proud name in a district where much of the land was copyhold and could only change owners subject to the payment of 'fines', and to the feudal consent of a 'court' presided over by the agent of a lord of the manor. Most of the dwellings were owned by their occupiers, who, each an absolute monarch of the soil, niggled in his sooty garden of an evening amid the flutter of drying shirts and towels. Freehold Villas symbolised the final triumph of Victorian economics, the apotheosis of the prudent and industrious artisan. It corresponded with a Building Society Secretary's dream of paradise. And indeed it was a very real achievement. Nevertheless, Hilda's irrational contempt would not admit this.

Heaven be praised, we cry! At last we are coming to Hilda herself. But not so fast. Hilda may have been this, that, and the other; but Hilda not only looked at houses, and thought of houses; Hilda lived in a house. And what sort of a house did Hilda live in? Mr Bennett proceeds:

It was one of the two middle houses of a detached terrace of four houses built by her grandfather Lessways, the teapot manufacturer; it was the chief of the four, obviously the habitation of the proprietor of the terrace. One of the corner houses comprised a grocer's shop, and this house had been robbed of its just proportion of garden so that the seigneurial gardenplot might be triflingly larger than the other. The terrace was not a terrace of cottages, but of houses rated at from twenty-six to thirty-six pounds a year; beyond the means of artisans and petty insurance agents and rentcollectors. And further, it was well built, generously built; and its architecture, though debased, showed some faint traces of Georgian amenity. It was admittedly the best row of houses in that newly settled quarter of the town. In coming to it out of Freehold Villas Mr Skellorn obviously came to something superior, wider, more liberal. Suddenly Hilda heard her mother's voice ...

But we cannot hear her mother's voice, or Hilda's voice; we can only hear

Mr Bennett's voice telling us facts about rents and freeholds and copyholds and fines. What can Mr Bennett be about? I have formed my own opinion of what Mr Bennett is about—he is trying to make us imagine for him; he is trying to hypnotise us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there. With all his powers of observation, which are marvellous, with all his sympathy and humanity, which are great, Mr Bennett has never once looked at Mrs Brown in her corner. There she sits in the corner of the carriage—that carriage which is travelling, not from Richmond to Waterloo, but from one age of English literature to the next, for Mrs Brown is eternal, Mrs Brown is human nature, Mrs Brown changes only on the surface, it is the novelists who get in and out—there she sits and not one of the Edwardian writers has so much as looked at her. They have looked very powerfully, searchingly, and sympathetically out of the window; at factories, at Utopias, even at the decoration and upholstery of the carriage; but never at her, never at life, never at human nature. And so they have developed a technique of novel-writing which suits their purpose; they have made tools and established conventions which do their business. But those tools are not our tools, and that business is not our business. For us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death.

You may well complain of the vagueness of my language. What is a convention, a tool, you may ask, and what do you mean by saying that Mr Bennett's and Mr Wells's and Mr Galsworthy's conventions are the wrong conventions for the Georgians? The question is difficult: I will attempt a short cut. A convention in writing is not much different from a convention in manners. Both in life and in literature it is necessary to have some means of bridging the gulf between the hostess and her unknown guest on the one hand, the writer and his unknown reader on the other. The hostess bethinks her of the weather, for generations of hostesses have established the fact that this is a subject of universal interest in which we all believe. She begins by saying that we are having a wretched May, and, having thus got into touch with her unknown guest, proceeds to matters of greater interest. So it is in literature. The writer must get into touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognises, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to co-operate in the far more difficult business of intimacy. And it is of the highest importance that this common meeting-place should be reached easily, almost instinctively, in the dark, with one's eyes shut. Here is Mr Bennett making use of this common ground in



the passage which I have quoted. The problem before him was to make us believe in the reality of Hilda Lessways. So he began, being an Edwardian, by describing accurately and minutely the sort of house Hilda lived in, and the sort of house she saw from the window. House property was the common ground from which the Edwardians found it easy to proceed to intimacy. Indirect as it seems to us, the convention worked admirably, and thousands of Hilda Lessways were launched upon the world by this means. For that age and generation, the convention was a good one.

But now, if you will allow me to pull my own anecdote to pieces, you will see how keenly I felt the lack of a convention, and how serious a matter it is when the tools of one generation are useless for the next. The incident had made a great impression on me. But how was I to transmit it to you? All I could do was to report as accurately as I could what was said, to describe in detail what was worn, to say, despairingly, that all sorts of scenes rushed into my mind, to proceed to tumble them out pell-mell, and to describe this vivid, this overmastering impression by likening it to a draught or a smell of burning. To tell you the truth, I was also strongly tempted to manufacture a three-volume novel about the old lady's son, and his adventures crossing the Atlantic, and her daughter, and how she kept a milliner's shop in Westminster, the past life of Smith himself, and his house at Sheffield, though such stories seem to me the most dreary, irrelevant, and humbugging affairs in the world.

But if I had done that I should have escaped the appalling effort of saying what I meant. And to have got at what I meant, I should have had to go back and back and back; to experiment with one thing and another; to try this sentence and that, referring each word to my vision, matching it as exactly as possible, and knowing that somehow I had to find a common ground between us, a convention which would not seem to you too odd, unreal, and far-fetched to believe in. I admit that I shirked that arduous undertaking. I let my Mrs Brown slip through my fingers. I have told you nothing whatever about her. But that is partly the great Edwardians' fault. I asked them—they are my elders and betters—How shall I begin to describe this woman's character? And they said, 'Begin by saying that her father kept a shop in Harrogate. Ascertain the rent. Ascertain the wages of shop assistants in the year 1878. Discover what her mother died of. Describe cancer. Describe calico. Describe —' But I cried, 'Stop! Stop!' and I regret to say that I threw that ugly, that clumsy, that incongruous tool out of the window, for I knew that if I began

describing the cancer and the calico, my Mrs Brown, that vision to which I cling though I know no way of imparting it to you, would have been dulled and tarnished and vanished for ever.

That is what I mean by saying that the Edwardian tools are the wrong ones for us to use. They have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things. They have given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there. To give them their due, they have made that house much better worth living in. But if you hold that novels are in the first place about people, and only in the second about the houses they live in, that is the wrong way to set about it. Therefore, you see, the Georgian writer had to begin by throwing away the method that was in use at the moment. He was left alone there facing Mrs Brown without any method of conveying her to the reader. But that is inaccurate. A writer is never alone. There is always the public with him—if not on the same seat, at least in the compartment next door. Now the public is a strange travelling companion. In England it is a very suggestible and docile creature, which, once you get it to attend, will believe implicitly what it is told for a certain number of years. If you say to the public with sufficient conviction, ‘All women have tails, and all men humps,’ it will actually learn to see women with tails and men with humps, and will think it very revolutionary and probably improper if you say ‘Nonsense. Monkeys have tails and camels humps. But men and women have brains, and they have hearts; they think and they feel,’—that will seem to it a bad joke, and an improper into the bargain.

But to return. Here is the British public sitting by the writer’s side and saying in its vast and unanimous way, ‘Old women have houses. They have fathers. They have incomes. They have servants. They have hot water bottles. That is how we know that they are old women. Mr Wells and Mr Bennett and Mr Galsworthy have always taught us that this is the way to recognise them. But now with your Mrs Brown—how are we to believe in her? We do not even know whether her villa was called Albert or Balmoral;\* what she paid for her gloves; or whether her mother died of cancer or of consumption. How can she be alive? No; she is a mere figment of your imagination.’

And old women of course ought to be made of freehold villas and copyhold estates, not of imagination.

The Georgian novelist, therefore, was in an awkward predicament. There was Mrs Brown protesting that she was different, quite different, from what people made out, and luring the novelist to her rescue by the most fascinating

if fleeting glimpse of her charms; there were the Edwardians handing out tools appropriate to house building and house breaking; and there was the British public asseverating that they must see the hot water bottle first. Meanwhile the train was rushing to that station where we must all get out.

Such, I think, was the predicament in which the young Georgians found themselves about the year 1910. Many of them—I am thinking of Mr Forster\* and Mr Lawrence in particular—spoilt their early work because, instead of throwing away those tools, they tried to use them. They tried to compromise. They tried to combine their own direct sense of the oddity and significance of some character with Mr Galsworthy's knowledge of the Factory Acts,\* and Mr Bennett's knowledge of the Five Towns. They tried it, but they had too keen, too overpowering a sense of Mrs Brown and her peculiarities to go on trying it much longer. Something had to be done. At whatever cost of life, limb, and damage to valuable property Mrs Brown must be rescued, expressed, and set in her high relations to the world before the train stopped and she disappeared for ever. And so the smashing and the crashing began. Thus it is that we hear all round us, in poems and novels and biographies, even in newspaper articles and essays, the sound of breaking and falling, crashing and destruction. It is the prevailing sound of the Georgian age—rather a melancholy one if you think what melodious days there have been in the past, if you think of Shakespeare and Milton and Keats or even of Jane Austen and Thackeray and Dickens; if you think of the language, and the heights to which it can soar when free, and see the same eagle captive, bald, and croaking.

In view of these facts, with these sounds in my ears and these fancies in my brain, I am not going to deny that Mr Bennett has some reason when he complains that our Georgian writers are unable to make us believe that our characters are real. I am forced to agree that they do not pour out three immortal masterpieces with Victorian regularity every autumn. But instead of being gloomy, I am sanguine. For this state of things is, I think, inevitable whenever from hoar old age or callow youth the convention ceases to be a means of communication between writer and reader, and becomes instead an obstacle and an impediment. At the present moment we are suffering, not from decay, but from having no code of manners which writers and readers accept as a prelude to the more exciting intercourse of friendship. The literary convention of the time is so artificial—you have to talk about the weather and nothing but the weather throughout the entire visit—that, naturally, the feeble

are tempted to outrage, and the strong are led to destroy the very foundations and rules of literary society. Signs of this are everywhere apparent. Grammar is violated; syntax disintegrated, as a boy staying with an aunt for the weekend rolls in the geranium bed out of sheer desperation as the solemnities of the sabbath wear on. The more adult writers do not, of course, indulge in such wanton exhibitions of spleen. Their sincerity is desperate, and their courage tremendous; it is only that they do not know which to use, a fork or their fingers. Thus, if you read Mr Joyce and Mr Eliot\* you will be struck by the indecency of the one, and the obscurity of the other. Mr Joyce's indecency in *Ulysses* seems to me the conscious and calculated indecency of a desperate man who feels that in order to breathe he must break the windows. At moments, when the window is broken, he is magnificent. But what a waste of energy! And, after all, how dull indecency is, when it is not the overflowing of a superabundant energy or savagery, but the determined and public-spirited act of a man who needs fresh air! Again, with the obscurity of Mr Eliot. I think that Mr Eliot has written some of the loveliest lines in modern poetry.\* But how intolerant he is of the old usages and politenesses of society—respect for the weak, consideration for the dull! As I sun myself upon the intense and ravishing beauty of one of his lines, and reflect that I must make a dizzy and dangerous leap to the next, and so on from line to line, like an acrobat flying precariously from bar to bar, I cry out, I confess, 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. Again in Mr Strachey's books, *Eminent Victorians* and *Queen Victoria*,\* the effort and strain of writing against the grain and current of the times is visible too. It is much less visible, of course, for not only is he dealing with facts, which are stubborn things, but he has fabricated, chiefly from eighteenth-century material, a very discreet code of manners of his own, which allows him to sit at table with the highest in the land and to say a great many things under cover of that exquisite apparel which, had they gone naked, would have been chased by the men-servants from the room. Still, if you compare *Eminent Victorians* with some of Lord Macaulay's essays,\* though you will feel that Lord Macaulay is always wrong, and Mr Strachey always right, you will also feel a body, a sweep, a richness in Lord Macaulay's essays which show that his age was behind him; all his strength went straight into his work; none was used for purposes of concealment or of conversion. But Mr Strachey has had to open our eyes before he made us see;

he has had to search out and sew together a very artful manner of speech; and the effort, beautifully though it is concealed, has robbed his work of some of the force that should have gone into it, and limited his scope.

For these reasons, then, we must reconcile ourselves to a season of failures and fragments. We must reflect that where so much strength is spent on finding a way of telling the truth the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition. Ulysses, Queen Victoria, Mr Prufrock\*—to give Mrs Brown some of the names she has made famous lately—is a little pale and dishevelled by the time her rescuers reach her. And it is the sound of their axes that we hear—a vigorous and stimulating sound in my ears—unless of course you wish to sleep, when in the bounty of his concern, Providence has provided a host of writers anxious and able to satisfy your needs.

Thus I have tried, at tedious length, I fear, to answer some of the questions which I began by asking. I have given an account of some of the difficulties which in my view beset the Georgian writer in all his forms. I have sought to excuse him. May I end by venturing to remind you of the duties and responsibilities that are yours as partners in this business of writing books, as companions in the railway carriage, as fellow travellers with Mrs Brown? For she is just as visible to you who remain silent as to us who tell stories about her. In the course of your daily life this past week you have had far stranger and more interesting experiences than the one I have tried to describe. You have overheard scraps of talk that filled you with amazement. You have gone to bed at night bewildered by the complexity of your feelings. In one day thousands of ideas have coursed through your brains; thousands of emotions have met, collided, and disappeared in astonishing disorder. Nevertheless, you allow the writers to palm off upon you a version of all this, an image of Mrs Brown, which has no likeness to that surprising apparition whatsoever. In your modesty you seem to consider that writers are of different blood and bone from yourselves; that they know more of Mrs Brown than you do. Never was there a more fatal mistake. It is this division between reader and writer, this humility on your part, these professional airs and graces on ours, that corrupt and emasculate the books which should be the healthy offspring of a close and equal alliance between us. Hence spring those sleek, smooth novels, those portentous and ridiculous biographies, that milk and watery criticism, those poems melodiously celebrating the innocence of roses and sheep which pass so plausibly for literature at the present time.

Your part is to insist that writers shall come down off their plinths and pedestals, and describe beautifully if possible, truthfully at any rate, our Mrs Brown. You should insist that she is an old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety; capable of appearing in any place; wearing any dress; saying anything and doing heaven knows what. But the things she says and the things she does and her eyes and her nose and her speech and her silence have an overwhelming fascination, for she is, of course, the spirit we live by, life itself.

But do not expect just at present a complete and satisfactory presentment of her. Tolerate the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure. Your help is invoked in a good cause. For I will make one final and surpassingly rash prediction—we are trembling on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature. But it can only be reached if we are determined never, never to desert Mrs Brown.

## ‘IMPASSIONED PROSE’

WHEN he was still a boy, his own discrimination led De Quincey to doubt whether his ‘natural vocation lay towards poetry’.\* He wrote poetry, eloquently and profusely, and his poetry was praised; but even so he decided that he was no poet, and the sixteen volumes of his collected works are written entirely in prose. After the fashion of his time, he wrote on many subjects—on political economy, on philosophy, on history; he wrote essays and biographies and confessions and memoirs. But as we stand before the long row of his books and make, as we are bound to make after all these years, our own selection, the whole mass and range of these sixteen volumes seems to reduce itself to one sombre level in which hang a few splendid stars. He dwells in our memory because he could make phrases like ‘trepidations of innumerable fugitives’, because he could compose scenes like that of the laurelled coach driving into the midnight market-place, because he could tell stories like that of the phantom woodcutter heard by his brother on the desert island.\* And, if we examine our choice and give a reason for it, we have to confess that, prose writer though he is, it is for his poetry that we read him and not for his prose.

What could be more damaging, to him as writer, to us as readers, than this confession? For if the critics agree on any point it is on this, that nothing is more reprehensible than for a prose writer to write like a poet. Poetry is poetry and prose is prose—how often have we not heard that! Poetry has one mission and prose another. Prose, Mr Binyon wrote the other day, ‘is a medium primarily addressed to the intelligence, poetry to feeling and imagination’. And again, ‘the poetical prose has but a bastard kind of beauty, easily appearing overdressed’.\* It is impossible not to admit, in part at least, the truth of these remarks. Memory supplies but too many instances of discomfort, of anguish, when in the midst of sober prose suddenly the temperature rises, the rhythm changes, we go up with a lurch, come down with a bang, and wake, roused and angry. But memory supplies also a number of passages—in Browne, in Landor, in Carlyle, in Ruskin, in Emily Brontë\*—where there is no such jerk, no such sense (for this perhaps is at the



root of our discomfort) of something unfused, unwrought, incongruous, and casting ridicule upon the rest. The prose writer has subdued his army of facts; he has brought them all under the same laws of perspective. They work upon our minds as poetry works upon them. We are not woken; we reach the next point—and it may well be highly commonplace—without any sense of strain.

But, unfortunately for those who would wish to see a great many more things said in prose than are now thought proper, we live under the rule of the novelists. If we talk of prose we mean in fact prose fiction. And of all writers the novelist has his hands fullest of facts. Smith gets up, shaves, has his breakfast, taps his egg, reads *The Times*. How can we ask the panting, the perspiring, the industrious scribe with all this on his hands to modulate beautifully off into rhapsodies about Time and Death and what the hunters are doing at the Antipodes? It would upset the whole proportions of his day. It would cast grave doubt upon his veracity. Moreover, the greatest of his order seem deliberately to prefer a method which is the antithesis of prose poetry. A shrug of the shoulders, a turn of the head, a few words spoken in a hurry at a moment of crisis—that is all. But the train has been laid so deep beneath page after page and chapter after chapter that the single word when it is spoken is enough to start an explosion. We have so lived and thought with these men and women that they need only raise a finger and it seems to reach the skies. To elaborate that gesture would be to spoil it. The whole tendency therefore of fiction is against prose poetry. The lesser novelists are not going to take risks which the greater deliberately avoid. They trust that, if only the egg is real and the kettle boils, stars and nightingales will somehow be thrown in by the imagination of the reader. And therefore all that side of the mind which is exposed in solitude they ignore. They ignore its thoughts, its rhapsodies, its dreams, with the result that the people of fiction bursting with energy on one side are atrophied on the other; while prose itself, so long in service to this drastic master, has suffered the same deformity, and will be fit, after another hundred years of such discipline, to write nothing but the immortal works of Bradshaw and Baedeker.\*

But happily there are in every age some writers who puzzle the critics, who refuse to go in with the herd. They stand obstinately across the boundary lines, and do a greater service by enlarging and fertilizing and influencing than by their actual achievement, which, indeed, is often too eccentric to be satisfactory. Browning did a service of this kind to poetry. Peacock\* and Samuel Butler have both had an influence upon novelists which is out of all



proportion to their own popularity. And one of De Quincey's claims to our gratitude, one of his main holds upon our interest, is that he was an exception and a solitary. He made a class for himself. He widened the choice for others. Faced with the usual problem of what to write, since write he must, he decided that with all his poetic sensibility he was not a poet. He lacked the fire and the concentration. Nor, again, was he a novelist. With immense powers of language at his command, he was incapable of a sustained and passionate interest in the affairs of other people. It was his disease, he said, 'to meditate too much and to observe too little'.\* He would follow a poor family who went marketing on a Saturday night, sympathetically, but at a distance. He was intimate with no one. Then, again, he had an extraordinary gift for the dead languages, and a passion for acquiring knowledge of all kinds. Yet there was some quality in him which forbade him to shut himself up alone with his books, as such gifts seemed to indicate. The truth was that he dreamed—he was always dreaming. The faculty was his long before he took to eating opium. When he was a child he stood by his sister's dead body and suddenly

a vault seemed to open in the zenith of the far blue sky, a shaft which ran up for ever. I, in spirit, rose as on billows that also ran up the shaft for ever; and the billows seemed to pursue the throne of God; but that also ran before us and fled away continually.\*

The visions were of extreme vividness; they made life seem a little dull in comparison; they extended it, they completed it. But in what form was he to express this that was the most real part of his own existence? There was none ready made to his hand. He invented, as he claimed, 'modes of impassioned prose'. With immense elaboration and art he formed a style in which to express these 'visionary scenes derived from the world of dreams'. For such prose there were no precedents, he believed; and he begged the reader to remember 'the perilous difficulty' of an attempt where 'a single false note, a single word in a wrong key, ruins the whole music'.\*

Added to that 'perilous difficulty' was another which is often forced upon the reader's attention. A prose writer may dream dreams and see visions, but they cannot be allowed to lie scattered, single, solitary upon the page. So spaced out they die. For prose has neither the intensity nor the self-sufficiency of poetry. It rises slowly off the ground; it reaches its height by a series of gradual steps; it must be connected on this side and on that. There must be some medium in which its ardours and ecstasies can float without

incongruity, from which they receive support and impetus. Here was a difficulty which De Quincey often faced and often failed to solve. Many of his most tiresome and disfiguring faults are the result of the dilemma into which his genius plunged him. There was something in the story before him which kindled his interest and quickened his powers. For example, the Spanish Military Nun, as she descends half-starved and frozen from the Andes, sees before her a belt of trees which promises safety. As if De Quincey had himself reached that shelter and could breathe in safety, he broadens out—

Oh! verdure of dark olive foliage, offered suddenly to fainting eyes, as if by some winged patriarchal herald of wrath relenting—solitary Arab's tent, rising with saintly signals of peace in the dreadful desert, must Kate indeed die even yet, whilst she sees but cannot reach you? Outpost on the frontier of man's dominions; standing within life, but looking out upon everlasting death, wilt thou hold up the anguish of thy mocking invitation only to betray?\*

Alas, how easy it is to rise, how dangerous to fall! He has Kate on his hands; he is halfway through with her story; he must rouse himself, he must collect himself, he must descend from these happy heights to the levels of ordinary existence. And, again and again, it is in returning to earth that De Quincey is undone. How is he to bridge the horrid transition? How is he to turn from an angel with wings of flame and eyes of fire to a gentleman in black who talks sense? Sometimes he makes a joke—it is generally painful. Sometimes he tells a story—it is always irrelevant. Most often he spreads himself out in a waste of verbosity, where any interest that there may have been peters out dismally and loses itself in the sand. We can read no more.

It is tempting to say that De Quincey failed because he was not a novelist. He ought to have left Kate alone; he had not a novelist's sense of character and action. To a critic such formulas are helpful; unfortunately, they are often false. For in fact, De Quincey can convey character admirably; he is a master of the art of narrative once he has succeeded (and the condition is indispensable for all writers) in adjusting the perspective to suit his own eyesight. It was a sight, it is true, that required a most curious rearrangement of the landscape. Nothing must come too close. A veil must be drawn over the multitudinous disorder of human affairs. It must always be possible, without distressing the reader, to allude to a girl as 'a prepossessing young female'.\* A mist must lie upon the human face. The hills must be higher and the distances bluer than they are in the world we know. He required, too, endless leisure and ample elbow-room. He wanted time to soliloquize and

loiter; here to pick up some trifle and bestow upon it all his powers of analysis and decoration; here to brush aside such patient discrimination and widen and enlarge and amplify until nothing remains but the level sands and the immense sea. He wanted a subject that would allow him all possible freedom and yet possess enough emotional warmth to curb his inborn verbosity.

He found it, naturally, in himself. He was a born autobiographer. If the *Opium Eater* remains his masterpiece, a longer and less perfect book, the *Autobiographic Sketches*, runs it very close. For here it is fitting that he should stand a little apart, should look back, under cover of his raised hand, at scenes which had almost melted into the past. His enemy, the hard fact, became cloudlike and supple under his hands. He was under no obligation to recite 'the old hackneyed roll-call, chronologically arranged, of inevitable facts in a man's life'.\* It was his object to record impressions, to render states of mind without particularizing the features of the precise person who had experienced them. A serene and lovely light lies over the whole of that distant prospect of his childhood. The house, the fields, the garden, even the neighbouring town of Manchester,\* all seem to exist, but far away on some island separated from us by a veil of blue. On this background, where no detail is accurately rendered, the little group of children and parents, the little island of home and garden, are all distinctly visible and yet as if they moved and had their being behind a veil. Upon the opening chapters rests the solemnity of a splendid summer's day, whose radiance, long since sunk, has something awful in it, in whose profound stillness sounds strangely reverberate—the sounds of hooves on the far-away high road, the sound of words like 'palm', the sound of that 'solemn wind, the saddest that ear ever heard',\* which was for ever to haunt the mind of the little boy who now heard it for the first time. Nor, so long as he keeps within the circle of the past, is it necessary that he should face the disagreeable necessity of waking. About the reality of childhood still hung some of the charm of illusion. If the peace is broken, it is by an apparition like that of the mad dog which passes and pauses with something of the terror of a dream. If he needs variety, he finds it in describing with a whimsical humour perfectly suited to the subject the raptures and miseries of childhood. He mocks; he dilates; he makes the very small very great; then he describes the war with the mill hands, the brothers' imaginary kingdoms, his brother's boast that he could walk upon the ceiling like a fly, with admirable particularity.\* He can rise easily and fall

naturally here. Here too, given his own memories to work upon, he can exercise his extraordinary powers of description. He was never exact; he disliked glitter and emphasis; he sacrificed the showy triumphs of the art; but he had to perfection the gift of composition. Scenes come together under his hands like congregations of clouds which gently join and slowly disperse or hang solemnly still. So displayed before us we see the coaches gathering at the post office in all their splendour; the lady in the carriage to whom the news of victory brings only sorrow; the couple surprised on the road at midnight by the thunder of the mail coach and the threat of death; Lamb asleep in his chair; Ann disappearing for ever into the dark London night.\* All these scenes have something of the soundlessness and the lustre of dreams. They swim up to the surface, they sink down again into the depths. They have, into the bargain, the strange power of growing in our minds, so that it is always a surprise to come upon them again and see what, in the interval, our minds have done to alter and expand.

Meanwhile, all these scenes compose an autobiography of a kind, but of a kind which is so unusual that one is forced to ask what one has learnt from it about De Quincey in the end. Of facts, scarcely anything. One has been told only what De Quincey wished us to know; and even that has been chosen for the sake of some adventitious quality—as that it fitted in here, or was the right colour to go there—never for its truth. But nevertheless there grows upon us a curious sense of intimacy. It is an intimacy with the mind, and not with the body; yet we cannot help figuring to ourselves, as the rush of eloquence flows, the fragile little body, the fluttering hands, the glowing eyes, the alabaster cheeks, the glass of opium on the table. We can guess that no one so gifted with silver speech, so prone to plunge into reverie and awe, held his own imperturbably among his fellows. We can guess at his evasions and unpunctualities; at the hordes of old papers that littered his room; at the courtesy which excused his inability to abide by the ordinary rules of life; at the overmastering desire that possessed him to wander and dream on the hills alone; at the seasons of gloom and irritability with which he paid for that exquisite fineness of ear that tuned each word to harmony and set each paragraph flowing and following like the waves of the sea. All this we know or guess. But it is odd to reflect how little, after all, we have been admitted to intimacy. In spite of the fact that he talks of confessions and calls the work by which he set most store *Suspiria de Profundis*,\* he is always self-possessed, secretive, and composed. His confession is not that he has sinned but that he

has dreamed. Hence it comes about that his most perfect passages are not lyrical but descriptive. They are not cries of anguish which admit us to closeness and sympathy; they are descriptions of states of mind in which, often, time is miraculously prolonged and space miraculously expanded. When in the *Suspiria de Profundis* he tries to rise straight from the ground and to achieve in a few pages without prelude or sequence his own peculiar effects of majesty and distance, his force is not sufficient to bear him the whole distance. There juts up a comment upon the rules of Eton, a note to remind us that this refers to the tobacco States of North America, in the midst of 'Levana and Our Ladies of Sorrow',\* which puts their sweet-tongued phrases sadly out of countenance.

But if he was not a lyric writer, he was undoubtedly a descriptive writer, a reflective writer, who with only prose at his command—an instrument hedged about with restrictions, debased by a thousand common uses—made his way into precincts which are terribly difficult to approach. The breakfast table, he seems to say, is only a temporary apparition which we can think into non-existence, or invest with such associations that even its mahogany legs have their charm. To sit cheek by jowl with our fellows cramped up together is distasteful, indeed repulsive. But draw a little apart, see people in groups, as outlines, and they become at once memorable and full of beauty. Then it is not the actual sight or sound itself that matters, but the reverberations that it makes as it travels through our minds. These are often to be found far away, strangely transformed; but it is only by gathering up and putting together these echoes and fragments that we arrive at the true nature of our experience. So thinking, he altered slightly the ordinary relationships. He shifted the values of familiar things. And this he did in prose, which makes us wonder whether, then, it is quite so limited as the critics say, and ask further whether the prose writer, the novelist, might not capture fuller and finer truths than are now his aim if he ventured into those shadowy regions where De Quincey has been before him.

## HOW SHOULD ONE READ A BOOK?

AT this late hour of the world's history, books are to be found in almost every room of the house—in the nursery, in the drawing-room, in the dining-room, in the kitchen. But in some houses they have become such a company that they have to be accommodated with a room of their own—a reading-room, a library, a study. Let us imagine that we are now in such a room; that it is a sunny room, with windows opening on a garden, so that we can hear the trees rustling, the gardener talking, the donkey braying, the old women gossiping at the pump—and all the ordinary processes of life pursuing the casual irregular way which they have pursued these many hundreds of years. As casually, as persistently, books have been coming together on the shelves. Novels, poems, histories, memoirs, dictionaries, maps, directories; black letter books and brand new books; books in French and Greek and Latin; of all shapes and sizes and values, bought for purposes of research, bought to amuse a railway journey, bought by miscellaneous beings, of one temperament and another, serious and frivolous, men of action and men of letters.

Now, one may well ask oneself, strolling into such a room as this, how am I to read these books? What is the right way to set about it? They are so many and so various. My appetite is so fitful and so capricious. What am I to do to get the utmost possible pleasure out of them? And is it pleasure, or profit, or what is it that I should seek? I will lay before you some of the thoughts that have come to me on such an occasion as this. But you will notice the note of interrogation at the end of my title. One may think about reading as much as one chooses, but no one is going to lay down laws about it. Here in this room, if nowhere else, we breathe the air of freedom. Here simple and learned, man and woman are alike. For though reading seems so simple—a mere matter of knowing the alphabet—it is indeed so difficult that it is doubtful whether anybody knows anything about it. Paris is the capital of France; King John signed the Magna Charta; those are facts; those can be taught; but how are we to teach people so to read *Paradise Lost* as to see that it is a great poem, or *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*\* so as to see that it is a good novel? How are we to



learn the art of reading for ourselves? Without attempting to lay down laws upon a subject that has not been legalised, I will make a few suggestions, which may serve to show you how not to read, or to stimulate you to think out better methods of your own.

And directly we begin to ask how should one read a book we are faced by the fact that books differ; there are poems, novels, biographies on the book shelf there; each differs from the other as a tiger differs from a tortoise, a tortoise from an elephant. Our attitude must always be changing; it is clear. From different books we must ask different qualities. Simple as this sounds, people are always behaving as if all books were of the same species—as if there were only tortoises or nothing but tigers. It makes them furious to find a novelist bring Queen Victoria to the throne six months before her time;\* they will praise a poet enthusiastically for teaching them that a violet has four petals and a daisy almost invariably ten. You will save a great deal of time and temper better kept for worthier objects if you will try to make out before you begin to read what qualities you expect of a novelist, what of a poet, what of a biographer. The tortoise is bald and shiny; the tiger has a thick coat of yellow fur. So books too differ: one has its fur, the other has its baldness.

Yes; but for all that the problem is not so simple in a library as at the Zoological Gardens.\* Books have a great deal in common; they are always overflowing their boundaries; they are always breeding new species from unexpected matches among themselves. It is difficult to know how to approach them, to which species each belongs. But if we remember, as we turn to the bookcase, that each of these books was written by a pen which, consciously or unconsciously, tried to trace out a design, avoiding this, accepting that, adventuring the other; if we try to follow the writer in his experiment from the first word to the last, without imposing our design upon him, then we shall have a good chance of getting hold of the right end of the string.

To read a book well, one should read it as if one were writing it. Begin not by sitting on the bench among the judges but by standing in the dock with the criminal. Be his fellow worker, become his accomplice. Even, if you wish merely to read books, begin by writing them. For this certainly is true—one cannot write the most ordinary little story, attempt to describe the simplest event—meeting a beggar, shall we say, in the street, without coming up against difficulties that the greatest of novelists have had to face. In order that we may realise, however briefly and crudely, the main divisions into which

novelists group themselves, let us imagine how differently Defoe, Jane Austen, and Thomas Hardy would describe the same incident—this meeting a beggar in the street. Defoe is a master of narrative. His prime effort will be to reduce the beggar's story to perfect order and simplicity. This happened first, that next, the other thing third. He will put in nothing, however attractive, that will tire the reader unnecessarily, or divert his attention from what he wishes him to know. He will also make us believe, since he is a master, not of romance or of comedy, but of narrative, that everything that happened is true. He will be extremely precise therefore. This happened, as he tells us on the first pages of *Robinson Crusoe*,\* on the first of September. More subtly and artfully, he will hypnotise us into a state of belief by dropping out casually some little unnecessary fact—for instance, 'my father called me one morning into his chamber, where he was confined by the gout.'\* His father's gout is not necessary to the story, but it is necessary to the truth of the story, for it is thus that anybody who is speaking the truth adds some small irrelevant detail without thinking. Further, he will choose a type of sentence which is flowing but not too full, exact but not epigrammatic. His aim will be to present the thing itself without distortion from his own angle of vision. He will meet the subject face to face, four-square, without turning aside for a moment to point out that this was tragic, or that beautiful; and his aim is perfectly achieved.

But let us not for a moment confuse it with Jane Austen's aim. Had she met a beggar woman, no doubt she would have been interested in the beggar's story. But she would have seen at once that for her purposes the whole incident must be transformed. Streets and the open air and adventures mean nothing to her, artistically. It is character that interests her. She would at once make the beggar into a comfortable elderly man of the upper-middle classes, seated by his fireside at his ease. Then, instead of plunging into the story vigorously and veraciously, she will write a few paragraphs of accurate and artfully seasoned introduction, summing up the circumstances and sketching the character of the gentleman she wishes us to know. 'Matrimony as the origin of change was always disagreeable' to Mr Woodhouse, she says. Almost immediately, she thinks it well to let us see that her words are corroborated by Mr Woodhouse himself. We hear him talking. 'Poor Miss Taylor!—I wish she were here again. What a pity it is that Mr Weston ever thought of her.' And when Mr Woodhouse has talked enough to reveal himself from the inside, she then thinks it time to let us see him through his daughter's eyes. 'You got Hannah that good place. Nobody thought of



Hannah till you mentioned her.’\* Thus she shows us Emma flattering him and humouring him. Finally then, we have Mr Woodhouse’s character seen from three different points of view at once; as he sees himself; as his daughter sees him; and as he is seen by the marvellous eye of that invisible lady Jane Austen herself. All three meet in one, and thus we can pass round her characters free, apparently, from any guidance but our own.

Now let Thomas Hardy choose the same theme—a beggar met in the street—and at once two great changes will be visible. The street will be transformed into a vast and sombre heath; the man or woman will take on some of the size and indistinctness of a statue. Further, the relations of this human being will not be towards other people, but towards the heath, towards man as law-giver, towards those powers which are in control of man’s destiny. Once more our perspective will be completely changed. All the qualities which were admirable in *Robinson Crusoe*, admirable in *Emma*, will be neglected or absent. The direct literal statement of Defoe is gone. There is none of the clear, exact brilliance of Jane Austen. Indeed, if we come to Hardy from one of these great writers we shall exclaim at first that he is ‘melodramatic’ or ‘unreal’ compared with them. But we should bethink us that there are at least two sides to the human soul; the light side and the dark side. In company, the light side of the mind is exposed; in solitude, the dark. Both are equally real, equally important. But a novelist will always tend to expose one rather than the other; and Hardy, who is a novelist of the dark side, will contrive that no clear, steady light falls upon his people’s faces, that they are not closely observed in drawing-rooms, that they come in contact with moors, sheep, the sky and the stars, and in their solitude are directly at the mercy of the gods. If Jane Austen’s characters are real in the drawing-room, they would not exist at all upon the top of Stonehenge. Feeble and clumsy in drawing-rooms, Hardy’s people are large-limbed and vigorous out of doors. To achieve his purpose Hardy is neither literal and four-square like Defoe, nor deft and pointed like Jane Austen. He is cumbrous, involved, metaphorical. Where Jane Austen describes manners, he describes Nature. Where she is matter of fact, he is romantic and poetical. As both are great artists, each is careful to observe the laws of his own perspective, and will not be found confusing us (as so many lesser writers do) by introducing two different kinds of reality into the same book.

Yet it is very difficult not to wish them less scrupulous. Frequent are the complaints that Jane Austen is too prosaic, Thomas Hardy too melodramatic.

And we have to remind ourselves that it is necessary to approach every writer differently in order to get from him all he can give us. We have to remember that it is one of the qualities of greatness that it brings heaven and earth and human nature into conformity with its own vision. It is by reason of this masterliness of theirs, this uncompromising idiosyncrasy, that great writers often require us to make heroic efforts in order to read them rightly. They bend us and break us. To go from Jane Austen to Hardy, from Peacock to Trollope, from Scott to Meredith, from Richardson to Kipling,\* is to be wrenched and distorted, thrown this way and then that. Besides, everyone is born with a natural bias of his own in one direction rather than in another. He instinctively accepts Hardy's vision rather than Jane Austen's, and, reading with the current and not against it, is carried on easily and swiftly by the impetus of his own bent to the heart of his author's genius. But then Jane Austen is repulsive to him. He can scarcely stagger through the desert of her novels.

Sometimes this natural antagonism is too great to be overcome, but trial is always worth making. For these difficult and inaccessible books, with all their preliminary harshness, often yield the richest fruits in the end, and so curiously is the brain compounded that while tracts of literature repel at one season, they are appetising and essential at another.

If, then, this is true—that books are of very different types, and that to read them rightly we have to bend our imaginations powerfully, first one way, then another—it is clear that reading is one of the most arduous and exhausting of occupations. Often the pages fly before us and we seem, so keen is our interest, to be living and not even holding the volume in our hands. But the more exciting the book, the more danger we run of over-reading. The symptoms are familiar. Suddenly the book becomes dull as ditchwater and heavy as lead. We yawn and stretch and cannot attend. The highest flights of Shakespeare and Milton become intolerable. And we say to ourselves—is Keats a fool or am I?—a painful question, a question, moreover, that need not be asked if we realised how great a part the art of not reading plays in the art of reading. To be able to read books without reading them, to skip and saunter, to suspend judgement, to lounge and loaf down the alleys and bye-streets of letters is the best way of rejuvenating one's own creative power. All biographies and memoirs, all the hybrid books which are largely made up of facts, serve to restore to us the power of reading real books—that is to say, works of pure imagination. That they serve also to

impart knowledge and to improve the mind is true and important, but if we are considering how to read books for pleasure, not how to provide an adequate pension for one's widow, this other property of theirs is even more valuable and important. But here again one should know what one is after. One is after rest, and fun, and oddity, and some stimulus to one's own jaded creative power. One has left one's bare and angular tower and is strolling along the street looking in at the open windows. After solitude and concentration, the open air, the sight of other people absorbed in innumerable activities, comes upon us with an indescribable fascination.

The windows of the houses are open; the blinds are drawn up. One can see the whole household without their knowing that they are being seen. One can see them sitting round the dinner table, talking, reading, playing games. Sometimes they seem to be quarrelling—but what about? Or they are laughing—but what is the joke? Down in the basement the cook is reading a newspaper aloud, while the housemaid is making a piece of toast; in comes the kitchenmaid and they all start talking at the same moment—but what are they saying? Upstairs a girl is dressing to go to a party. But where is she going? There is an old lady sitting at her bedroom window with some kind of wool work in her hand and a fine green parrot in a cage beside her. And what is she thinking? All this life has somehow come together; there is a reason for it; a coherency in it, could one but seize it. The biographer answers the innumerable questions which we ask as we stand outside on the pavement looking in at the open window. Indeed there is nothing more interesting than to pick one's way about among these vast depositories of facts, to make up the lives of men and women, to create their complex minds and households from the extraordinary abundance and litter and confusion of matter which lies strewn about. A thimble, a skull, a pair of scissors, a sheaf of sonnets, are given us, and we have to create, to combine, to put these incongruous things together. There is, too, a quality in facts, an emotion which comes from knowing that men and women actually did and suffered these things, which only the greatest novelists can surpass. Captain Scott, starving and freezing to death in the snow,\* affects us deeply as any made-up story of adventure by Conrad or Defoe; but it affects us differently. The biography differs from the novel. To ask a biographer to give us the same kind of pleasure that we get from a novelist is to misuse and misread him. Directly he says 'John Jones was born at five-thirty in the morning of August 13, 1862,' he has committed himself, focused his lens upon fact, and if he then begins to romance, the

perspective becomes blurred, we grow suspicious, and our faith in his integrity as a writer is destroyed. In the same way fact destroys fiction. If Thackeray, for example, had quoted an actual newspaper account of the Battle of Waterloo in *Vanity Fair*,\* the whole fabric of his story would have been destroyed, as a stone destroys a bubble.

But it is undoubted that these hybrid books, these warehouses and depositories of facts, play a great part in resting the brain and restoring its zest of imagination. The work of building up a life for oneself from skulls, thimbles, scissors, and sonnets stimulates our interest in creation and rouses our wish to see the work beautifully and powerfully done by a Flaubert or a Tolstoy. Moreover, however interesting facts may be, they are an inferior form of fiction, and gradually we become impatient of their weakness and diffuseness, of their compromises and evasions, of the slovenly sentences which they make for themselves, and are eager to revive ourselves with the greater intensity and truth of fiction.

It is necessary to have in hand an immense reserve of imaginative energy in order to attack the steeps of poetry. Here are none of those gradual introductions, those resemblances to the familiar world of daily life with which the novelist entices us into his world of imagination. All is violent, opposite, unrelated. But various causes, such as bad books, the worry of carrying on life efficiently, the intermittent but powerful shocks dealt us by beauty, and the incalculable impulses of our own minds and bodies, frequently put us into that state of mind in which poetry is a necessity. The sight of a crocus in a garden will suddenly bring to mind all the spring days that have ever been. One then desires the general, not the particular; the whole, not the detail; to turn uppermost the dark side of the mind; to be in contact with silence, solitude, and all men and women and not this particular Richard, or that particular Anne. Metaphors are then more expressive than plain statements.

Thus in order to read poetry rightly, one must be in a rash, an extreme, a generous state of mind in which many of the supports and comforts of literature are done without. Its power of make-believe, its representative power, is dispensed with in favour of its extremities and extravagances. The representation is often at a very far remove from the thing represented, so that we have to use all our energies of mind to grasp the relation between, for example, the song of a nightingale and the images and ideas which that song stirs in the mind. Thus reading poetry often seems a state of rhapsody in

which rhyme and metre and sound stir the mind as wine and dance stir the body, and we read on, understanding with the senses, not with the intellect, in a state of intoxication. Yet all this intoxication and intensity of delight depend upon the exactitude and truth of the image, on its being the counterpart of the reality within. Remote and extravagant as some of Shakespeare's images seem, far-fetched and ethereal as some of Keats's, at the moment of reading they seem the cap and culmination of the thought; its final expression. But it is useless to labour the matter in cold blood. Anyone who has read a poem with pleasure will remember the sudden conviction, the sudden recollection (for it seems sometimes as if we were about to say, or had in some previous existence already said, what Shakespeare is actually now saying), which accompany the reading of poetry, and give it its exaltation and intensity. But such reading is attended, whether consciously or unconsciously, with the utmost stretch and vigilance of the faculties, of the reason no less than of the imagination. We are always verifying the poet's statements, making a flying comparison, to the best of our powers, between the beauty he makes outside and the beauty we are aware of within. For the humblest among us is endowed with the power of comparison. The simplest (provided he loves reading) has that already within him to which he makes what is given him—by poet or novelist—correspond.

With that saying, of course, the cat is out of the bag. For this admission that we can compare, discriminate, brings us to this further point. Reading is not merely sympathising and understanding; it is also criticising and judging. Hitherto our endeavour has been to read books as a writer writes them. We have been trying to understand, to appreciate, to interpret, to sympathise. But now, when the book is finished, the reader must leave the dock and mount the bench. He must cease to be the friend; he must become the judge. And this is no mere figure of speech. The mind seems ('seems', for all is obscure that takes place in the mind) to go through two processes in reading. One might be called the actual reading; the other the after reading. During the actual reading, when we hold the book in our hands, there are incessant distractions and interruptions. New impressions are always completing or cancelling the old. One's judgement is suspended, for one does not know what is coming next. Surprise, admiration, boredom, interest, succeed each other in such quick succession that when, at last, the end is reached, one is for the most part in a state of complete bewilderment. Is it good? or bad? What kind of book is it? How good a book is it? The friction of reading and the emotion of

reading beat up too much dust to let us find clear answers to these questions. If we are asked our opinion, we cannot give it. Parts of the book seem to have sunk away, others to be starting out in undue prominence. Then perhaps it is better to take up some different pursuit—to walk, to talk, to dig, to listen to music. The book upon which we have spent so much time and thought fades entirely out of sight. But suddenly, as one is picking a snail from a rose, tying a shoe, perhaps, doing something distant and different, the whole book floats to the top of the mind complete. Some process seems to have been finished without one's being aware of it. The different details which have accumulated in reading assemble themselves in their proper places. The book takes on a definite shape; it becomes a castle, a cowshed, a gothic ruin, as the case may be. Now one can think of the book as a whole, and the book as a whole is different, and gives one a different emotion, from the book received currently in several different parts. Its symmetry and proportion, its confusion and distortion can cause great delight or great disgust apart from the pleasure given by each detail as it is separately realised. Holding this complete shape in mind it now becomes necessary to arrive at some opinion of the book's merits, for though it is possible to receive the greatest pleasure and excitement from the first process, the actual reading, though this is of the utmost importance, it is not so profound or so lasting as the pleasure we get when the second process—the after reading—is finished, and we hold the book clear, secure, and (to the best of our powers) complete in our minds.

But how, we may ask, are we to decide any of these questions—is it good, or is it bad?—how good is it, how bad is it? Not much help can be looked for from outside. Critics abound; criticisms pullulate; but minds differ too much to admit of close correspondence in matters of detail, and nothing is more disastrous than to crush one's own foot into another person's shoe. When we want to decide a particular case, we can best help ourselves, not by reading criticism, but by realising our own impression as acutely as possible and referring this to the judgements which we have gradually formulated in the past. There they hang in the wardrobe of our mind—the shapes of the books we have read, as we hung them up and put them away when we had done with them. If we have just read *Clarissa Harlowe*, for example, let us see how it shows up against the shape of *Anna Karenina*.<sup>\*</sup> At once the outlines of the two books are cut out against each other as a house with its chimneys bristling and its gables sloping is cut out against a harvest moon. At once Richardson's qualities—his verbosity, his obliqueness—are contrasted with

Tolstoy's brevity and directness. And what is the reason of this difference in their approach? And how does our emotion at different crises of the two books compare? And what must we attribute to the eighteenth century, and what to Russia and the translator? But the questions which suggest themselves are innumerable. They ramify infinitely, and many of them are apparently irrelevant. Yet it is by asking them and pursuing the answers as far as we can go that we arrive at our standard of values, and decide in the end that the book we have just read is of this kind or of that, has merit in that degree or in this. And it is now, when we have kept closely to our own impression, formulated independently our own judgement, that we can most profitably help ourselves to the judgements of the great critics—Dryden, Johnson,\* and the rest. It is when we can best defend our own opinions that we get most from theirs.

So, then—to sum up the different points we have reached in this essay—have we found any answer to our question, how should we read a book? Clearly, no answer that will do for everyone; but perhaps a few suggestions. In the first place, a good reader will give the writer the benefit of every doubt; the help of all his imagination; will follow as closely, interpret as intelligently as he can. In the next place, he will judge with the utmost severity. Every book, he will remember, has the right to be judged by the best of its kind. He will be adventurous, broad in his choice, true to his own instincts, yet ready to consider those of other people. This is an outline which can be filled in at taste and at leisure, but to read something after this fashion is to be a reader whom writers respect. It is by the means of such readers that masterpieces are helped into the world.

If the moralists ask us how we can justify our love of reading, we can make use of some such excuse as this. But if we are honest, we know that no such excuse is needed. It is true that we get nothing whatsoever except pleasure from reading; it is true that the wisest of us is unable to say what that pleasure may be. But that pleasure—mysterious, unknown, useless as it is—is enough. That pleasure is so curious, so complex, so immensely fertilising to the mind of anyone who enjoys it, and so wide in its effects, that it would not be in the least surprising to discover, on the day of judgement when secrets are revealed and the obscure is made plain, that the reason why we have grown from pigs to men and women, and come out from our caves, and dropped our bows and arrows, and sat round the fire and talked and drunk and made merry and given to the poor and helped the sick and made

pavements and houses and erected some sort of shelter and society on the waste of the world, is nothing but this: we have loved reading.



## POETRY, FICTION AND THE FUTURE

FAR the greater number of critics turn their backs upon the present and gaze steadily into the past. Wisely, no doubt, they make no comment upon what is being actually written at the moment; they leave that duty to the race of reviewers whose very title seems to imply transiency in themselves and in the objects they survey. But one has sometimes asked oneself, must the duty of a critic always be to the past, must his gaze always be fixed backward? Could he not sometimes turn round and, shading his eyes in the manner of Robinson Crusoe on the desert island, look into the future and trace on its mist the faint lines of the land which some day perhaps we may reach? The truth of such speculations can never be proved, of course, but in an age like ours there is a great temptation to indulge in them. For it is an age clearly when we are not fast anchored where we are; things are moving round us; we are moving ourselves. Is it not the critic's duty to tell us, or to guess at least, where we are going?

Obviously the inquiry must narrow itself very strictly, but it might perhaps be possible in a short space to take one instance of dissatisfaction and difficulty, and, having examined into that, we might be the better able to guess the direction in which, when we have surmounted it, we shall go.

Nobody indeed can read much modern literature without being aware that some dissatisfaction, some difficulty, is lying in our way. On all sides writers are attempting what they cannot achieve, are forcing the form they use to contain a meaning which is strange to it. Many reasons might be given, but here let us select only one, and that is the failure of poetry to serve us as it has served so many generations of our fathers. Poetry is not lending her services to us nearly as freely as she did to them. The great channel of expression which has carried away so much energy, so much genius, seems to have narrowed itself or to have turned aside.

That is true only within certain limits of course; our age is rich in lyric poetry; no age perhaps has been richer. But for our generation and the generation that is coming the lyric cry of ecstasy or despair, which is so

intense, so personal, and so limited, is not enough. The mind is full of monstrous, hybrid, unmanageable emotions. That the age of the earth is 3,000,000,000 years; that human life lasts but a second; that the capacity of the human mind is nevertheless boundless; that life is infinitely beautiful yet repulsive; that one's fellow creatures are adorable but disgusting; that science and religion have between them destroyed belief; that all bonds of union seem broken, yet some control must exist—it is in this atmosphere of doubt and conflict that writers have now to create, and the fine fabric of a lyric is no more fitted to contain this point of view than a rose leaf to envelop the rugged immensity of a rock.

But when we ask ourselves what has in the past served to express such an attitude as this—an attitude which is full of contrast and collision; an attitude which seems to demand the conflict of one character upon another, and at the same time to stand in need of some general shaping power, some conception which lends the whole harmony and force, we must reply that there was a form once, and it was not the form of lyrical poetry; it was the form of the drama, of the poetic drama of the Elizabethan age. And that is the one form which seems dead beyond all possibility of resurrection today.

For if we look at the state of the poetic play we must have grave doubts that any force on earth can now revive it. It has been practiced and is still practiced by writers of the highest genius and ambition. Since the death of Dryden every great poet it seems has had his fling. Wordsworth and Coleridge, Shelley and Keats, Tennyson, Swinburne, and Browning (to name the dead only) have all written poetic plays, but none has succeeded. Of all the plays they wrote, probably only Swinburne's *Atalanta* and Shelley's *Prometheus*\* are still read, and they less frequently than other works by the same writers. All the rest have climbed to the top shelves of our bookcases, put their heads under their wings, and gone to sleep. No one will willingly disturb those slumbers.

Yet it is tempting to try to find some explanation of this failure in case it should throw light upon the future which we are considering. The reason why poets can no longer write poetic plays lies somewhere perhaps in this direction.

There is a vague, mysterious thing called an attitude to life. We all know people—if we turn from literature to life for a moment—who are at loggerheads with existence; unhappy people who never get what they want; are baffled, complaining, who stand at an uncomfortable angle whence they

see everything slightly askew. There are others again who, though they appear perfectly content, seem to have lost all touch with reality. They lavish all their affections upon little dogs and old china. They take interest in nothing but the vicissitudes of their own health and the ups and downs of social snobbery. There are, however, others who strike us, why precisely it would be difficult to say, as being by nature or circumstances in a position where they can use their faculties to the full upon things that are of importance. They are not necessarily happy or successful, but there is a zest in their presence, an interest in their doings. They seem alive all over. This may be partly the result of circumstances—they have been born into surroundings that suit them—but much more is the result of some happy balance of qualities in themselves so that they see things not at an awkward angle, all askew; nor distorted through a mist; but four-square, in proportion; they grasp something hard; when they come into action they cut real ice.

A writer too has in the same way an attitude to life, though it is a different life from the other. They, too, can stand at an uncomfortable angle; can be baffled, frustrated, unable to get at what they want as writers. This is true, for example, of the novels of George Gissing.\* Then, again, they can retire to the suburbs and lavish their interest upon pet dogs and duchesses—prettinesses, sentimentalities, snobberies, and this is true of some of our most highly successful novelists. But there are others who seem by nature or circumstances so placed that they can use their faculties freely upon important things. It is not that they write quickly or easily, or become at once successful or celebrated. One is rather trying to analyse a quality which is present in most of the great ages of literature and is most marked in the work of the Elizabethan dramatists. They seem to have an attitude to life, a position which allows them to move their limbs freely; a view which, though made up of all sorts of different things, falls into the right perspective for their purposes.

In part, of course, this was the result of circumstances. The public appetite, not for books, but for the drama, the smallness of the towns, the distance which separated people, the ignorance in which even the educated then lived, all made it natural for the Elizabethan imagination to fill itself with lions and unicorns, dukes and duchesses, violence and mystery. This was reinforced by something which we cannot explain so simply, but which we can certainly feel. They had an attitude to life which made them able to express themselves freely and fully. Shakespeare's plays are not the work of a baffled and

frustrated mind; they are the perfectly elastic envelope of his thought. Without a hitch he turns from philosophy to a drunken brawl; from love songs to an argument; from simple merriment to profound speculation. And it is true of all the Elizabethan dramatists that though they may bore us—and they do—they never make us feel that they are afraid or self-conscious, or that there is anything hindering, hampering, inhibiting the full current of their minds.

Yet our first thought when we open a modern poetic play—and this applies to much modern poetry—is that the writer is not at his ease. He is afraid, he is forced, he is self-conscious. And with what good reason! we may exclaim, for which of us is perfectly at his ease with a man in a toga called Xenocrates, or with a woman in a blanket called Eudoxa? Yet for some reason the modern poetic play is always about Xenocrates and not about Mr Robinson; it is about Thessaly and not about Charing Cross Road.\* When the Elizabethans laid their scenes in foreign parts and made their heroes and heroines princes and princesses they only shifted the scene from one side to the other of a very thin veil. It was a natural device which gave depth and distance to their figures. But the country remained English; and the Bohemian prince was the same person as the English noble. Our modern poetic playwrights, however, seem to seek the veil of the past and of distance for a different reason. They want not a veil that heightens but a curtain that conceals; they lay their scene in the past because they are afraid of the present. They are aware that if they tried to express the thoughts, the visions, the sympathies and antipathies which are actually turning and tumbling in their brains in this year of grace 1927 the poetic decencies would be violated; they could only stammer and stumble and perhaps have to sit down or to leave the room. The Elizabethans had an attitude which allowed them complete freedom; the modern playwright has either no attitude at all, or one so strained that it cramps his limbs and distorts his vision. He has therefore to take refuge with Xenocrates, who says nothing or only what blank verse can with decency say.

But can we explain ourselves a little more fully? What has changed, what has happened, what has put the writer now at such an angle that he cannot pour his mind straight into the old channels of English poetry? Some sort of answer may be suggested by a walk through the streets of any large town. The long avenue of brick is cut up into boxes, each of which is inhabited by a different human being who has put locks on his doors and bolts on his

windows to ensure some privacy, yet is linked to his fellows by wires which pass overhead, by waves of sound which pour through the roof and speak aloud to him of battles and murders and strikes and revolutions all over the world. And if we go in and talk to him we shall find that he is a wary, secretive, suspicious animal, extremely self-conscious, extremely careful not to give himself away. Indeed, there is nothing in modern life which forces him to do it. There is no violence in private life; we are polite, tolerant, agreeable, when we meet. War even is conducted by companies and communities rather than by individuals. Duelling is extinct. The marriage bond can stretch indefinitely without snapping. The ordinary person is calmer, smoother, more self-contained than he used to be.

But again we should find if we took a walk with our friend that he is extremely alive to everything—to ugliness, sordidity, beauty, amusement. He is immensely inquisitive. He follows every thought careless where it may lead him. He discusses openly what used never to be mentioned even privately. And this very freedom and curiosity are perhaps the cause of what appears to be his most marked characteristic—the strange way in which things that have no apparent connection are associated in his mind. Feelings which used to come simple and separate do so no longer. Beauty is part ugliness; amusement part disgust; pleasure part pain. Emotions which used to enter the mind whole are now broken up on the threshold.

For example: It is a spring night, the moon is up, the nightingale singing, the willows bending over the river. Yes, but at the same time a diseased old woman is picking over her greasy rags on a hideous iron bench. She and the spring enter his mind together; they blend but do not mix. The two emotions, so incongruously coupled, bite and kick at each other in unison. But the emotion which Keats felt when he heard the song of a nightingale is one and entire, though it passes from joy in beauty to sorrow at the unhappiness of human fate. He makes no contrast. In his poem sorrow is the shadow which accompanies beauty. In the modern mind beauty is accompanied not by its shadow but by its opposite. The modern poet talks of the nightingale who sings ‘jug jug to dirty ears’.\* There trips along by the side of our modern beauty some mocking spirit which sneers at beauty for being beautiful; which turns the looking-glass and shows us that the other side of her cheek is pitted and deformed. It is as if the modern mind, wishing always to verify its emotions, had lost the power of accepting anything simply for what it is. Undoubtedly this sceptical and testing spirit has led to a great freshening and

quickening of soul. There is a candour, an honesty in modern writing which is salutary if not supremely delightful. Modern literature, which had grown a little sultry and scented with Oscar Wilde\* and Walter Pater, revived instantly from her nineteenth-century languor when Samuel Butler and Bernard Shaw began to burn their feathers and apply their salts to her nose. She awoke; she sat up; she sneezed. Naturally, the poets were frightened away.

For of course poetry has always been overwhelmingly on the side of beauty. She has always insisted on certain rights, such as rhyme, metre, poetic diction. She has never been used for the common purpose of life. Prose has taken all the dirty work on to her own shoulders; has answered letters, paid bills, written articles, made speeches, served the needs of businessmen, shopkeepers, lawyers, soldiers, peasants.

Poetry has remained aloof in the possession of her priests. She has perhaps paid the penalty for this seclusion by becoming a little stiff. Her presence with all her apparatus—her veils, her garlands, her memories, her associations—affects us the moment she speaks. Thus when we ask poetry to express this discord, this incongruity, this sneer, this contrast, this curiosity, the quick, queer emotions which are bred in small separate rooms, the wide, general ideas which civilization teaches, she cannot move quickly enough, simply enough, or broadly enough to do it. Her accent is too marked; her manner too emphatic. She gives us instead lovely lyric cries of passion; with a majestic sweep of her arm she bids us take refuge in the past; but she does not keep pace with the mind and fling herself subtly, quickly, passionately into its various sufferings and joys. Byron in *Don Juan*\* pointed the way; he showed how flexible an instrument poetry might become, but none has followed his example or put his tool to further use. We remain without a poetic play.

Thus we are brought to reflect whether poetry is capable of the task which we are now setting her. It may be that the emotions here sketched in such rude outline and imputed to the modern mind submit more readily to prose than to poetry. It may be possible that prose is going to take over—has, indeed, already taken over—some of the duties which were once discharged by poetry.

If, then, we are daring and risk ridicule and try to see in what direction we who seem to be moving so fast are going, we may guess that we are going in the direction of prose and that in ten or fifteen years' time prose will be used

for purposes for which prose has never been used before. That cannibal, the novel, which has devoured so many forms of art will by then have devoured even more. We shall be forced to invent new names for the different books which masquerade under this one heading. And it is possible that there will be among the so-called novels one which we shall scarcely know how to christen. It will be written in prose, but in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry. It will have something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose. It will be dramatic, and yet not a play. It will be read, not acted. By what name we are to call it is not a matter of very great importance. What is important is that this book which we see on the horizon may serve to express some of those feelings which seem at the moment to be balked by poetry pure and simple and to find the drama equally inhospitable to them. Let us try, then, to come to closer terms with it and to imagine what may be its scope and its nature.

In the first place, one may guess that it will differ from the novel as we know it now chiefly in that it will stand further back from life. It will give, as poetry does, the outline rather than the detail. It will make little use of the marvellous fact-recording power, which is one of the attributes of fiction. It will tell us very little about the houses, incomes, occupations of its characters; it will have little kinship with the sociological novel or the novel of environment. With these limitations it will express the feeling and ideas of the characters closely and vividly, but from a different angle. It will resemble poetry in this that it will give not only or mainly people's relations to each other and their activities together, as the novel has hitherto done, but it will give the relation of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude. For under the dominion of the novel we have scrutinized one part of the mind closely and left another unexplored. We have come to forget that a large and important part of life consists in our emotions toward such things as roses and nightingales, the dawn, the sunset, life, death, and fate; we forget that we spend much time sleeping, dreaming, thinking, reading, alone; we are not entirely occupied in personal relations; all our energies are not absorbed in making our livings. The psychological novelist has been too prone to limit psychology to the psychology of personal intercourse; we long sometimes to escape from the incessant, the remorseless analysis of falling into love and falling out of love, of what Tom feels for Judith and Judith does or does not altogether feel for Tom. We long for some more impersonal relationship. We long for ideas, for dreams, for imaginations, for poetry.



And it is one of the glories of the Elizabethan dramatists that they give us this. The poet is always able to transcend the particularity of Hamlet's relation to Ophelia and to give us his questioning not of his own personal lot alone but of the state and being of all human life. In *Measure for Measure*,\* for example, passages of extreme psychological subtlety are mingled with profound reflections, tremendous imaginations. Yet it is worth noticing that if Shakespeare gives us this profundity, this psychology, at the same time Shakespeare makes no attempt to give us certain other things. The plays are of no use whatever as 'applied sociology'. If we had to depend upon them for a knowledge of the social and economic conditions of Elizabethan life, we should be hopelessly at sea.

In these respects then the novel or the variety of the novel which will be written in time to come will take on some of the attributes of poetry. It will give the relations of man to nature, to fate; his imagination; his dreams. But it will also give the sneer, the contrast, the question, the closeness and complexity of life. It will take the mould of that queer conglomeration of incongruous things—the modern mind. Therefore it will clasp to its breast the precious prerogatives of the democratic art of prose; its freedom, its fearlessness, its flexibility. For prose is so humble that it can go anywhere; no place is too low, too sordid, or too mean for it to enter. It is infinitely patient, too, humbly acquisitive. It can lick up with its long glutinous tongue the most minute fragments of fact and mass them into the most subtle labyrinths, and listen silently at doors behind which only a murmur, only a whisper, is to be heard. With all the suppleness of a tool which is in constant use it can follow the windings and record the changes which are typical of the modern mind. To this, with Proust\* and Dostoevsky behind us, we must agree.

But can prose, we may ask, adequate though it is to deal with the common and the complex—can prose say the simple things which are so tremendous? Give the sudden emotions which are so surprising? Can it chant the elegy, or hymn the love, or shriek in terror, or praise the rose, the nightingale, or the beauty of the night? Can it leap at one spring at the heart of its subject as the poet does? I think not. That is the penalty it pays for having dispensed with the incantation and the mystery, with rhyme and metre. It is true that prose writers are daring; they are constantly forcing their instrument to make the attempt. But one has always a feeling of discomfort in the presence of the purple patch or the prose poem. The objection to the purple patch, however, is not that it is purple but that it is a patch. Recall for instance Meredith's



‘Diversion on a Penny Whistle’ in *Richard Feverel*.<sup>\*</sup> How awkwardly, how emphatically, with a broken poetic metre it begins: ‘Golden lie the meadows; golden run the streams; red-gold is on the pine-stems. The sun is coming down to earth and walks the fields and the waters.’ Or recall the famous description of the storm at the end of Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*. These passages are eloquent, lyrical, splendid; they read very well cut out and stuck in an anthology; but in the context of the novel they make us uncomfortable. For both Meredith and Charlotte Brontë called themselves novelists; they stood close up to life; they led us to expect the rhythm, the observation, the perspective of fiction; suddenly, violently and self-consciously they change all this for the rhythm, the observation and the perspective of poetry. We feel the jerk and the effort; we are half woken from that trance of consent and illusion in which our submission to the power of the writer’s imagination is most complete.

But let us now consider another book, which though written in prose and by way of being called a novel, adopts from the start a different attitude, a different rhythm, which stands back from life, and leads us to expect a different perspective—*Tristram Shandy*.<sup>\*</sup> It is a book full of poetry, but we never notice it; it is a book stained deep purple, which is yet never patchy. Here though the mood is changing always, there is no jerk, no jolt in that change to waken us from the depths of consent and belief. In the same breath Sterne laughs, sneers, cuts some indecent ribaldry, and passes on to a passage like this:

Time wastes too fast: every letter I trace tells me with what rapidity life follows my pen; the days and hours of it more precious—my dear Jenny—than the rubies about thy neck, are flying over our heads like light clouds of a windy day, never to return more; everything presses on—whilst thou art twisting that lock—see! it grows gray; and every time I kiss thy hand to bid adieu, and every absence which follows it, are preludes to that eternal separation which we are shortly to make.—Heaven have mercy upon us both!

## CHAP. IX

Now, for what the world thinks of that ejaculation—I would not give a groat.

And he goes on to my Uncle Toby, the Corporal, Mrs Shandy, and the rest of them.

There, one sees, is poetry changing easily and naturally into prose, prose into poetry. Standing a little aloof, Sterne lays his hands lightly upon imagination, wit, fantasy; and reaching high up among the branches where

these things grow, naturally and no doubt willingly forfeits his right to the more substantial vegetables that grow on the ground. For, unfortunately, it seems true that some renunciation is inevitable. You cannot cross the narrow bridge of art carrying all its tools in your hands. Some you must leave behind, or you will drop them in midstream or, what is worse, overbalance and be drowned yourself.

So, then, this unnamed variety of the novel will be written standing back from life, because in that way a larger view is to be obtained of some important features of it; it will be written in prose, because prose, if you free it from the beast-of-burden work which so many novelists necessarily lay upon it, of carrying loads of details, bushels of fact—prose thus treated will show itself capable of rising high from the ground, not in one dart, but in sweeps and circles, and of keeping at the same time in touch with the amusements and idiosyncrasies of human character in daily life.

There remains, however, a further question. Can prose be dramatic? It is obvious, of course, that Shaw and Ibsen\* have used prose dramatically with the highest success, but they have been faithful to the dramatic form. This form one may prophesy is not the one which the poetic dramatist of the future will find fit for his needs. A prose play is too rigid, too limited, too emphatic for his purposes. It lets slip between its meshes half the things that he wants to say. He cannot compress into dialogue all the comment, all the analysis, all the richness that he wants to give. Yet he covets the explosive emotional effect of the drama; he wants to draw blood from his readers, and not merely to stroke and tickle their intellectual susceptibilities. The looseness and freedom of *Tristram Shandy*, wonderfully though they encircle and float off such characters as Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim, do not attempt to range and marshal these people in dramatic contrast together. Therefore it will be necessary for the writer of this exacting book to bring to bear upon his tumultuous and contradictory emotions the generalizing and simplifying power of a strict and logical imagination. Tumult is vile; confusion is hateful; everything in a work of art should be mastered and ordered. His effort will be to generalize rather than to split up. Instead of enumerating details he will mould blocks. His characters thus will have a dramatic power which the minutely realized characters of contemporary fiction often sacrifice in the interests of psychology. And then, though this is scarcely visible, so far distant it lies on the rim of the horizon—one can imagine that he will have extended the scope of his interest so as to dramatize some of those influences

which play so large a part in life, yet have so far escaped the novelist—the power of music, the stimulus of sight, the effect on us of the shape of trees or the play of colour, the emotions bred in us by crowds, the obscure terrors and hatreds which come so irrationally in certain places or from certain people, the delight of movement, the intoxication of wine. Every moment is the centre and meeting-place of an extraordinary number of perceptions which have not yet been expressed. Life is always and inevitably much richer than we who try to express it.

But it needs no great gift of prophecy to be certain that whoever attempts to do what is outlined above will have need of all his courage. Prose is not going to learn a new step at the bidding of the first comer. Yet if the signs of the times are worth anything the need of fresh developments is being felt. It is certain that there are scattered about in England, France, and America writers who are trying to work themselves free from a bondage which has become irksome to them; writers who are trying to readjust their attitude so that they may once more stand easily and naturally in a position where their powers have full play upon important things. And it is when a book strikes us as the result of that attitude rather than by its beauty or its brilliancy that we know that it has in it the seeds of an enduring existence.

## CRAFTSMANSHIP

THE title of this series is 'Words Fail Me,' and this particular talk is called 'Craftsmanship.'\* We must suppose, therefore, that the talker is meant to discuss the craft of words—the craftsmanship of the writer. But there is something incongruous, unfitting, about the term 'craftsmanship' when applied to words. The English dictionary, to which we always turn in moments of dilemma, confirms us in our doubts. It says that the word 'craft' has two meanings; it means in the first place making useful objects out of solid matter—for example, a pot, a chair, a table. In the second place, the word 'craft' means cajolery, cunning, deceit. Now we know little that is certain about words, but this we do know—words never make anything that is useful; and words are the only things that tell the truth and nothing but the truth. Therefore, to talk of craft in connection with words is to bring together two incongruous ideas, which if they mate can only give birth to some monster fit for a glass case in a museum. Instantly, therefore, the title of the talk must be changed, and for it substituted another—A Ramble round Words, perhaps. For when you cut off the head of a talk it behaves like a hen that has been decapitated. It runs round in a circle till it drops dead—so people say who have killed hens. And that must be the course, or circle, of this decapitated talk. Let us then take for our starting point the statement that words are not useful. This happily needs little proving, for we are all aware of it. When we travel on the Tube, for example, when we wait on the platform for a train, there, hung up in front of us, on an illuminated signboard, are the words 'Passing Russell Square.'\* We look at those words; we repeat them; we try to impress that useful fact upon our minds; the next train will pass Russell Square. We say over and over again as we pace, 'Passing Russell Square, passing Russell Square.' And then as we say them, the words shuffle and change, and we find ourselves saying, 'Passing away saith the world, passing away.... The leaves decay and fall, the vapours weep their burthen to the ground. Man comes....' And then we wake up and find ourselves at King's Cross.\*

Take another example. Written up opposite us in the railway carriage are

the words: 'Do not lean out of the window.' At the first reading the useful meaning, the surface meaning, is conveyed; but soon, as we sit looking at the words, they shuffle, they change; and we begin saying, 'Windows, yes windows—casements opening on the foam of perilous seas in faery lands forlorn.' And before we know what we are doing, we have leant out of the window; we are looking for Ruth in tears amid the alien corn.\* The penalty for that is twenty pounds or a broken neck.

This proves, if it needs proving, how very little natural gift words have for being useful. If we insist on forcing them against their nature to be useful, we see to our cost how they mislead us, how they fool us, how they land us a crack on the head. We have been so often fooled in this way by words, they have so often proved that they hate being useful, that it is their nature not to express one simple statement but a thousand possibilities—they have done this so often that at last, happily, we are beginning to face the fact. We are beginning to invent another language—a language perfectly and beautifully adapted to express useful statements, a language of signs. There is one great living master of this language to whom we are all indebted, that anonymous writer—whether man, woman or disembodied spirit nobody knows—who describes hotels in the *Michelin Guide*. He wants to tell us that one hotel is moderate, another good, and a third the best in the place. How does he do it? Not with words; words would at once bring into being shrubberies and billiard tables, men and women, the moon rising and the long splash of the summer sea—all good things, but all here beside the point. He sticks to signs; one gable; two gables; three gables. That is all he says and all he needs to say. Baedeker\* carries the sign language still further into the sublime realms of art. When he wishes to say that a picture is good, he uses one star; if very good, two stars; when, in his opinion, it is a work of transcendent genius, three black stars shine on the page, and that is all. So with a handful of stars and daggers the whole of art criticism, the whole of literary criticism could be reduced to the size of a sixpenny bit—there are moments when one could wish it. But this suggests that in time to come writers will have two languages at their service; one for fact, one for fiction. When the biographer has to convey a useful and necessary fact, as, for example, that Oliver Smith went to college and took a third in the year 1892, he will say so with a hollow O on top of the figure five. When the novelist is forced to inform us that John rang the bell; after a pause the door was opened by a parlourmaid who said, 'Mrs Jones is not at home,' he will to our great gain and his own comfort convey

that repulsive statement not in words, but in signs—say, a capital H on top of the figure three. Thus we may look forward to the day when our biographies and novels will be slim and muscular; and a railway company that says: ‘Do not lean out of the window’ in words will be fined a penalty not exceeding five pounds for the improper use of language.

Words, then, are not useful. Let us now enquire into their other quality, their positive quality, that is, their power to tell the truth. According once more to the dictionary there are at least three kinds of truth: God’s or gospel truth; literary truth; and home truth (generally unflattering). But to consider each separately would take too long. Let us then simplify and assert that since the only test of truth is length of life, and since words survive the chops and changes of time longer than any other substance, therefore they are the truest. Buildings fall; even the earth perishes. What was yesterday a cornfield is today a bungalow. But words, if properly used, seem able to live for ever. What, then, we may ask next, is the proper use of words? Not, so we have said, to make a useful statement; for a useful statement is a statement that can mean only one thing. And it is the nature of words to mean many things. Take the simple sentence ‘Passing Russell Square.’ That proved useless because besides the surface meaning it contained so many sunken meanings. The word ‘passing’ suggested the transiency of things, the passing of time and the changes of human life. Then the word ‘Russell’ suggested the rustling of leaves and the skirt on a polished floor; also the ducal house of Bedford\* and half the history of England. Finally the word ‘Square’ brings in the sight, the shape of an actual square combined with some visual suggestion of the stark angularity of stucco. Thus one sentence of the simplest kind rouses the imagination, the memory, the eye and the ear—all combine in reading it.

But they combine—they combine unconsciously together. The moment we single out and emphasise the suggestions as we have done here they become unreal; and we, too, become unreal—specialists, word mongers, phrase finders, not readers. In reading we have to allow the sunken meanings to remain sunken, suggested, not stated; lapsing and flowing into each other like reeds on the bed of a river. But the words in that sentence—Passing Russell Square—are of course very rudimentary words. They show no trace of the strange, of the diabolical power which words possess when they are not tapped out by a typewriter but come fresh from a human brain—the power that is to suggest the writer; his character, his appearance, his wife, his family, his house—even the cat on the hearthrug. Why words do this, how

they do it, how to prevent them from doing it nobody knows. They do it without the writer's will; often against his will. No writer presumably wishes to impose his own miserable character, his own private secrets and vices upon the reader. But has any writer, who is not a typewriter, succeeded in being wholly impersonal? Always, inevitably, we know them as well as their books. Such is the suggestive power of words that they will often make a bad book into a very lovable human being, and a good book into a man whom we can hardly tolerate in the room. Even words that are hundreds of years old have this power; when they are new they have it so strongly that they deafen us to the writer's meaning—it is them we see, them we hear. That is one reason why our judgments of living writers are so wildly erratic. Only after the writer is dead do his words to some extent become disinfected, purified of the accidents of the living body.

Now, this power of suggestion is one of the most mysterious properties of words. Everyone who has ever written a sentence must be conscious or half-conscious of it. Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations—naturally. They have been out and about, on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries. And that is one of the chief difficulties in writing them today—that they are so stored with meanings, with memories, that they have contracted so many famous marriages. The splendid word 'incarnadine,' for example—who can use it without remembering also 'multitudinous seas'?\* In the old days, of course, when English was a new language, writers could invent new words and use them. Nowadays it is easy enough to invent new words—they spring to the lips whenever we see a new sight or feel a new sensation—but we cannot use them because the language is old. You cannot use a brand new word in an old language because of the very obvious yet mysterious fact that a word is not a single and separate entity, but part of other words. It is not a word indeed until it is part of a sentence. Words belong to each other, although, of course, only a great writer knows that the word 'incarnadine' belongs to 'multitudinous seas.' To combine new words with old words is fatal to the constitution of the sentence. In order to use new words properly you would have to invent a new language; and that, though no doubt we shall come to it, is not at the moment our business. Our business is to see what we can do with the English language as it is. How can we combine the old words in new orders so that they survive, so that they create beauty, so that they tell the truth? That is the question.



And the person who could answer that question would deserve whatever crown of glory the world has to offer. Think what it would mean if you could teach, if you could learn, the art of writing. Why, every book, every newspaper would tell the truth, would create beauty. But there is, it would appear, some obstacle in the way, some hindrance to the teaching of words. For though at this moment at least a hundred professors are lecturing upon the literature of the past, at least a thousand critics are reviewing the literature of the present, and hundreds upon hundreds of young men and women are passing examinations in English literature with the utmost credit, still—do we write better, do we read better than we read and wrote four hundred years ago when we were unlectured, uncriticized, untaught? Is our Georgian literature a patch on the Elizabethan? Where then are we to lay the blame? Not on our professors; not on our reviewers; not on our writers; but on words. It is words that are to blame. They are the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things. Of course, you can catch them and sort them and place them in alphabetical order in dictionaries. But words do not live in dictionaries; they live in the mind. If you want proof of this, consider how often in moments of emotion when we most need words we find none. Yet there is the dictionary; there at our disposal are some half-a-million words all in alphabetical order. But can we use them? No, because words do not live in dictionaries, they live in the mind. Look again at the dictionary. There beyond a doubt lie plays more splendid than *Antony and Cleopatra*;\* poems more lovely than the ‘Ode to a Nightingale’; novels beside which *Pride and Prejudice* or *David Copperfield* are the crude bunglings of amateurs. It is only a question of finding the right words and putting them in the right order. But we cannot do it because they do not live in dictionaries; they live in the mind. And how do they live in the mind? Various and strangely, much as human beings live, by ranging hither and thither, by falling in love, and mating together. It is true that they are much less bound by ceremony and convention than we are. Royal words mate with commoners. English words marry French words, German words, Indian words, Negro words, if they have a fancy. Indeed, the less we enquire into the past of our dear Mother English the better it will be for that lady’s reputation. For she has gone a-roving, a-roving fair maid.\*

Thus to lay down any laws for such irreclaimable vagabonds is worse than useless. A few trifling rules of grammar and spelling are all the constraint we can put on them. All we can say about them, as we peer at them over the edge



of that deep, dark and only fitfully illuminated cavern in which they live—the mind—all we can say about them is that they seem to like people to think and to feel before they use them, but to think and to feel not about them, but about something different. They are highly sensitive, easily made self-conscious. They do not like to have their purity or their impurity discussed. If you start a Society for Pure English,\* they will show their resentment by starting another for impure English—hence the unnatural violence of much modern speech; it is a protest against the puritans. They are highly democratic, too; they believe that one word is as good as another; uneducated words are as good as educated words, uncultivated words as cultivated words, there are no ranks or titles in their society. Nor do they like being lifted out on the point of a pen and examined separately. They hang together, in sentences, in paragraphs, sometimes for whole pages at a time. They hate being useful; they hate making money; they hate being lectured about in public. In short, they hate anything that stamps them with one meaning or confines them to one attitude, for it is their nature to change.

Perhaps that is their most striking peculiarity—their need of change. It is because the truth they try to catch is many-sided, and they convey it by being themselves many-sided, flashing this way, then that. Thus they mean one thing to one person, another thing to another person; they are unintelligible to one generation, plain as a pikestaff to the next. And it is because of this complexity that they survive. Perhaps then one reason why we have no great poet, novelist or critic writing today is that we refuse words their liberty. We pin them down to one meaning, their useful meaning, the meaning which makes us catch the train, the meaning which makes us pass the examination. And when words are pinned down they fold their wings and die. Finally, and most emphatically, words, like ourselves, in order to live at their ease, need privacy. Undoubtedly they like us to think, and they like us to feel, before we use them; but they also like us to pause; to become unconscious. Our unconsciousness is their privacy; our darkness is their light.... That pause was made, that veil of darkness was dropped, to tempt words to come together in one of those swift marriages which are perfect images and create everlasting beauty. But no—nothing of that sort is going to happen tonight. The little wretches are out of temper; disobliging; disobedient; dumb. What is it that they are muttering? ‘Time’s up! Silence!’

# **LIFE-WRITING**

## THE NEW BIOGRAPHY

‘THE aim of biography,’ said Sir Sidney Lee, who had perhaps read and written more lives than any man of his time, ‘is the truthful transmission of personality,’\* and no single sentence could more neatly split up into two parts the whole problem of biography as it presents itself to us today. On the one hand there is truth; on the other, there is personality. And if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it.

For the truth of which Sir Sidney speaks, the truth which biography demands, is truth in its hardest, most obdurate form; it is truth as truth is to be found in the British Museum; it is truth out of which all vapour of falsehood has been pressed by the weight of research. Only when truth had been thus established did Sir Sidney Lee use it in the building of his monument; and no one can be so foolish as to deny that the piles he raised of such hard facts, whether one is called Shakespeare or another King Edward the Seventh,\* are worthy of all our respect. For there is a virtue in truth; it has an almost mystic power. Like radium, it seems able to give off for ever and ever grains of energy, atoms of light. It stimulates the mind, which is endowed with a curious susceptibility in this direction as no fiction, however artful or highly coloured can stimulate it. Truth being thus efficacious and supreme, we can only explain the fact that Sir Sidney’s life of Shakespeare is dull, and that his life of Edward the Seventh is unreadable, by supposing that though both are stuffed with truth, he failed to choose those truths which transmit personality. For in order that the light of personality may shine through, facts must be manipulated; some must be brightened; others shaded; yet, in the process, they must never lose their integrity. And it is obvious that it is easier to obey these precepts by considering that the true life of your subject shows itself in action which is evident rather than in that inner life of thought and emotion which meanders darkly and obscurely through the hidden channels of the

soul. Hence, in the old days, the biographer chose the easier path. A life, even when it was lived by a divine, was a series of exploits. The biographer, whether he was Izaak Walton or Mrs Hutchinson\* or that unknown writer who is often so surprisingly eloquent on tombstones and memorial tablets, told a tale of battle and victory. With their stately phrasing and their deliberate, artistic purpose, such records transmit personality with a formal sincerity which is perfectly satisfactory of its kind. And so, perhaps, biography might have pursued its way, draping the robes decorously over the recumbent figures of the dead, had there not arisen toward the end of the eighteenth century one of those curious men of genius who seem able to break up the stiffness into which the company has fallen by speaking in his natural voice. So Boswell spoke. So we hear booming out from Boswell's page the voice of Samuel Johnson. 'No, sir; stark insensibility,'\* we hear him say. Once we have heard those words we are aware that there is an incalculable presence among us which will go on ringing and reverberating in widening circles however times may change and ourselves. All the draperies and decencies of biography fall to the ground. We can no longer maintain that life consists in actions only or in works. It consists in personality. Something has been liberated beside which all else seems cold and colourless. We are freed from a servitude which is now seen to be intolerable. No longer need we pass solemnly and stiffly from camp to council chamber. We may sit, even with the great and good, over the table and talk.

Through the influence of Boswell, presumably, biography all through the nineteenth century concerned itself as much with the lives of the sedentary as with the lives of the active. It sought painstakingly and devotedly to express not only the outer life of work and activity but the inner life of emotion and thought. The uneventful lives of poets and painters were written out as lengthily as the lives of soldiers and statesmen. But the Victorian biography was a parti-coloured, hybrid, monstrous birth. For though truth of fact was observed as scrupulously as Boswell observed it, the personality which Boswell's genius set free was hampered and distorted. The convention which Boswell had destroyed settled again, only in a different form, upon biographers who lacked his art. Where the Mrs Hutchinsons and the Izaak Waltons had wished to prove that their heroes were prodigies of courage and learning the Victorian biographer was dominated by the idea of goodness. Noble, upright, chaste, severe; it is thus that the Victorian worthies are presented to us. The figure is almost always above life size in top hat and

frock coat, and the manner of presentation becomes increasingly clumsy and laborious. For lives which no longer express themselves in action take shape in innumerable words. The conscientious biographer may not tell a fine tale with a flourish, but must toil through endless labyrinths and embarrass himself with countless documents. In the end he produces an amorphous mass, a life of Tennyson or of Gladstone,\* in which we go seeking disconsolately for voice or laughter, for curse or anger, for any trace that this fossil was once a living man. Often, indeed, we bring back some invaluable trophy, for Victorian biographies are laden with truth; but always we rummage among them with a sense of the prodigious waste, of the artistic wrong-headedness of such a method.

With the twentieth century, however, a change came over biography, as it came over fiction and poetry. The first and most visible sign of it was in the difference of size. In the first twenty years of the new century biographies must have lost half their weight. Mr Strachey compressed four stout Victorians into one slim volume; M Maurois boiled the usual two volumes of a Shelley life into one little book the size of a novel.\* But the diminution of size was only the outward token of an inward change. The point of view had completely altered. If we open one of the new school of biographies its bareness, its emptiness makes us at once aware that the author's relation to his subject is different. He is no longer the serious and sympathetic companion, toiling even slavishly in the footsteps of his hero. Whether friend or enemy, admiring or critical, he is an equal. In any case, he preserves his freedom and his right to independent judgement. Moreover, he does not think himself constrained to follow every step of the way. Raised upon a little eminence which his independence has made for him, he sees his subject spread about him. He chooses; he synthesises; in short, he has ceased to be the chronicler; he has become an artist.

Few books illustrate the new attitude to biography better than *Some People*, by Harold Nicolson. In his biographies of Tennyson and of Byron\* Mr Nicolson followed the path which had been already trodden by Mr Strachey and others. Here he has taken a step on his own initiative. For here he has devised a method of writing about people and about himself as though they were at once real and imaginary. He has succeeded remarkably, if not entirely, in making the best of both worlds. *Some People* is not fiction because it has the substance, the reality of truth. It is not biography because it has the freedom, the artistry of fiction. And if we try to discover how he has

won the liberty which enables him to present us with these extremely amusing pages we must in the first place credit him with having had the courage to rid himself of a mountain of illusion. An English diplomat is offered all the bribes which usually induce people to swallow humbug in large doses with composure. If Mr Nicolson wrote about Lord Curzon it should have been solemnly. If he mentioned the Foreign Office it should have been respectfully. His tone toward the world of the Bognors and Whitehall should have been friendly but devout. But thanks to a number of influences and people, among whom one might mention Max Beerbohm and Voltaire,\* the attitude of the bribed and docile official has been blown to atoms. Mr Nicolson laughs. He laughs at Lord Curzon; he laughs at the Foreign Office; he laughs at himself. And since his laughter is the laughter of the intelligence it has the effect of making us take the people he laughs at seriously. The figure of Lord Curzon concealed behind the figure of a drunken valet is touched off with merriment and irreverence; yet of all the studies of Lord Curzon which have been written since his death none makes us think more kindly of that preposterous but, it appears, extremely human man.

So it would seem as if one of the great distinctions, one of the great advantages, of the new school to which Mr Nicolson belongs is the lack of pose, humbug, solemnity. They approach their bigwigs fearlessly. They have no fixed scheme of the universe, no standard of courage or morality to which they insist that he shall conform. The man himself is the supreme object of their curiosity. Further, and it is this chiefly which has so reduced the bulk of biography, they maintain that the man himself, the pith and essence of his character, shows itself to the observant eye in the tone of a voice, the turn of a head, some little phrase or anecdote picked up in passage. Thus in two subtle phrases, in one passage of brilliant description, whole chapters of the Victorian volume are synthesised and summed up. *Some People* is full of examples of this new phase of the biographer's art. Mr Nicolson wants to describe a governess and he tells us that she had a drop at the end of her nose and made him salute the quarterdeck. He wants to describe Lord Curzon, and he makes him lose his trousers and recite 'Tears, Idle Tears'.\* He does not cumber himself with a single fact about them. He waits till they have said or done something characteristic, and then he pounces on it with glee. But, though he waits with an intention of pouncing which might well make his victims uneasy if they guessed it, he lays suspicion by appearing himself in his own proper person in no flattering light. He has a scrubby dinner jacket,

he tells us; a pink bumptious face, curly hair and a curly nose. He is as much the subject of his own irony and observation as they are. He lies in wait for his own absurdities as artfully as for theirs. Indeed, by the end of the book we realise that the figure which has been most completely and most subtly displayed is that of the author. Each of the supposed subjects holds up in his or her small bright diminishing mirror a different reflection of Harold Nicolson. And though the figure thus revealed is not noble or impressive or shown in an heroic attitude, it is for these very reasons extremely like a real human being. It is thus, he would seem to say, in the mirrors of our friends that we chiefly live.

To have contrived this effect is a triumph not of skill only, but of those positive qualities which we are likely to treat as if they were negative—freedom from pose, from sentimentality, from illusion. And the victory is definite enough to leave us asking what territory it has won for the art of biography. Mr Nicolson has proved that one can use many of the devices of fiction in dealing with real life. He has shown that a little fiction mixed with fact can be made to transmit personality very effectively. But some objections or qualifications suggest themselves. Undoubtedly the figures in *Some People* are all rather below life size. The irony with which they are treated, though it has its tenderness, stunts their growth. It dreads nothing more than that one of these little beings should grow up and become serious or perhaps tragic. And, again, they never occupy the stage for more than a few brief moments. They do not want to be looked at very closely. They have not a great deal to show us. Mr Nicolson makes us feel, in short, that he is playing with very dangerous elements. An incautious movement and the book will be blown sky high. He is trying to mix the truth of real life and the truth of fiction. He can only do it by using no more than a pinch of either. For though both truths are genuine, they are antagonistic; let them meet and they destroy each other. Even here, where the imagination is not deeply engaged, when we find people whom we know to be real like Lord Oxford or Lady Colefax,\* mingling with Miss Plimsoll and Marstock, whose reality we doubt, the one casts suspicion upon the other. Let it be fact, one feels, or let it be fiction; the imagination will not serve under two masters simultaneously.

And here we again approach the difficulty which, for all his ingenuity, the biographer still has to face. Truth of fact and truth of fiction are incompatible; yet he is now more than ever urged to combine them. For it would seem that the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life; it dwells in the



personality rather than in the act. Each of us is more Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, than he is John Smith, of the Corn Exchange. Thus, the biographer's imagination is always being stimulated to use the novelist's art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect to expound the private life. Yet if he carries the use of fiction too far, so that he disregards the truth, or can only introduce it with incongruity, he loses both worlds; he has neither the freedom of fiction nor the substance of fact. Boswell's astonishing power over us is based largely upon his obstinate veracity, so that we have implicit belief in what he tells us. When Johnson says 'No, sir; stark insensibility,' the voice has a ring in it because we have been told, soberly and prosaically, a few pages earlier, that Johnson 'was entered a Commoner of Pembroke, on the 31st of October, 1728, being then in his nineteenth year'.\* We are in the world of brick and pavement; of birth, marriage and death; of Acts of Parliament; of Pitt and Burke and Sir Joshua Reynolds.\* Whether this is a more real world than the world of Bohemia and Hamlet and Macbeth we doubt, but the mixture of the two is abhorrent.

Be that as it may we can assure ourselves by a very simple experiment that the days of Victorian biography are over. Consider one's own life; pass under review a few years that one has actually lived. Conceive how Lord Morley\* would have expounded them; how Sir Sidney Lee would have documented them; how strangely all that has been most real in them would have slipped through their fingers. Nor can we name the biographer whose art is subtle and bold enough to present that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow. His method still remains to be discovered. But Mr Nicolson with his mixture of biography and autobiography, of fact and fiction, of Lord Curzon's trousers and Miss Plimsoll's nose, waves his hand airily in a possible direction.



## ON BEING ILL

CONSIDERING how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to view, what precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals, what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us by the act of sickness, how we go down into the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation close above our heads and wake thinking to find ourselves in the presence of the angels and the harpers when we have a tooth out and come to the surface in the dentist's arm-chair and confuse his 'Rinse the mouth—rinse the mouth' with the greeting of the Deity stooping from the floor of Heaven to welcome us—when we think of this, as we are so frequently forced to think of it, it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature. Novels, one would have thought, would have been devoted to influenza; epic poems to typhoid; odes to pneumonia; lyrics to toothache. But no; with a few exceptions—De Quincey attempted something of the sort in *The Opium Eater*; there must be a volume or two about disease scattered through the pages of Proust\*—literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null, and negligible and non-existent. On the contrary, the very opposite is true. All day, all night the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours, turns to wax in the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk of February. The creature within can only gaze through the pane—smudged or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body like the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea for a single instant; it must go through the whole unending procession of changes, heat and cold, comfort and discomfort, hunger and satisfaction, health and illness, until there comes the inevitable catastrophe; the body smashes itself to smithereens, and the soul (it is said) escapes. But of all this daily drama of the body there is no record. People write always of

the doings of the mind; the thoughts that come to it; its noble plans; how the mind has civilised the universe. They show it ignoring the body in the philosopher's turret; or kicking the body, like an old leather football, across leagues of snow and desert in the pursuit of conquest or discovery. Those great wars which the body wages with the mind a slave to it, in the solitude of the bedroom against the assault of fever or the oncome of melancholia, are neglected. Nor is the reason far to seek. To look these things squarely in the face would need the courage of a lion tamer; a robust philosophy; a reason rooted in the bowels of the earth. Short of these, this monster, the body, this miracle, its pain, will soon make us taper into mysticism, or rise, with rapid beats of the wings, into the raptures of transcendentalism. The public would say that a novel devoted to influenza lacked plot; they would complain that there was no love in it—wrongly however, for illness often takes on the disguise of love, and plays the same odd tricks. It invests certain faces with divinity, sets us to wait, hour after hour, with pricked ears for the creaking of a stair, and wreathes the faces of the absent (plain enough in health, Heaven knows) with a new significance, while the mind concocts a thousand legends and romances about them for which it has neither time nor taste in health. Finally, to hinder the description of illness in literature, there is the poverty of the language. English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear,\* has no words for the shiver and the headache. It has all grown one way. The merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry. There is nothing ready made for him. He is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other (as perhaps the people of Babel\* did in the beginning), so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out. Probably it will be something laughable. For who of English birth can take liberties with the language? To us it is a sacred thing and therefore doomed to die, unless the Americans, whose genius is so much happier in the making of new words than in the disposition of the old, will come to our help and set the springs aflo w. Yet it is not only a new language that we need, more primitive, more sensual, more obscene, but a new hierarchy of the passions; love must be deposed in favour of a temperature of 104; jealousy give place to the pangs of sciatica; sleeplessness play the part of villain, and the hero become a white liquid with a sweet taste—that mighty Prince with the moths' eyes and the feathered feet, one of

whose names is Chloral.\*

But to return to the invalid. 'I am in bed with influenza'—but what does that convey of the great experience; how the world has changed its shape; the tools of business grown remote; the sounds of festival become romantic like a merry-go-round heard across far fields; and friends have changed, some putting on a strange beauty, others deformed to the squatness of toads, while the whole landscape of life lies remote and fair, like the shore seen from a ship far out at sea, and he is now exalted on a peak and needs no help from man or God, and now grovels supine on the floor glad of a kick from a housemaid—the experience cannot be imparted and, as is always the way with these dumb things, his own suffering serves but to wake memories in his friends' minds of *their* influenzas, *their* aches and pains which went unwept last February, and now cry aloud, desperately, clamorously, for the divine relief of sympathy.

But sympathy we cannot have. Wisest Fate says no. If her children, weighted as they already are with sorrow, were to take on them that burden too, adding in imagination other pains to their own, buildings would cease to rise; roads would peter out into grassy tracks; there would be an end of music and of painting; one great sigh alone would rise to Heaven, and the only attitudes for men and women would be those of horror and despair. As it is, there is always some little distraction—an organ grinder at the corner of the hospital, a shop with book or trinket to decoy one past the prison or the workhouse, some absurdity of cat or dog to prevent one from turning the old beggar's hieroglyphic of misery into volumes of sordid suffering; and thus the vast effort of sympathy which those barracks of pain and discipline, those dried symbols of sorrow, ask us to exert on their behalf, is uneasily shuffled off for another time. Sympathy nowadays is dispensed chiefly by the laggards and failures, women for the most part (in whom the obsolete exists so strangely side by side with anarchy and newness), who, having dropped out of the race, have time to spend upon fantastic and unprofitable excursions; C.L. for example, who, sitting by the stale sickroom fire, builds up, with touches at once sober and imaginative, the nursery fender, the loaf, the lamp, barrel organs in the street, and all the simple old wives' tales of pinafores and escapades; A.R., the rash, the magnanimous, who, if you fancied a giant tortoise to solace you or a theorbo to cheer you, would ransack the markets of London and procure them somehow, wrapped in paper, before the end of the day; the frivolous K.T.,\* who, dressed in silks and feathers, powdered and

painted (which takes time too) as if for a banquet of Kings and Queens, spends her whole brightness in the gloom of the sickroom, and makes the medicine bottles ring and the flames shoot up with her gossip and her mimicry. But such follies have had their day; civilisation points to a different goal; and then what place will there be for the tortoise and the theorbo?

There is, let us confess it (and illness is the great confessional), a childish outspokenness in illness; things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals. About sympathy for example—we can do without it. That illusion of a world so shaped that it echoes every groan, of human beings so tied together by common needs and fears that a twitch at one wrist jerks another, where however strange your experience other people have had it too, where however far you travel in your own mind someone has been there before you—is all an illusion. We do not know our own souls, let alone the souls of others. Human beings do not go hand in hand the whole stretch of the way. There is a virgin forest in each; a snowfield where even the print of birds' feet is unknown. Here we go alone, and like it better so. Always to have sympathy, always to be accompanied, always to be understood would be intolerable. But in health the genial pretence must be kept up and the effort renewed—to communicate, to civilise, to share, to cultivate the desert, educate the native, to work together by day and by night to sport. In illness this make-believe ceases. Directly the bed is called for, or, sunk deep among pillows in one chair, we raise our feet even an inch above the ground on another, we cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright; we become deserters. They march to battle. We float with the sticks on the stream; helter-skelter with the dead leaves on the lawn, irresponsible and disinterested and able, perhaps for the first time for years, to look round, to look up—to look, for example, at the sky.

The first impression of that extraordinary spectacle is strangely overcoming. Ordinarily to look at the sky for any length of time is impossible. Pedestrians would be impeded and disconcerted by a public sky-gazer. What snatches we get of it are mutilated by chimneys and churches, serve as a background for man, signify wet weather or fine, daub windows gold, and, filling in the branches, complete the pathos of dishevelled autumnal plane trees in autumnal squares. Now, lying recumbent, staring straight up, the sky is discovered to be something so different from this that really it is a little shocking. This then has been going on all the time without our knowing it!—this incessant making up of shapes and casting them down,

this buffeting of clouds together, and drawing vast trains of ships and waggons from North to South, this incessant ringing up and down of curtains of light and shade, this interminable experiment with gold shafts and blue shadows, with veiling the sun and unveiling it, with making rock ramparts and wafting them away—this endless activity, with the waste of Heaven knows how many million horse power of energy, has been left to work its will year in year out. The fact seems to call for comment and indeed for censure. Ought not someone to write to *The Times*? Use should be made of it. One should not let this gigantic cinema play perpetually to an empty house. But watch a little longer and another emotion drowns the stirrings of civic ardour. Divinely beautiful it is also divinely heartless. Immeasurable resources are used for some purpose which has nothing to do with human pleasure or human profit. If we were all laid prone, stiff, still the sky would be experimenting with its blues and its golds. Perhaps then, if we look down at something very small and close and familiar, we shall find sympathy. Let us examine the rose. We have seen it so often flowering in bowls, connected it so often with beauty in its prime, that we have forgotten how it stands, still and steady, throughout an entire afternoon in the earth. It preserves a demeanour of perfect dignity and self-possession. The suffusion of its petals is of inimitable rightness. Now perhaps one deliberately falls; now all the flowers, the voluptuous purple, the creamy, in whose waxen flesh the spoon has left a swirl of cherry juice; gladioli; dahlias; lilies, sacerdotal, ecclesiastical; flowers with prim cardboard collars tinged apricot and amber, all gently incline their heads to the breeze—all, with the exception of the heavy sunflower, who proudly acknowledges the sun at midday and perhaps at midnight rebuffs the moon. There they stand; and it is of these, the stillest, the most self-sufficient of all things that human beings have made companions; these that symbolise their passions, decorate their festivals, and lie (as if *they* knew sorrow) upon the pillows of the dead. Wonderful to relate, poets have found religion in nature; people live in the country to learn virtue from plants. It is in their indifference that they are comforting. That snowfield of the mind, where man has not trodden, is visited by the cloud, kissed by the falling petal, as, in another sphere, it is the great artists, the Miltons and the Popes, who console not by their thought of us but by their forgetfulness.

Meanwhile, with the heroism of the ant or the bee, however indifferent the sky or disdainful the flowers, the army of the upright marches to battle. Mrs Jones catches her train. Mr Smith mends his motor. The cows are driven

home to be milked. Men thatch the roof. The dogs bark. The rooks, rising in a net, fall in a net upon the elm trees. The wave of life flings itself out indefatigably. It is only the recumbent who know what, after all, nature is at no pains to conceal—that she in the end will conquer; heat will leave the world; stiff with frost we shall cease to drag ourselves about the fields; ice will lie thick upon factory and engine; the sun will go out. Even so, when the whole earth is sheeted and slippery, some undulation, some irregularity of surface will mark the boundary of an ancient garden, and there, thrusting its head up undaunted in the starlight, the rose will flower, the crocus will burn. But with the hook of life still in us still we must wriggle. We cannot stiffen peaceably into glassy mounds. Even the recumbent spring up at the mere imagination of frost about the toes and stretch out to avail themselves of the universal hope—Heaven, Immortality. Surely, since men have been wishing all these ages, they will have wished something into existence; there will be some green isle for the mind to rest on even if the foot cannot plant itself there. The co-operative imagination of mankind must have drawn some firm outline. But no. One opens the *Morning Post* and reads the Bishop of Lichfield\* on Heaven. One watches the church-goers file into those gallant temples where, on the bleakest day, in the wettest fields, lamps will be burning, bells will be ringing, and however the autumn leaves may shuffle and the winds sigh outside, hopes and desires will be changed to beliefs and certainties within. Do they look serene? Are their eyes filled with the light of their supreme conviction? Would one of them dare leap straight into Heaven off Beachy Head?\* None but a simpleton would ask such questions; the little company of believers lags and drags and strays. The mother is worn; the father tired. As for imagining Heaven, they have no time. Heaven-making must be left to the imagination of the poets. Without their help we can but trifle—imagine Pepys\* in Heaven, adumbrate little interviews with celebrated people on tufts of thyme, soon fall into gossip about such of our friends as have stayed in Hell, or, worse still, revert again to earth and choose, since there is no harm in choosing, to live over and over, now as man, now as woman, as sea-captain, or court lady, as Emperor or farmer's wife, in splendid cities and on remote moors, at the time of Pericles or Arthur, Charlemagne, or George the Fourth\*—to live and live till we have lived out those embryo lives which attend about us in early youth until 'I' suppressed them. But 'I' shall not, if wishing can alter it, usurp Heaven too, and condemn us, who have played our parts here as William or Alice to

remain William or Alice for ever. Left to ourselves we speculate thus carnally. We need the poets to imagine for us. The duty of Heaven-making should be attached to the office of the Poet Laureate.

Indeed it is to the poets that we turn. Illness makes us disinclined for the long campaigns that prose exacts. We cannot command all our faculties and keep our reason and our judgement and our memory at attention while chapter swings on top of chapter, and, as one settles into place, we must be on the watch for the coming of the next, until the whole structure—arches, towers, and battlements—stands firm on its foundations. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is not the book for influenza, nor *The Golden Bowl*\* nor *Madame Bovary*. On the other hand, with responsibility shelved and reason in the abeyance—for who is going to exact criticism from an invalid or sound sense from the bed-ridden?—other tastes assert themselves; sudden, fitful, intense. We rifle the poets of their flowers. We break off a line or two and let them open in the depths of the mind:

and oft at eve  
Visits the herds along the twilight meadows\*

wandering in thick flocks along the mountains  
Shepherded by the slow unwilling wind.\*

Or there is a whole three volume novel to be mused over in a verse of Hardy's or a sentence of La Bruyère.\* We dip in Lamb's Letters—some prose writers are to be read as poets—and find 'I am a sanguinary murderer of time, and would kill him inchmeal just now. But the snake is vital' and who shall explain the delight? or open Rimbaud and read

O saisons o châteaux  
Quelle âme est sans défauts?\*

and who shall rationalise the charm? In illness words seem to possess a mystic quality. We grasp what is beyond their surface meaning, gather instinctively this, that, and the other—a sound, a colour, here a stress, there a pause—which the poet, knowing words to be meagre in comparison with ideas, has strewn about his page to evoke, when collected, a state of mind which neither words can express nor the reason explain. Incomprehensibility has an enormous power over us in illness, more legitimately perhaps than the upright will allow. In health meaning has encroached upon sound. Our



intelligence domineers over our senses. But in illness, with the police off duty, we creep beneath some obscure poem by Mallarmé\* or Donne, some phrase in Latin or Greek, and the words give out their scent and distil their flavour, and then, if at last we grasp the meaning, it is all the richer for having come to us sensually first, by way of the palate and the nostrils, like some queer odour. Foreigners, to whom the tongue is strange, have us at a disadvantage. The Chinese must know the sound of *Antony and Cleopatra* better than we do.

Rashness is one of the properties of illness—outlaws that we are—and it is rashness that we need in reading Shakespeare. It is not that we should doze in reading him, but that, fully conscious and aware, his fame intimidates and bores, and all the views of all the critics dull in us that thunder clap of conviction which, if an illusion, is still so helpful an illusion, so prodigious a pleasure, so keen a stimulus in reading the great. Shakespeare is getting flyblown; a paternal government might well forbid writing about him, as they put his monument at Stratford beyond the reach of scribbling fingers. With all this buzz of criticism about, one may hazard one's conjectures privately, make one's notes in the margin; but, knowing that someone has said it before, or said it better, the zest is gone. Illness, in its kingly sublimity, sweeps all that aside and leaves nothing but Shakespeare and oneself. What with his overweening power and our overweening arrogance, the barriers go down, the knots run smooth, the brain rings and resounds with *Lear* or *Macbeth*, and even Coleridge himself squeaks like a distant mouse.

But enough of Shakespeare—let us turn to Augustus Hare. There are people who say that even illness does not warrant these transitions; that the author of *The Story of Two Noble Lives* is not the peer of Boswell; and if we assert that short of the best in literature we like the worst—it is mediocrity that is hateful—will have none of that either. So be it. The law is on the side of the normal. But for those who suffer a slight rise of temperature the names of Hare and Waterford and Canning\* ray out as beams of benignant lustre. Not, it is true, for the first hundred pages or so. There, as so often in these fat volumes, we flounder and threaten to sink in a plethora of aunts and uncles. We have to remind ourselves that there is such a thing as atmosphere; that the masters themselves often keep us waiting intolerably while they prepare our minds for whatever it may be—the surprise, or the lack of surprise. So Hare, too, takes his time; the charm steals upon us imperceptibly; by degrees we become almost one of the family, yet not quite, for our sense of the oddity of



it all remains,\* and share the family dismay when Lord Stuart leaves the room—there was a ball going forward—and is next heard of in Iceland. Parties, he said, bored him—such were English aristocrats before marriage with intellect had adulterated the fine singularity of their minds. Parties bore them; they are off to Iceland. Then Beckford's mania for castle building\* attacked him; he must lift a French *château* across the Channel, and erect pinnacles and towers to use as servants' bedrooms at vast expense, upon the borders of a crumbling cliff, too, so that the housemaids saw their brooms swimming down the Solent,\* and Lady Stuart was much distressed, but made the best of it and began, like the high-born lady that she was, planting evergreens in the face of ruin. Meanwhile the daughters, Charlotte and Louisa, grew up in their incomparable loveliness, with pencils in their hands, for ever sketching, dancing, flirting, in a cloud of gauze. They are not very distinct it is true. For life then was not the life of Charlotte and Louisa. It was the life of families, of groups. It was a web, a net, spreading wide and enmeshing every sort of cousin, dependant, and old retainer. Aunts—Aunt Caledon, Aunt Mexborough—grandmothers—Granny Stuart, Granny Hardwicke—cluster in chorus, and rejoice and sorrow and eat Christmas dinner together, and grow very old and remain very upright, and sit in hooded chairs cutting flowers it seems out of coloured paper. Charlotte married Canning and went to India; Louisa married Lord Waterford and went to Ireland. Then letters begin to cross vast spaces in slow sailing ships and communication becomes still more protracted and verbose, and there seems no end to the space and the leisure of those early Victorian days, and faiths are lost and the life of Hedley Vicars revives them; aunts catch cold but recover; cousins marry; there are the Irish famine and the Indian Mutiny,\* and both sisters remain to their great, but silent, grief without children to come after them. Louisa, dumped down in Ireland with Lord Waterford at the hunt all day, was often very lonely; but she stuck to her post, visited the poor, spoke words of comfort ('I am sorry indeed to hear of Anthony Thompson's loss of mind, or rather of memory; if, however, he can understand sufficiently to trust solely in our Saviour, he has enough') and sketched and sketched. Thousands of notebooks were filled with pen and ink drawings of an evening, and then the carpenter stretched sheets for her and she designed frescoes for schoolrooms, had live sheep into her bedroom, draped gamekeepers in blankets, painted Holy Families in abundance, until the great Watts\* exclaimed that here was Titian's peer and Raphael's master! At that Lady

Waterford laughed (she had a generous, benignant sense of humour); and said that she was nothing but a sketcher; had scarcely had a lesson in her life—witness her angel's wings scandalously unfinished. Moreover, there was her father's house forever falling into the sea; she must shore it up; must entertain her friends; must fill her days with all sorts of charities, till her Lord came home from hunting, and then, at midnight often, she would sketch him with his knightly face half hidden in a bowl of soup, sitting with her sketch-book under a lamp beside him. Off he would ride again, stately as a crusader, to hunt the fox, and she would wave to him and think each time, what if this should be the last? And so it was, that winter's morning; his horse stumbled; he was killed. She knew it before they told her, and never could Sir John Leslie forget, when he ran downstairs on the day of the burial, the beauty of the great lady standing to see the hearse depart, nor, when he came back, how the curtain, heavy, mid-Victorian, plush perhaps, was all crushed together where she had grasped it in her agony.

## LESLIE STEPHEN

By the time that his children were growing up the great days of my father's life were over. His feats on the river and on the mountains had been won before they were born. Relics of them were to be found lying about the house—the silver cup on the study mantelpiece; the rusty alpenstocks that leant against the bookcase in the corner; and to the end of his days he would speak of great climbers and explorers with a peculiar mixture of admiration and envy. But his own years of activity were over, and my father had to content himself with pottering about the Swiss valleys or taking a stroll across the Cornish moors.\*

That to potter and to stroll meant more on his lips than on other people's is becoming obvious now that some of his friends have given their own version of those expeditions. He would start off after breakfast alone, or with one companion. Shortly before dinner he would return. If the walk had been successful, he would have out his great map and commemorate a new short-cut in red ink. And he was quite capable, it appears, of striding all day across the moors without speaking more than a word or two to his companion. By that time, too, he had written the *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, which is said by some to be his masterpiece; and the *Science of Ethics*—the book which interested him most; and *The Playground of Europe*, in which is to be found 'The Sunset on Mont Blanc'—in his opinion the best thing he ever wrote.\*

He still wrote daily and methodically, though never for long at a time. In London he wrote in the large room with three long windows at the top of the house. He wrote lying almost recumbent in a low rocking chair which he tipped to and fro as he wrote, like a cradle, and as he wrote he smoked a short clay pipe, and he scattered books round him in a circle. The thud of a book dropped on the floor could be heard in the room beneath. And often as he mounted the stairs to his study with his firm, regular tread he would burst, not into song, for he was entirely unmusical, but into a strange rhythmical chant, for verse of all kinds, both 'utter trash', as he called it, and the most sublime words of Milton and Wordsworth, stuck in his memory, and the act of

walking or climbing seemed to inspire him to recite whichever it was that came uppermost or suited his mood.\*

But it was his dexterity with his fingers that delighted his children before they could potter along the lanes at his heels or read his books. He would twist a sheet of paper beneath a pair of scissors and out would drop an elephant, a stag, or a monkey with trunks, horns, and tails delicately and exactly formed. Or, taking a pencil, he would draw beast after beast—an art that he practised almost unconsciously as he read, so that the fly-leaves of his books swarm with owls and donkeys as if to illustrate the ‘Oh, you ass!’ or ‘Conceited dunce’, that he was wont to scribble impatiently in the margin. Such brief comments, in which one may find the germ of the more temperate statements of his essays, recall some of the characteristics of his talk. He could be very silent, as his friends have testified. But his remarks, made suddenly in a low voice between the puffs of his pipe, were extremely effective. Sometimes with one word—but his one word was accompanied by a gesture of the hand—he would dispose of the tissue of exaggerations which his own sobriety seemed to provoke. ‘There are 40,000,000 unmarried women in London alone!’ Lady Ritchie\* once informed him. ‘Oh, Annie, Annie!’ my father exclaimed in tones of horrified but affectionate rebuke. But Lady Ritchie, as if she enjoyed being rebuked, would pile it up even higher next time she came.

The stories he told to amuse his children of adventures in the Alps—but accidents only happened, he would explain, if you were so foolish as to disobey your guides—or of those long walks, after one of which, from Cambridge to London on a hot day, ‘I drank, I am sorry to say, rather more than was good for me,’ were told very briefly, but with a curious power to impress the scene. The things that he did not say were always there in the background. So, too, though he seldom told anecdotes, and his memory for facts was bad, when he described a person—and he had known many people, both famous and obscure—he would convey exactly what he thought of him in two or three words. And what he thought might be the opposite of what other people thought. He had a way of upsetting established reputations and disregarding conventional values that could be disconcerting, and sometimes perhaps wounding, though no one was more respectful of any feeling that seemed to him genuine. But when, suddenly opening his bright blue eyes, and rousing himself from what had seemed complete abstraction, he gave his opinion, it was difficult to disregard it. It was a habit, especially when

deafness made him unaware that this opinion could be heard, that had its inconveniences.

‘I am the most easily bored of men’,\* he wrote, truthfully as usual: and when, as was inevitable in a large family, some visitor threatened to stay not merely for tea but also for dinner, my father would express his anguish at first by twisting and untwisting a certain lock of hair. Then he would burst out, half to himself, half to the powers above, but quite audibly, ‘Why can’t he go? Why can’t he go?’ Yet such is the charm of simplicity—and did he not say, also truthfully, that ‘bores are the salt of the earth’?—that the bores seldom went, or, if they did, forgave him and came again.

Too much, perhaps, has been said of his silence; too much stress has been laid upon his reserve. He loved clear thinking, he hated sentimentality and gush; but this by no means meant that he was cold and unemotional, perpetually critical and condemnatory in daily life. On the contrary, it was his power of feeling strongly and of expressing his feeling with vigour that made him sometimes so alarming as a companion. A lady, for instance, complained of the wet summer that was spoiling her tour in Cornwall. But to my father, though he never called himself a democrat, the rain meant that the corn was being laid; some poor man was being ruined; and the energy with which he expressed his sympathy—not with the lady—left her discomfited. He had something of the same respect for farmers and fishermen that he had for climbers and explorers. So, too, he talked little of patriotism, but during the South African War\*—and all wars were hateful to him—he lay awake thinking that he heard the guns on the battlefield. Again, neither his reason nor his cold common sense helped to convince him that a child could be late for dinner without having been maimed or killed in an accident. And not all his mathematics together with a bank balance which he insisted must be ample in the extreme, could persuade him, when it came to signing a cheque, that the whole family was not ‘shooting Niagara to ruin’, as he put it. The pictures that he would draw of old age and the Bankruptcy Court, of ruined men of letters who have to support large families in small houses at Wimbledon (he owned a very small house at Wimbledon) might have convinced those who complain of his understatements that hyperbole was well within his reach had he chosen.

Yet the unreasonable mood was superficial, as the rapidity with which it vanished would prove. The cheque-book was shut; Wimbledon and the workhouse were forgotten. Some thought of a humorous kind made him

chuckle. Taking his hat and his stick, calling for his dog and his daughter, he would stride off into Kensington Gardens, where he had walked as a little boy, where his brother Fitzjames and he had made beautiful bows to young Queen Victoria and she had swept them a curtsy, and so, round the Serpentine, to Hyde Park Corner, where he had once saluted the great Duke himself;\* and so home. He was not then in the least 'alarming'; he was very simple, very confiding; and his silence, though one might last unbroken from the Round Pond to the Marble Arch, was curiously full of meaning, as if he were thinking half aloud, about poetry and philosophy and people he had known.

He himself was the most abstemious of men. He smoked a pipe perpetually, but never a cigar. He wore his clothes until they were too shabby to be tolerable; and he held old-fashioned and rather puritanical views as to the vice of luxury and the sin of idleness. The relations between parents and children today have a freedom that would have been impossible with my father. He expected a certain standard of behaviour, even of ceremony, in family life. Yet if freedom means the right to think one's own thoughts and to follow one's own pursuits, then no one respected and indeed insisted upon freedom more completely than he did. His sons, with the exception of the Army and Navy, should follow whatever professions they chose; his daughters, though he cared little enough for the higher education of women, should have the same liberty. If at one moment he rebuked a daughter sharply for smoking a cigarette—smoking was not in his opinion a nice habit in the other sex—she had only to ask him if she might become a painter, and he assured her that so long as she took her work seriously he would give her all the help he could. He had no special love for painting; but he kept his word.\* Freedom of that sort was worth thousands of cigarettes.

It was the same with the perhaps more difficult problem of literature. Even today there may be parents who would doubt the wisdom of allowing a girl of fifteen the free run of a large and quite unexpurgated library. But my father allowed it. There were certain facts—very briefly, very shyly he referred to them. Yet 'Read what you like,' he said, and all his books, 'mangy and worthless', as he called them, but certainly they were many and various, were to be had without asking. To read what one liked because one liked it, never to pretend to admire what one did not—that was his only lesson in the art of reading. To write in the fewest possible words, as clearly as possible, exactly what one meant—that was his only lesson in the art of writing. All the rest

must be learnt for oneself. Yet a child must have been childish in the extreme not to feel that such was the teaching of a man of great learning and wide experience, though he would never impose his own views or parade his own knowledge. For, as his tailor remarked when he saw my father walk past his shop up Bond Street, 'There goes a gentleman that wears good clothes without knowing it.'

In those last years, grown solitary and very deaf, he would sometimes call himself a failure as a writer; he had been 'jack of all trades, and master of none'.\* But whether he failed or succeeded as a writer, it is permissible to believe that he left a distinct impression of himself on the minds of his friends. Meredith saw him as 'Phoebus Apollo turned fasting friar' in his earlier days; Thomas Hardy, years later, looked at the 'spare and desolate figure' of the Schreckhorn and thought of

him,  
Who scaled its horn with ventured life and limb,  
Drawn on by vague imaginings, maybe,  
Of semblance to his personality  
In its quaint glooms, keen lights, and rugged trim.

But the praise he would have valued most, for though he was an agnostic nobody believed more profoundly in the worth of human relationships, was Meredith's tribute after his death: 'He was the one man to my knowledge worthy to have married your mother.' And Lowell,\* when he called him 'L.S., the most lovable of men', has best described the quality that makes him, after all these years, unforgettable.

# THE ART OF BIOGRAPHY

## I

THE art of biography, we say—but at once go on to ask, Is biography an art? The question is foolish perhaps, and ungenerous certainly, considering the keen pleasure that biographers have given us. But the question asks itself so often that there must be something behind it. There it is, whenever a new biography is opened, casting its shadow on the page; and there would seem to be something deadly in that shadow, for after all, of the multitude of lives that are written, how few survive!

But the reason for this high death rate, the biographer might argue, is that biography, compared with the arts of poetry and fiction, is a young art. Interest in our selves and in other people's selves is a late development of the human mind. Not until the eighteenth century in England did that curiosity express itself in writing the lives of private people. Only in the nineteenth century was biography fully grown and hugely prolific. If it is true that there have been only three great biographers—Johnson, Boswell, and Lockhart\*—the reason, he argues, is that the time was short; and his plea, that the art of biography has had but little time to establish itself and develop itself, is certainly borne out by the textbooks. Tempting as it is to explore the reason—why, that is, the self that writes a book of prose came into being so many centuries after the self that writes a poem, why Chaucer preceded Henry James—it is better to leave that insoluble question unasked, and so pass to his next reason for the lack of masterpieces. It is that the art of biography is the most restricted of all the arts. He has his proof ready to hand. Here it is in the preface in which Smith, who has written the life of Jones, takes this opportunity of thanking old friends who have lent letters, and 'last but not least' Mrs Jones, the widow, for that help 'without which,' as he puts it, 'this biography could not have been written.' Now the novelist, he points out, simply says in his foreword, 'Every character in this book is fictitious.' The novelist is free; the biographer is tied.

There, perhaps, we come within hailing distance of that very difficult,



again perhaps insoluble, question: What do we mean by calling a book a work of art? At any rate, here is a distinction between biography and fiction—a proof that they differ in the very stuff of which they are made. One is made with the help of friends, of facts; the other is created without any restrictions save those that the artist, for reasons that seem good to him, chooses to obey. That is a distinction; and there is good reason to think that in the past biographers have found it not only a distinction but a very cruel distinction.

The widow and the friends were hard taskmasters. Suppose, for example, that the man of genius was immoral, ill-tempered, and threw the boots at the maid's head. The widow would say, 'Still I loved him—he was the father of my children; and the public, who love his books, must on no account be disillusioned. Cover up; omit.' The biographer obeyed. And thus the majority of Victorian biographies are like the wax figures now preserved in Westminster Abbey, that were carried in funeral processions through the street—effigies that have only a smooth superficial likeness to the body in the coffin.

Then, towards the end of the nineteenth century, there was a change. Again for reasons not easy to discover, widows became broader-minded, the public keener-sighted; the effigy no longer carried conviction or satisfied curiosity. The biographer certainly won a measure of freedom. At least he could hint that there were scars and furrows on the dead man's face. Froude's Carlyle is by no means a wax mask painted rosy red. And following Froude there was Sir Edmund Gosse, who dared to say that his own father was a fallible human being.\* And following Edmund Gosse in the early years of the present century came Lytton Strachey.

## II

The figure of Lytton Strachey is so important a figure in the history of biography, that it compels a pause. For his three famous books, *Eminent Victorians*, *Queen Victoria*, and *Elizabeth and Essex*,\* are of a stature to show both what biography can do and what biography cannot do. Thus they suggest many possible answers to the question whether biography is an art, and if not why it fails.

Lytton Strachey came to birth as an author at a lucky moment. In 1918, when he made his first attempt, biography, with its new liberties, was a form

that offered great attractions. To a writer like himself, who had wished to write poetry or plays but was doubtful of his creative power, biography seemed to offer a promising alternative. For at last it was possible to tell the truth about the dead; and the Victorian age was rich in remarkable figures many of whom had been grossly deformed by the effigies that had been plastered over them. To recreate them, to show them as they really were, was a task that called for gifts analogous to the poet's or the novelist's, yet did not ask that inventive power in which he found himself lacking.

It was well worth trying. And the anger and the interest that his short studies of Eminent Victorians aroused showed that he was able to make Manning, Florence Nightingale, Gordon, and the rest live as they had not lived since they were actually in the flesh. Once more they were the centre of a buzz of discussion. Did Gordon really drink, or was that an invention? Had Florence Nightingale received the Order of Merit in her bedroom or in her sitting-room? He stirred the public, even though a European war was raging, to an astonishing interest in such minute matters. Anger and laughter mixed; and editions multiplied.

But these were short studies with something of the over-emphasis and the foreshortening of caricatures. In the lives of the two great Queens, Elizabeth and Victoria, he attempted a far more ambitious task. Biography had never had a fairer chance of showing what it could do. For it was now being put to the test by a writer who was capable of making use of all the liberties that biography had won: he was fearless; he had proved his brilliance; and he had learned his job. The result throws great light upon the nature of biography. For who can doubt after reading the two books again, one after the other, that the *Victoria* is a triumphant success, and that the *Elizabeth* by comparison is a failure? But it seems too, as we compare them, that it was not Lytton Strachey who failed; it was the art of biography. In the *Victoria* he treated biography as a craft; he submitted to its limitations. In the *Elizabeth* he treated biography as an art; he flouted its limitations.

But we must go on to ask how we have come to this conclusion and what reasons support it. In the first place it is clear that the two Queens present very different problems to their biographer. About Queen Victoria everything was known. Everything she did, almost everything she thought, was a matter of common knowledge. No one has ever been more closely verified and exactly authenticated than Queen Victoria. The biographer could not invent her, because at every moment some document was at hand to check his

invention. And, in writing of Victoria, Lytton Strachey submitted to the conditions. He used to the full the biographer's power of selection and relation, but he kept strictly within the world of fact. Every statement was verified; every fact was authenticated. And the result is a life which, very possibly, will do for the old Queen what Boswell did for the old dictionary maker. In time to come Lytton Strachey's Queen Victoria will be Queen Victoria, just as Boswell's Johnson is now Dr Johnson. The other versions will fade and disappear. It was a prodigious feat, and no doubt, having accomplished it, the author was anxious to press further. There was Queen Victoria, solid, real, palpable. But undoubtedly she was limited. Could not biography produce something of the intensity of poetry, something of the excitement of drama, and yet keep also the peculiar virtue that belongs to fact—its suggestive reality, its own proper creativeness?

Queen Elizabeth seemed to lend herself perfectly to the experiment. Very little was known about her. The society in which she lived was so remote that the habits, the motives, and even the actions of the people of that age were full of strangeness and obscurity. 'By what art are we to worm our way into those strange spirits? those even stranger bodies? The more clearly we perceive it, the more remote that singular universe becomes,' Lytton Strachey remarked on one of the first pages. Yet there was evidently a 'tragic history' lying dormant, half revealed, half concealed, in the story of the Queen and Essex. Everything seemed to lend itself to the making of a book that combined the advantages of both worlds, that gave the artist freedom to invent, but helped his invention with the support of facts—a book that was not only a biography but also a work of art.

Nevertheless, the combination proved unworkable; fact and fiction refused to mix. Elizabeth never became real in the sense that Queen Victoria had been real, yet she never became fictitious in the sense that Cleopatra or Falstaff\* is fictitious. The reason would seem to be that very little was known—he was urged to invent; yet something was known—his invention was checked. The Queen thus moves in an ambiguous world, between fact and fiction, neither embodied nor disembodied. There is a sense of vacancy and effort, of a tragedy that has no crisis, of characters that meet but do not clash.

If this diagnosis is true we are forced to say that the trouble lies with biography itself. It imposes conditions, and those conditions are that it must be based upon fact. And by fact in biography we mean facts that can be verified by other people besides the artist. If he invents facts as an artist

invents them—facts that no one else can verify—and tries to combine them with facts of the other sort, they destroy each other.

Lytton Strachey himself seems in the *Queen Victoria* to have realized the necessity of this condition, and to have yielded to it instinctively. ‘The first forty-two years of the Queen’s life,’ he wrote, ‘are illuminated by a great and varied quantity of authentic information. With Albert’s death a veil descends.’ And when with Albert’s death\* the veil descended and authentic information failed, he knew that the biographer must follow suit. ‘We must be content with a brief and summary relation,’ he wrote; and the last years are briefly disposed of. But the whole of Elizabeth’s life was lived behind a far thicker veil than the last years of Victoria. And yet, ignoring his own admission, he went on to write, not a brief and summary relation, but a whole book about those strange spirits and even stranger bodies of whom authentic information was lacking. On his own showing, the attempt was doomed to failure.

### III

It seems, then, that when the biographer complained that he was tied by friends, letters, and documents he was laying his finger upon a necessary element in biography; and that it is also a necessary limitation. For the invented character lives in a free world where the facts are verified by one person only—the artist himself. Their authenticity lies in the truth of his own vision. The world created by that vision is rarer, intenser, and more wholly of a piece than the world that is largely made of authentic information supplied by other people. And because of this difference the two kinds of fact will not mix; if they touch they destroy each other. No one, the conclusion seems to be, can make the best of both worlds; you must choose, and you must abide by your choice.

But though the failure of *Elizabeth and Essex* leads to this conclusion, that failure, because it was the result of a daring experiment carried out with magnificent skill, leads the way to further discoveries. Had he lived,\* Lytton Strachey would no doubt himself have explored the vein that he had opened. As it is, he has shown us the way in which others may advance. The biographer is bound by facts—that is so; but, if it is so, he has the right to all the facts that are available. If Jones threw boots at the maid’s head, had a mistress at Islington, or was found drunk in a ditch after a night’s debauch, he

must be free to say so—so far at least as the law of libel and human sentiment allow.

But these facts are not like the facts of science—once they are discovered, always the same. They are subject to changes of opinion; opinions change as the times change. What was thought a sin is now known, by the light of facts won for us by the psychologists, to be perhaps a misfortune; perhaps a curiosity; perhaps neither one nor the other, but a trifling foible of no great importance one way or the other. The accent on sex has changed within living memory. This leads to the destruction of a great deal of dead matter still obscuring the true features of the human face. Many of the old chapter headings—life at college, marriage, career—are shown to be very arbitrary and artificial distinctions. The real current of the hero's existence took, very likely, a different course.

Thus the biographer must go ahead of the rest of us, like the miner's canary, testing the atmosphere, detecting falsity, unreality, and the presence of obsolete conventions. His sense of truth must be alive and on tiptoe. Then again, since we live in an age when a thousand cameras are pointed, by newspapers, letters, and diaries, at every character from every angle, he must be prepared to admit contradictory versions of the same face. Biography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking glasses at odd corners. And yet from all this diversity it will bring out, not a riot of confusion, but a richer unity. And again, since so much is known that used to be unknown, the question now inevitably asks itself, whether the lives of great men only should be recorded. Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography—the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious? And what is greatness? And what smallness? We must revise our standards of merit and set up new heroes for our admiration.

## IV

Biography thus is only at the beginning of its career; it has a long and active life before it, we may be sure—a life full of difficulty, danger, and hard work. Nevertheless, we can also be sure that it is a different life from the life of poetry and fiction—a life lived at a lower degree of tension. And for that reason its creations are not destined for the immortality which the artist now and then achieves for his creations.

There would seem to be certain proof of that already. Even Dr Johnson as

created by Boswell will not live as long as Falstaff as created by Shakespeare. Micawber and Miss Bates\* we may be certain will survive Lockhart's Sir Walter Scott and Lytton Strachey's Queen Victoria. For they are made of more enduring matter. The artist's imagination at its most intense fires out what is perishable in fact; he builds with what is durable; but the biographer must accept the perishable, build with it, imbed it in the very fabric of his work. Much will perish; little will live. And thus we come to the conclusion, that he is a craftsman, not an artist; and his work is not a work of art, but something betwixt and between.

Yet on that lower level the work of the biographer is invaluable; we cannot thank him sufficiently for what he does for us. For we are incapable of living wholly in the intense world of the imagination. The imagination is a faculty that soon tires and needs rest and refreshment. But for a tired imagination the proper food is not inferior poetry or minor fiction, indeed they blunt and debauch it, but sober fact, that 'authentic information' from which, as Lytton Strachey has shown us, good biography is made. When and where did the real man live; how did he look; did he wear laced boots or elastic-sided; who were his aunts, and his friends; how did he blow his nose; whom did he love, and how; and when he came to die did he die in his bed like a Christian, or ...

By telling us the true facts, by sifting the little from the big, and shaping the whole so that we perceive the outline, the biographer does more to stimulate the imagination than any poet or novelist save the very greatest. For few poets and novelists are capable of that high degree of tension which gives us reality. But almost any biographer, if he respects facts, can give us much more than another fact to add to our collection. He can give us the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders. Of this, too, there is certain proof. For how often, when a biography is read and tossed aside, some scene remains bright, some figure lives on in the depths of the mind, and causes us, when we read a poem or a novel, to feel a start of recognition, as if we remembered something that we had known before.

# **WOMEN AND FICTION**

## THE FEMININE NOTE IN FICTION

MR COURTNEY is certain that there is such a thing as the feminine note in fiction; he desires, moreover, to define its nature in the book before us,\* though at the start he admits that the feminine and masculine points of view are so different that it is difficult for one to understand the other. At any rate, he has made a laborious attempt; it is, perhaps, partly for the reason just stated that he ends where he begins. He gives us eight very patient and careful studies in the works of living women writers, in which he outlines the plots of their most successful books in detail. But we would have spared him the trouble willingly in exchange for some definite verdict; we can all read Mrs Humphry Ward,\* for instance, and remember her story, but we want a critic to separate her virtues and her failings, to assign her right place in literature and to decide which of her characteristics are essentially feminine and why, and what is their significance. Mr Courtney implies by his title that he will, at any rate, accomplish this last, and it is with disappointment, though not with surprise, that we discover that he has done nothing of the kind. Is it not too soon after all to criticise the 'feminine note' in anything? And will not the adequate critic of women be a woman?

Mr Courtney, we think, feels something of this difficulty; his introduction, in which we expected to find some kind of summing-up, contains only some very tentative criticisms and conclusions. Women, we gather, are seldom artists, because they have a passion for detail which conflicts with the proper artistic proportion of their work. We would cite Sappho\* and Jane Austen as examples of two great women who combine exquisite detail with a supreme sense of artistic proportion. Women, again, excel in 'close analytic miniature work;'\* they are more happy when they reproduce than when they create; their genius is for psychological analysis—all of which we note with interest, though we reserve our judgment for the next hundred years or bequeath the duty to our successor. Yet it is worth noting, as proof of the difficulty of the task which Mr Courtney has set himself, that he finds two at least of his eight women writers 'artists'—that two others possess a strength which in this age one has to call masculine, and, in fact, that no pair of them come under any



one heading, though, of course, in the same way as men, they can be divided roughly into schools. At any rate, it seems to be clear according to Mr Courtney that more and more novels are written by women for women, which is the cause, he declares, that the novel as a work of art is disappearing. The first part of his statement may well be true; it means that women having found their voices have something to say which is naturally of supreme interest and meaning to women, but the value of which we cannot yet determine. The assertion that the woman novelist is extinguishing the novel as a work of art seems to us, however, more doubtful. It is, at any rate, possible that the widening of her intelligence by means of education and study of the Greek and Latin classics may give her that sterner view of literature which will make an artist of her, so that, having blurted out her message somewhat formlessly, she will in due time fashion it into permanent artistic shape. Mr Courtney has given us material for many questions such as these, but his book has done nothing to prevent them from still remaining questions.

## WOMEN NOVELISTS

BY rights, or, more modestly, according to a theory of ours, Mr Brimley Johnson\* should have written a book amply calculated, according to the sex of the reader, to cause gratification or annoyance, but of no value from a critical point of view. Experience seems to prove that to criticise the work of a sex as a sex is merely to state with almost invariable acrimony prejudices derived from the fact that you are either a man or a woman. By some lucky balance of qualities Mr Brimley Johnson has delivered his opinion of women novelists without this fatal bias, so that, besides saying some very interesting things about literature, he says also many that are even more interesting about the peculiar qualities of the literature that is written by women.

Given this unusual absence of partisanship, the interest and also the complexity of the subject can scarcely be overstated. Mr Johnson, who has read more novels by women than most of us have heard of, is very cautious—more apt to suggest than to define, and much disposed to qualify his conclusions. Thus, though his book is not a mere study of the women novelists, but an attempt to prove that they have followed a certain course of development, we should be puzzled to state what his theory amounts to. The question is one not merely of literature, but to a large extent of social history. What, for example, was the origin of the extraordinary outburst in the eighteenth century of novel writing by women? Why did it begin then, and not in the time of the Elizabethan renaissance? Was the motive which finally determined them to write a desire to correct the current view of their sex expressed in so many volumes and for so many ages by male writers? If so, their art is at once possessed of an element which should be absent from the work of all previous writers. It is clear enough, however, that the work of Miss Burney, the mother of English fiction, was not inspired by any single wish to redress a grievance: the richness of the human scene as Dr Burney's daughter\* had the chance of observing it provided a sufficient stimulus; but however strong the impulse to write had become, it had at the outset to meet opposition not only of circumstance but of opinion. Her first manuscripts were burnt by her stepmother's orders, and needlework was inflicted as a

penance, much as, a few years later, Jane Austen would slip her writing beneath a book if anyone came in, and Charlotte Brontë stopped in the middle of her work to pare the potatoes. But the domestic problem, being overcome or compromised with, there remained the moral one. Miss Burney had showed that it was ‘possible for a woman to write novels and be respectable’,\* but the burden of proof still rested anew upon each authoress. Even so late as the mid-Victorian days George Eliot was accused of ‘coarseness and immorality’ in her attempt ‘to familiarise the minds of our young women in the middle and higher ranks with matters on which their fathers and brothers would never venture to speak in their presence’.\*

The effect of these repressions is still clearly to be traced in women’s work, and the effect is wholly to the bad. The problem of art is sufficiently difficult in itself without having to respect the ignorance of young women’s minds or to consider whether the public will think that the standard of moral purity displayed in your work is such as they have a right to expect from your sex. The attempt to conciliate, or more naturally to outrage, public opinion is equally a waste of energy and a sin against art. It may have been not only with a view to obtaining impartial criticism that George Eliot and Miss Brontë adopted male pseudonyms, but in order to free their own consciousness as they wrote from the tyranny of what was expected from their sex. No more than men, however, could they free themselves from a more fundamental tyranny—the tyranny of sex itself. The effort to free themselves, or rather to enjoy what appears, perhaps erroneously, to be the comparative freedom of the male sex from that tyranny, is another influence which has told disastrously upon the writing of women. When Mr Brimley Johnson says that ‘imitation has not been, fortunately, the besetting sin of women novelists’,\* he has in mind no doubt the work of the exceptional women who imitated neither a sex nor any individual of either sex. But to take no more thought of their sex when they wrote than of the colour of their eyes was one of their conspicuous distinctions, and of itself a proof that they wrote at the bidding of a profound and imperious instinct. The women who wished to be taken for men in what they wrote were certainly common enough; and if they have given place to the women who wish to be taken for women the change is hardly for the better, since any emphasis, either of pride or of shame, laid consciously upon the sex of a writer is not only irritating but superfluous. As Mr Brimley Johnson again and again remarks, a woman’s writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at its best it is most

feminine: the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine. He shows his wisdom not only by advancing a great many suggestions, but also by accepting the fact, upsetting though it is, that women are apt to differ. Still, here are a few attempts: 'Women are born preachers and always work for an ideal.' 'Woman is the moral realist, and her realism is not inspired by any idle ideal of art, but of sympathy with life.' For all her learning, 'George Eliot's outlook remains thoroughly emotional and feminine'.\* Women are humorous and satirical rather than imaginative. They have a greater sense of emotional purity than men, but a less alert sense of honour.

No two people will accept without wishing to add to and qualify these attempts at a definition, and yet no one will admit that he can possibly mistake a novel written by a man for a novel written by a woman. There is the obvious and enormous difference of experience in the first place; but the essential difference lies in the fact not that men describe battles and women the birth of children, but that each sex describes itself. The first words in which either a man or a woman is described are generally enough to determine the sex of the writer; but though the absurdity of a woman's hero or of a man's heroine is universally recognised, the sexes show themselves extremely quick at detecting each other's faults. No one can deny the authenticity of a Becky Sharp or of a Mr Woodhouse.\* No doubt the desire and the capacity to criticise the other sex had its share in deciding women to write novels, for indeed that particular vein of comedy has been but slightly worked, and promises great richness. Then again, though men are the best judges of men and women of women, there is a side of each sex which is known only to the other, nor does this refer solely to the relationship of love. And finally (as regards this review at least) there rises for consideration the very difficult question of the difference between the man's and the woman's view of what constitutes the importance of any subject. From this spring not only marked differences of plot and incident, but infinite differences in selection, method and style.

## WOMEN AND FICTION

THE title of this article can be read in two ways: it may allude to women and the fiction that they write, or to women and the fiction that is written about them. The ambiguity is intentional, for, in dealing with women as writers, as much elasticity as possible is desirable; it is necessary to leave oneself room to deal with other things besides their work, so much has that work been influenced by conditions that have nothing whatever to do with art.

The most superficial inquiry into women's writing instantly raises a host of questions. Why, we ask at once, was there no continuous writing done by women before the eighteenth century? Why did they then write almost as habitually as men, and in the course of that writing produce, one after another, some of the classics of English fiction? And why did their art then, and why to some extent does their art still, take the form of fiction?

A little thought will show us that we are asking questions to which we shall get, as answer, only further fiction. The answer lies at present locked in old diaries, stuffed away in old drawers, half obliterated in the memories of the aged. It is to be found in the lives of the obscure—in those almost unlit corridors of history where the figures of generations of women are so dimly, so fitfully perceived. For very little is known about women. The history of England is the history of the male line, not of the female. Of our fathers we know always some fact, some distinction. They were soldiers or they were sailors; they filled that office or they made that law. But of our mothers, our grandmothers, our great-grandmothers, what remains? Nothing but a tradition. One was beautiful; one was red-haired; one was kissed by a Queen. We know nothing of them except their names and the dates of their marriages and the number of children they bore.

Thus, if we wish to know why at any particular time women did this or that, why they wrote nothing, why on the other hand they wrote masterpieces, it is extremely difficult to tell. Anyone who should seek among those old papers, who should turn history wrong side out and so construct a faithful picture of the daily life of the ordinary woman in Shakespeare's time, in

Milton's time, in Johnson's time, would not only write a book of astonishing interest, but would furnish the critic with a weapon which he now lacks. The extraordinary woman depends on the ordinary woman. It is only when we know what were the conditions of the average woman's life—the number of her children, whether she had money of her own, if she had a room to herself, whether she had help in bringing up her family, if she had servants, whether part of the housework was her task—it is only when we can measure the way of life and the experience of life made possible to the ordinary woman that we can account for the success or failure of the extraordinary woman as a writer.

Strange spaces of silence seem to separate one period of activity from another. There was Sappho and a little group of women all writing poetry on a Greek island six hundred years before the birth of Christ.\* They fall silent. Then about the year 1000 we find a certain court lady, the Lady Murasaki, writing a very long and beautiful novel in Japan.\* But in England in the sixteenth century, when the dramatists and poets were most active, the women were dumb. Elizabethan literature is exclusively masculine. Then, at the end of the eighteenth century and in the beginning of the nineteenth, we find women again writing—this time in England—with extraordinary frequency and success.

Law and custom were of course largely responsible for these strange intermissions of silence and speech. When a woman was liable, as she was in the fifteenth century, to be beaten and flung about the room if she did not marry the man of her parents' choice, the spiritual atmosphere was not favourable to the production of works of art. When she was married without her own consent to a man who thereupon became her lord and master, 'so far at least as law and custom could make him', as she was in the time of the Stuarts,\* it is likely she had little time for writing, and less encouragement. The immense effect of environment and suggestion upon the mind, we in our psychoanalytical age are beginning to realize. Again, with memoirs and letters to help us, we are beginning to understand how abnormal is the effort needed to produce a work of art, and what shelter and what support the mind of the artist requires. Of those facts the lives and letters of men like Keats and Carlyle and Flaubert\* assure us.

Thus it is clear that the extraordinary outburst of fiction in the beginning of the nineteenth century in England was heralded by innumerable slight changes in law and customs and manners. And women of the nineteenth

century had some leisure; they had some education. It was no longer the exception for women of the middle and upper classes to choose their own husbands. And it is significant that of the four great women novelists—Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot—not one had a child, and two were unmarried.\*

Yet, though it is clear that the ban upon writing had been removed, there was still, it would seem, considerable pressure upon women to write novels. No four women can have been more unlike in genius and character than these four. Jane Austen can have had nothing in common with George Eliot; George Eliot was the direct opposite of Emily Brontë. Yet all were trained for the same profession; all, when they wrote, wrote novels.

Fiction was, as fiction still is, the easiest thing for a woman to write. Nor is it difficult to find the reason. A novel is the least concentrated form of art. A novel can be taken up or put down more easily than a play or a poem. George Eliot left her work to nurse her father. Charlotte Brontë put down her pen to pick the eyes out of the potatoes. And living as she did in the common sitting-room, surrounded by people, a woman was trained to use her mind in observation and upon the analysis of character. She was trained to be a novelist and not to be a poet.

Even in the nineteenth century, a woman lived almost solely in her home and her emotions. And those nineteenth-century novels, remarkable as they were, were profoundly influenced by the fact that the women who wrote them were excluded by their sex from certain kinds of experience. That experience has a great influence upon fiction is indisputable. The best part of Conrad's novels, for instance, would be destroyed if it had been impossible for him to be a sailor. Take away all that Tolstoy knew of war as a soldier, of life and society as a rich young man whose education admitted him to all sorts of experience, and *War and Peace* would be incredibly impoverished.

Yet *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wuthering Heights*,\* *Villette*, and *Middlemarch* were written by women from whom was forcibly withheld all experience save that which could be met with in a middle-class drawing-room. No first-hand experience of war or seafaring or politics or business was possible for them. Even their emotional life was strictly regulated by law and custom. When George Eliot ventured to live with Mr Lewes without being his wife, public opinion was scandalized.\* Under its pressure she withdrew into a suburban seclusion which, inevitably, had the worst possible effects upon her work. She wrote that unless people asked of their own accord to come and

see her, she never invited them. At the same time, on the other side of Europe, Tolstoy was living a free life as a soldier, with men and women of all classes, for which nobody censured him and from which his novels drew much of their astonishing breadth and vigour.

But the novels of women were not affected only by the necessarily narrow range of the writer's experience. They showed, at least in the nineteenth century, another characteristic which may be traced to the writer's sex. In *Middlemarch* and in *Jane Eyre* we are conscious not merely of the writer's character, as we are conscious of the character of Charles Dickens, but we are conscious of a woman's presence—of someone resenting the treatment of her sex and pleading for its rights. This brings into women's writing an element which is entirely absent from a man's, unless, indeed, he happens to be a working man, a negro, or one who for some other reason is conscious of disability. It introduces a distortion and is frequently the cause of weakness. The desire to plead some personal cause or to make a character the mouthpiece of some personal discontent or grievance always has a distracting effect, as if the spot at which the reader's attention is directed were suddenly twofold instead of single.

The genius of Jane Austen and Emily Brontë is never more convincing than in their power to ignore such claims and solicitations and to hold on their way unperturbed by scorn or censure. But it needed a very serene or a very powerful mind to resist the temptation to anger. The ridicule, the censure, the assurance of inferiority in one form or another which were lavished upon women who practised an art, provoked such reactions naturally enough. One sees the effect in Charlotte Brontë's indignation, in George Eliot's resignation. Again and again one finds it in the work of the lesser women writers—in their choice of a subject, in their unnatural selfassertiveness, in their unnatural docility. Moreover, insincerity leaks in almost unconsciously. They adopt a view in deference to authority. The vision becomes too masculine or it becomes too feminine; it loses its perfect integrity and, with that, its most essential quality as a work of art.

The great change that has crept into women's writing is, it would seem, a change of attitude. The woman writer is no longer bitter. She is no longer angry. She is no longer pleading and protesting as she writes. We are approaching, if we have not yet reached, the time when her writing will have little or no foreign influence to disturb it. She will be able to concentrate upon her vision without distraction from outside. The aloofness that was once



within the reach of genius and originality is only now coming within the reach of ordinary women. Therefore the average novel by a woman is far more genuine and far more interesting today than it was a hundred or even fifty years ago.

But it is still true that before a woman can write exactly as she wishes to write, she has many difficulties to face. To begin with, there is the technical difficulty—so simple, apparently; in reality, so baffling—that the very form of the sentence does not fit her. It is a sentence made by men; it is too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman's use. Yet in a novel, which covers so wide a stretch of ground, an ordinary and usual type of sentence has to be found to carry the reader on easily and naturally from one end of the book to the other. And this a woman must make for herself, altering and adapting the current sentence until she writes one that takes the natural shape of her thought without crushing or distorting it.

But that, after all, is only a means to an end, and the end is still to be reached only when a woman has the courage to surmount opposition and the determination to be true to herself. For a novel, after all, is a statement about a thousand different objects—human, natural, divine; it is an attempt to relate them to each other. In every novel of merit these different elements are held in place by the force of the writer's vision. But they have another order also, which is the order imposed upon them by convention. And as men are the arbiters of that convention, as they have established an order of values in life, so too, since fiction is largely based on life, these values prevail there also to a very great extent.

It is probable, however, that both in life and in art the values of a woman are not the values of a man. Thus, when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values—to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important. And for that, of course, she will be criticized; for the critic of the opposite sex will be genuinely puzzled and surprised by an attempt to alter the current scale of values, and will see in it not merely a difference of view, but a view that is weak, or trivial, or sentimental, because it differs from his own.

But here, too, women are coming to be more independent of opinion. They are beginning to respect their own sense of values. And for this reason the subject matter of their novels begins to show certain changes. They are less interested, it would seem, in themselves; on the other hand, they are more

interested in other women. In the early nineteenth century, women's novels were largely autobiographical. One of the motives that led them to write was the desire to expose their own suffering, to plead their own cause. Now that this desire is no longer so urgent, women are beginning to explore their own sex, to write of women as women have never been written of before; for of course, until very lately, women in literature were the creation of men.

Here again there are difficulties to overcome, for, if one may generalize, not only do women submit less readily to observation than men, but their lives are far less tested and examined by the ordinary processes of life. Often nothing tangible remains of a woman's day. The food that has been cooked is eaten; the children that have been nursed have gone out into the world. Where does the accent fall? What is the salient point for the novelist to seize upon? It is difficult to say. Her life has an anonymous character which is baffling and puzzling in the extreme. For the first time, this dark country is beginning to be explored in fiction; and at the same moment a woman has also to record the changes in women's minds and habits which the opening of the professions has introduced. She has to observe how their lives are ceasing to run underground; she has to discover what new colours and shadows are showing in them now that they are exposed to the outer world.

If, then, one should try to sum up the character of women's fiction at the present moment, one would say that it is courageous; it is sincere; it keeps closely to what women feel. It is not bitter. It does not insist upon its femininity. But at the same time, a woman's book is not written as a man would write it. These qualities are much commoner than they were, and they give even to second- and third-rate work the value of truth and the interest of sincerity.

But in addition to these good qualities, there are two that call for a word more of discussion. The change which has turned the English woman from a nondescript influence, fluctuating and vague, to a voter, \* a wage-earner, a responsible citizen, has given her both in her life and in her art a turn toward the impersonal. Her relations now are not only emotional; they are intellectual, they are political. The old system which condemned her to squint askance at things through the eyes or through the interests of husband or brother, has given place to the direct and practical interests of one who must act for herself, and not merely influence the acts of others. Hence her attention is being directed away from the personal centre which engaged it exclusively in the past to the impersonal, and her novels naturally become

more critical of society, and less analytical of individual lives.

We may expect that the office of gadfly to the state, which has been so far a male prerogative, will not be discharged by women also. Their novels will deal with social evils and remedies. Their men and women will not be observed wholly in relation to each other emotionally, but as they cohere and clash in groups and classes and races. That is one change of some importance. But there is another more interesting to those who prefer the butterfly to the gadfly—that is to say, the artist to the reformer. The greater impersonality of women's lives will encourage the poetic spirit, and it is in poetry that women's fiction is still weakest. It will lead them to be less absorbed in facts and no longer content to record with astonishing acuteness the minute details which fall under their own observation. They will look beyond the personal and political relationships to the wider questions which the poet tries to solve—of our destiny and the meaning of life.

The basis of the poetic attitude is of course largely founded upon material things. It depends upon leisure, and a little money, and the chance which money and leisure give to observe impersonally and dispassionately. With money and leisure at their service, women will naturally occupy themselves more than has hitherto been possible with the craft of letters. They will make a fuller and a more subtle use of the instrument of writing. Their technique will become bolder and richer.

In the past, the virtue of women's writing often lay in its divine spontaneity, like that of the blackbird's song or the thrush's. It was untaught; it was from the heart. But it was also, and much more often, chattering and garrulous—mere talk spilt over paper and left to dry in pools and blots. In future, granted time and books and a little space in the house for herself, literature will become for women, as for men, an art to be studied. Women's gift will be trained and strengthened. The novel will cease to be the dumping-ground for the personal emotions. It will become, more than at present, a work of art like any other, and its resources and its limitations will be explored.

From this it is a short step to the practice of the sophisticated arts, hitherto so little practised by women—to the writing of essays and criticism, of history and biography. And that, too, if we are considering the novel, will be of advantage; for besides improving the quality of the novel itself, it will draw off the aliens who have been attracted to fiction by its accessibility while their hearts lay elsewhere. Thus will the novel be rid of those

excrescences of history and fact which, in our time, have made it so shapeless.

So, if we may prophesy, women in time to come will write fewer novels, but better novels; and not novels only, but poetry and criticism and history. But in this, to be sure, one is looking ahead to that golden, that perhaps fabulous, age when women will have what has so long been denied them—leisure, and money, and a room to themselves.

## PROFESSIONS FOR WOMEN

WHEN your secretary invited me to come here, she told me that your Society\* is concerned with the employment of women and she suggested that I might tell you something about my own professional experiences. It is true I am a woman; it is true I am employed; but what professional experiences have I had? It is difficult to say. My profession is literature; and in that profession there are fewer experiences for women than in any other, with the exception of the stage—fewer, I mean, that are peculiar to women. For the road was cut many years ago—by Fanny Burney, by Aphra Behn, by Harriet Martineau,\* by Jane Austen, by George Eliot—many famous women, and many more unknown and forgotten, have been before me, making the path smooth, and regulating my steps. Thus, when I came to write, there were very few material obstacles in my way. Writing was a reputable and harmless occupation. The family peace was not broken by the scratching of a pen. No demand was made upon the family purse. For ten and sixpence one can buy paper enough to write all the plays of Shakespeare—if one has a mind that way. Pianos and models, Paris, Vienna and Berlin, masters and mistresses, are not needed by a writer. The cheapness of writing paper is, of course, the reason why women have succeeded as writers before they have succeeded in the other professions.

But to tell you my story—it is a simple one. You have only got to figure to yourselves a girl in a bedroom with a pen in her hand. She had only to move that pen from left to right—from ten o'clock to one. Then it occurred to her to do what is simple and cheap enough after all—to slip a few of those pages into an envelope, fix a penny stamp in the corner, and drop the envelope into the red box at the corner. It was thus that I became a journalist; and my effort was rewarded on the first day of the following month—a very glorious day it was for me—by a letter from an editor containing a cheque for one pound ten shillings and sixpence. But to show you how little I deserve to be called a professional woman, how little I know of the struggles and difficulties of such lives, I have to admit that instead of spending that sum upon bread and butter, rent, shoes and stockings, or butcher's bills, I went out and bought a

cat—a beautiful cat, a Persian cat, which very soon involved me in bitter disputes with my neighbours.

What could be easier than to write articles and to buy Persian cats with the profits? But wait a moment. Articles have to be about something. Mine, I seem to remember, was about a novel by a famous man. And while I was writing this review, I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, *The Angel in the House*.<sup>\*</sup> It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her. You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of her—you may not know what I mean by the *Angel in the House*. I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace. In those days—the last of Queen Victoria—every house had its Angel. And when I came to write I encountered her with the very first words. The shadow of her wings fell on my page; I heard the rustling of her skirts in the room. Directly, that is to say, I took my pen in my hand to review that novel by a famous man, she slipped behind me and whispered: ‘My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure.’ And she made as if to guide my pen. I now record the one act for which I take some credit to myself, though the credit rightly belongs to some excellent ancestors of mine who left me a certain sum of money—shall we say five hundred pounds a year?<sup>\*</sup>—so that it was not necessary for me to depend solely on charm for my living. I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel

without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must—to put it bluntly—tell lies if they are to succeed. Thus, whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard. Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. She was always creeping back when I thought I had despatched her. Though I flatter myself that I killed her in the end, the struggle was severe; it took much time that had better have been spent upon learning Greek grammar; or in roaming the world in search of adventures. But it was a real experience; it was an experience that was bound to befall all women writers at that time. Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.

But to continue my story. The Angel was dead; what then remained? You may say that what remained was a simple and common object—a young woman in a bedroom with an inkpot. In other words, now that she had rid herself of falsehood, that young woman had only to be herself. Ah, but what is ‘herself’? I mean, what is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do not believe that you know. I do not believe that anybody can know until she has expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skill. That indeed is one of the reasons why I have come here—out of respect for you, who are in process of showing us by your experiments what a woman is, who are in process of providing us, by your failures and successes, with that extremely important piece of information.

But to continue the story of my professional experiences. I made one pound ten and six by my first review; and I bought a Persian cat with the proceeds. Then I grew ambitious. A Persian cat is all very well, I said; but a Persian cat is not enough. I must have a motor car. And it was thus that I became a novelist—for it is a very strange thing that people will give you a motor car if you will tell them a story. It is a still stranger thing that there is nothing so delightful in the world as telling stories. It is far pleasanter than writing reviews of famous novels. And yet, if I am to obey your secretary and tell you my professional experiences as a novelist, I must tell you about a very strange experience that befell me as a novelist. And to understand it you must try first to imagine a novelist’s state of mind. I hope I am not giving away professional secrets if I say that a novelist’s chief desire is to be as

unconscious as possible. He has to induce in himself a state of perpetual lethargy. He wants life to proceed with the utmost quiet and regularity. He wants to see the same faces, to read the same books, to do the same things day after day, month after month, while he is writing, so that nothing may break the illusion in which he is living—so that nothing may disturb or disquiet the mysterious nosings about, feelings round, darts, dashes and sudden discoveries of that very shy and illusive spirit, the imagination. I suspect that this state is the same both for men and women. Be that as it may, I want you to imagine me writing a novel in a state of trance. I want you to figure to yourselves a girl sitting with a pen in her hand, which for minutes, and indeed for hours, she never dips into the inkpot. The image that comes to my mind when I think of this girl is the image of a fisherman lying sunk in dreams on the verge of a deep lake with a rod held out over the water. She was letting her imagination sweep unchecked round every rock and cranny of the world that lies submerged in the depths of our unconscious being. Now came the experience, the experience that I believe to be far commoner with women writers than with men. The line raced through the girl's fingers. Her imagination had rushed away. It had sought the pools, the depths, the dark places where the largest fish slumber. And then there was a smash. There was an explosion. There was foam and confusion. The imagination had dashed itself against something hard. The girl was roused from her dream. She was indeed in a state of the most acute and difficult distress. To speak without figure she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked. The consciousness of what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artist's state of unconsciousness. She could write no more. The trance was over. Her imagination could work no longer. This I believe to be a very common experience with women writers—they are impeded by the extreme conventionality of the other sex. For though men sensibly allow themselves great freedom in these respects, I doubt that they realize or can control the extreme severity with which they condemn such freedom in women.

These then were two very genuine experiences of my own. These were two of the adventures of my professional life. The first—killing the Angel in the House—I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet. The obstacles against her are still immensely



powerful—and yet they are very difficult to define. Outwardly, what is simpler than to write books? Outwardly, what obstacles are there for a woman rather than for a man? Inwardly, I think, the case is very different; she has still many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome. Indeed it will be a long time still, I think, before a woman can sit down to write a book without finding a phantom to be slain, a rock to be dashed against. And if this is so in literature, the freest of all professions for women, how is it in the new professions which you are now for the first time entering?

Those are the questions that I should like, had I time, to ask you. And indeed, if I have laid stress upon these professional experiences of mine, it is because I believe that they are, though in different forms, yours also. Even when the path is nominally open—when there is nothing to prevent a woman from being a doctor, a lawyer, a civil servant—there are many phantoms and obstacles, as I believe, looming in her way. To discuss and define them is I think of great value and importance; for thus only can the labour be shared, the difficulties be solved. But besides this, it is necessary also to discuss the ends and the aims for which we are fighting, for which we are doing battle with these formidable obstacles. Those aims cannot be taken for granted; they must be perpetually questioned and examined. The whole position, as I see it—here in this hall surrounded by women practising for the first time in history I know not how many different professions—is one of extraordinary interest and importance. You have won rooms of your own\* in the house hitherto exclusively owned by men. You are able, though not without great labour and effort, to pay the rent. You are earning your five hundred pounds a year. But this freedom is only a beginning; the room is your own, but it is still bare. It has to be furnished; it has to be decorated; it has to be shared. How are you going to furnish it, how are you going to decorate it? With whom are you going to share it, and upon what terms? These, I think are questions of the utmost importance and interest. For the first time in history you are able to ask them; for the first time you are able to decide for yourselves what the answers should be. Willingly would I stay and discuss those questions and answers—but not tonight. My time is up; and I must cease.

## MEMORIES OF A WORKING WOMEN'S GUILD

WHEN you asked me to write a preface to a book which you had collected of papers by working women\* I replied that I would be drowned rather than write a preface to any book whatsoever. Books should stand on their own feet, my argument was (and I think it is a sound one). If they need shoring up by a preface here, an introduction there, they have no more right to exist than a table that needs a wad of paper under one leg in order to stand steady. But you left me the papers, and, turning them over, I saw that on this occasion the argument did not apply; this book is not a book. Turning the pages, I began to ask myself what is that book then, if it is not a book? What quality has it? What ideas does it suggest? What old arguments and memories does it rouse in me? And as all this had nothing to do with an introduction or a preface, but brought you to mind and certain pictures from the past, I stretched my hand for a sheet of notepaper and wrote the following letter addressed not to the public but to you.

You have forgotten (I wrote) a hot June morning in Newcastle in the year 1913,\* or at least you will not remember what I remember, because you were otherwise engaged. Your attention was entirely absorbed by a green table, several sheets of paper, and a bell. Moreover you were frequently interrupted. There was a woman wearing something like a Lord Mayor's chain round her shoulders; she took her seat perhaps at your right; there were other women without ornament save fountain pens and despatch boxes—they sat perhaps at your left. Soon a row had been formed up there on the platform, with tables and inkstands and tumblers of water; while we, many hundreds of us, scraped and shuffled and filled the entire body of some vast municipal building beneath. The proceedings somehow opened. Perhaps an organ played. Perhaps songs were sung. Then the talking and the laughing suddenly subsided. A bell struck; a figure rose; a woman took her way from among us; she mounted a platform; she spoke for precisely five minutes; she descended. Directly she sat down another woman rose; mounted the platform; spoke for

precisely five minutes and descended; then a third rose, then a fourth—and so it went on, speaker following speaker, one from the right, one from the left, one from the middle, one from the background—each took her way to the stand, said what she had to say, and gave place to her successor. There was something military in the regularity of the proceeding. They were like marksmen, I thought, standing up in turn with rifle raised to aim at a target. Sometimes they missed, and there was a roar of laughter; sometimes they hit, and there was a roar of applause. But whether the particular shot hit or missed there was no doubt about the carefulness of the aim. There was no beating the bush; there were no phrases of easy eloquence. The speaker made her way to the stand primed with her subject. Determination and resolution were stamped on her face. There was so much to be said between the strokes of the bell that she could not waste one second. The moment had come for which she had been waiting, perhaps for many months. The moment had come for which she had stored hat, shoes and dress—there was an air of discreet novelty about her clothing. But above all the moment had come when she was going to speak her mind, the mind of her constituency, the mind of the women who had sent her from Devonshire, perhaps, or Sussex, or some black mining village in Yorkshire to speak their mind for them in Newcastle.

It soon became obvious that the mind which lay spread over so wide a stretch of England was a vigorous mind working with great activity. It was thinking in June 1913 of the reform of the Divorce Laws; of the taxation of land values; of the Minimum Wage. It was concerned with the care of maternity; with the Trades Board Act; with the education of children over fourteen; it was unanimously of opinion that Adult Suffrage should become a Government measure\*—it was thinking in short about every sort of public question, and it was thinking constructively and pugnaciously. Accrington did not see eye to eye with Halifax, nor Middlesbrough with Plymouth. There was argument and opposition; resolutions were lost and amendments won. Hands shot up stiff as swords, or were pressed as stiffly to the side. Speaker followed speaker; the morning was cut up into precise lengths of five minutes by the bell.

Meanwhile—let me try after seventeen years to sum up the thoughts that passed through the minds of your guests, who had come from London and elsewhere, not to take part, but to listen—meanwhile what was it all about? What was the meaning of it? These women were demanding divorce, education, the vote—all good things. They were demanding higher wages

and shorter hours—what could be more reasonable? And yet, though it was all so reasonable, much of it so forcible, some of it so humorous, a weight of discomfort was settling and shifting itself uneasily from side to side in your visitors' minds. All these questions—perhaps this was at the bottom of it—which matter so intensely to the people here, questions of sanitation and education and wages, this demand for an extra shilling, for another year at school, for eight hours instead of nine behind a counter or in a mill, leave me, in my own blood and bones, untouched. If every reform they demand was granted this very instant it would not touch one hair of my comfortable capitalistic head. Hence my interest is merely altruistic. It is thin spread and moon coloured. There is no lifeblood or urgency about it. However hard I clap my hands or stamp my feet there is a hollowness in the sound which betrays me. I am a benevolent spectator. I am irretrievably cut off from the actors. I sit here hypocritically clapping and stamping, an outcast from the flock. On top of this too, my reason (it was in 1913, remember) could not help assuring me that even if the resolution, whatever it was, were carried unanimously the stamping and the clapping was an empty noise. It would pass out of the open window and become part of the clamour of the lorries and the striving of the hooves on the cobbles of Newcastle beneath—an inarticulate uproar. The mind might be active; the mind might be aggressive; but the mind was without a body; it had no legs or arms with which to enforce its will. In all that audience, among all those women who worked, who bore children, who scrubbed and cooked and bargained, there was not a single woman with a vote. Let them fire off their rifles if they liked, but they would hit no target; there were only blank cartridges inside. The thought was irritating and depressing in the extreme.

The clock had now struck half-past eleven. Thus there were still then many hours to come. And if one had reached this stage of irritation and depression by half-past eleven in the morning, into what depths of boredom and despair would one not be plunged by half-past five in the evening? How could one sit out another day of speechifying? How could one, above all, face you, our hostess, with the information that your Congress had proved so insupportably exacerbating that one was going back to London by the very first train? The only chance lay in some happy conjuring trick, some change of attitude by which the mist and blankness of the speeches could be turned to blood and bone. Otherwise they remained intolerable. But suppose one played a childish game; suppose one said, as a child says, 'Let's pretend.'

‘Let’s pretend,’ one said to oneself, looking at the speaker, ‘that I am Mrs Giles of Durham City.’ A woman of that name had just turned to address us. ‘I am the wife of a miner. He comes back thick with grime. First he must have his bath. Then he must have his supper. But there is only a copper. My range is crowded with saucepans. There is no getting on with the work. All my crocks are covered with dust again. Why in the Lord’s name have I not hot water and electric light laid on when middle-class women ...’ So up I jump and demand passionately ‘labour saving appliances and housing reform.’ Up I jump in the person of Mrs Giles of Durham; in the person of Mrs Phillips of Bacup; in the person of Mrs Edwards of Wolverton. But after all the imagination is largely the child of the flesh. One could not be Mrs Giles of Durham because one’s body had never stood at the wash-tub; one’s hands had never wrung and scrubbed and chopped up whatever the meat may be that makes a miner’s supper. The picture therefore was always letting in irrelevancies. One sat in an armchair or read a book. One saw landscapes and seascapes, perhaps Greece or Italy, where Mrs Giles or Mrs Edwards must have seen slag heaps and rows upon rows of slate-roofed houses. Something was always creeping in from a world that was not their world and making the picture false and the game too much of a game to be worth playing.

It was true that one could always correct these fancy portraits by taking a look at the actual person—at Mrs Thomas, or Mrs Langrish, or Miss Bolt of Hebden Bridge. They were worth looking at. Certainly, there were no armchairs, or electric light, or hot water laid on in their lives; no Greek hills or Mediterranean bays in their dreams. Bakers and butchers did not call for orders. They did not sign a cheque to pay the weekly bills, or order, over the telephone, a cheap but quite adequate seat at the Opera. If they travelled it was on excursion day, with food in string bags and babies in their arms. They did not stroll through the house and say, that cover must go to the wash, or those sheets need changing. They plunged their arms in hot water and scrubbed the clothes themselves. In consequence their bodies were thick-set and muscular, their hands were large, and they had the slow emphatic gestures of people who are often stiff and fall tired in a heap on hard-backed chairs. They touched nothing lightly. They gripped papers and pencils as if they were brooms. Their faces were firm and heavily folded and lined with deep lines. It seemed as if their muscles were always taut and on the stretch. Their eyes looked as if they were always set on something actual—on saucepans that were boiling over, on children who were getting into mischief.

Their lips never expressed the lighter and more detached emotions that come into play when the mind is perfectly at ease about the present. No, they were not in the least detached and easy and cosmopolitan. They were indigenous and rooted to one spot. Their very names were like the stones of the fields—common, grey, worn, obscure, docked of all splendours of association and romance. Of course they wanted baths and ovens and education and seventeen shillings instead of sixteen, and freedom and air and ... ‘And,’ said Mrs Winthrop of Spennymoor, breaking into these thoughts with words that sounded like a refrain, ‘we can wait.’ ... ‘Yes,’ she repeated, as if she had waited so long that the last lap of that immense vigil meant nothing for the end was in sight, ‘we can wait.’ And she got down rather stiffly from her perch and made her way back to her seat, an elderly woman dressed in her best clothes.

Then Mrs Potter spoke. Then Mrs Elphick. Then Mrs Holmes of Edgbaston. So it went on, and at last after innumerable speeches, after many communal meals at long tables and many arguments—the world was to be reformed, from top to bottom, in a variety of ways—after seeing Co-operative jams bottled and Co-operative biscuits made, after some song singing and ceremonies with banners, the new President received the chain of office with a kiss from the old President; the Congress dispersed; and the separate members who had stood up so valiantly and spoken out so boldly while the clock ticked its five minutes went back to Yorkshire and Wales and Sussex and Devonshire, and hung their clothes in the wardrobe and plunged their hands in the wash-tub again.

Later that summer the thoughts here so inadequately described, were again discussed, but not in a public hall hung with banners and loud with voices. The head office of the Guild, the centre from which speakers, papers, inkstands and tumblers, as I suppose, issued, was then in Hampstead.\* There, if I may remind you again of what you may well have forgotten, you invited us to come; you asked us to tell you how the Congress had impressed us. But I must pause on the threshold of that very dignified old house, with its eighteenth-century carvings and panelling, as we paused then in truth, for one could not enter and go upstairs without encountering Miss Kidd.\* Miss Kidd sat at her typewriter in the outer office. Miss Kidd, one felt, had set herself as a kind of watch-dog to ward off the meddlesome middle-class wasters of time who come prying into other people’s business. Whether it was for this reason that she was dressed in a peculiar shade of deep purple I do not know. The

colour seemed somehow symbolical.\* She was very short, but, owing to the weight which sat on her brow and the gloom which seemed to issue from her dress, she was also very heavy. An extra share of the world's grievances seemed to press upon her shoulders. When she clicked her typewriter one felt that she was making that instrument transmit messages of foreboding and ill-omen to an unheeding universe. But she relented, and like all relentings after gloom hers came with a sudden charm. Then we went upstairs, and upstairs we came upon a very different figure—upon Miss Lilian Harris,\* indeed, who, whether it was due to her dress which was coffee coloured, or to her smile which was serene, or to the ash-tray in which many cigarettes had come amiably to an end, seemed the image of detachment and equanimity. Had one not known that Miss Harris was to the Congress what the heart is to the remoter veins—that the great engine at Newcastle would not have thumped and throbbed without her—that she had collected and sorted and summoned and arranged that very intricate but orderly assembly of women—she would never have enlightened one. She had nothing whatever to do; she licked a few stamps and addressed a few envelopes—it was a fad of hers—that was what her manner conveyed. It was Miss Harris who moved the papers off the chairs and got the tea-cups out of the cupboard. It was she who answered questions about figures and put her hand on the right file of letters infallibly and sat listening, without saying very much, but with calm comprehension, to whatever was said.

Again let me telescope into a few sentences, and into one scene many random discussions on various occasions at various places. We said then—for you now emerged from an inner room, and if Miss Kidd was purple and Miss Harris was coffee coloured, you, speaking pictorially (and I dare not speak more explicitly) were kingfisher blue and as arrowy and decisive as that quick bird—we said then that the Congress had roused thoughts and ideas of the most diverse nature. It had been a revelation and a disillusionment. We had been humiliated and enraged. To begin with, all their talk, we said, or the greater part of it, was of matters of fact. They want baths and money. To expect us, whose minds, such as they are, fly free at the end of a short length of capital to tie ourselves down again to that narrow plot of acquisitiveness and desire is impossible. We have baths and we have money. Therefore, however much we had sympathized our sympathy was largely fictitious. It was aesthetic sympathy, the sympathy of the eye and of the imagination, not of the heart and of the nerves; and such sympathy is



always physically uncomfortable. Let us explain what we mean, we said. The Guild's women are magnificent to look at. Ladies in evening dress are lovelier far, but they lack the sculpturesque quality that these working women have. And though the range of expression is narrower in working women, their few expressions have a force and an emphasis, of tragedy or humour, which the faces of ladies lack. But, at the same time, it is much better to be a lady; ladies desire Mozart and Einstein\*—that is, they desire things that are ends, not things that are means. Therefore to deride ladies and to imitate, as some of the speakers did, their mincing speech and little knowledge of what it pleases them to call 'reality' is, so it seems to us, not merely foolish but gives away the whole purpose of the Congress, for if it is better to be working women by all means let them remain so and not undergo the contamination which wealth and comfort bring. In spite of this, we went on, apart from prejudice and bandying compliments, undoubtedly the women at the Congress possess something which ladies lack, and something which is desirable, which is stimulating, and yet very difficult to define. One does not want to slip easily into fine phrases about 'contact with life', about 'facing facts' and 'the teaching of experience', for they invariably alienate the hearer, and moreover no working man or woman works harder or is in closer touch with reality than a painter with his brush or a writer with his pen. But the quality that they have, judging from a phrase caught here and there, from a laugh, or a gesture seen in passing, is precisely the quality that Shakespeare would have enjoyed. One can fancy him slipping away from the brilliant salons of educated people to crack a joke in Mrs Robson's back kitchen. Indeed, we said, one of our most curious impressions at your Congress was that the 'poor', 'the working classes', or by whatever name you choose to call them, are not downtrodden, envious and exhausted; they are humorous and vigorous and thoroughly independent. Thus if it were possible to meet them not as masters or mistresses or customers with a counter between us, but over the wash-tub or in the parlour casually and congenially as fellow-beings with the same wishes and ends in view, a great liberation would follow, and perhaps friendship and sympathy would supervene. How many words must lurk in those women's vocabularies that have faded from ours! How many scenes must lie dormant in their eyes which are unseen by ours! What images and saws and proverbial sayings must still be current with them that have never reached the surface of print, and very likely they still keep the power which we have lost of making new ones. There were many shrewd sayings in



the speeches at Congress which even the weight of a public meeting could not flatten out entirely. But, we said, and here perhaps fiddled with a paper knife, or poked the fire impatiently by way of expressing our discontent, what is the use of it all? Our sympathy is fictitious, not real. Because the baker calls and we pay our bills with cheques, and our clothes are washed for us and we do not know the liver from the lights we are condemned to remain forever shut up in the confines of the middle classes, wearing tail coats and silk stockings, and called Sir or Madam as the case may be, when we are all, in truth, simply Johns and Susans. And they remain equally deprived. For we have as much to give them as they to give us—wit and detachment, learning and poetry, and all those good gifts which those who have never answered bells or minded machines enjoy by right. But the barrier is impassable. And nothing perhaps exacerbated us more at the Congress (you must have noticed at times a certain irritability) than the thought that this force of theirs, this smouldering heat which broke the crust now and then and licked the surface with a hot and fearless flame, is about to break through and melt us together so that life will be richer and books more complex and society will pool its possessions instead of segregating them—all this is going to happen inevitably, thanks to you, very largely, and to Miss Harris and to Miss Kidd—but only when we are dead.

It was thus that we tried in the Guild Office that afternoon to explain the nature of fictitious sympathy and how it differs from real sympathy and how defective it is because it is not based upon sharing the same important emotions unconsciously. It was thus that we tried to describe the contradictory and complex feelings which beset the middle-class visitor when forced to sit out a Congress of working women in silence.

Perhaps it was at this point that you unlocked a drawer and took out a packet of papers. You did not at once untie the string that fastened them. Sometimes, you said, you got a letter which you could not bring yourself to burn; once or twice a Guildswoman had at your suggestion written a few pages about her life. It might be that we should find these papers interesting; that if we read them the women would cease to be symbols and would become instead individuals. But they were very fragmentary and ungrammatical; they had been jotted down in the intervals of housework. Indeed you could not at once bring yourself to give them up, as if to expose them to other eyes were a breach of confidence. It might be that their crudity would only perplex, that the writing of people who do not know how to write

—but at this point we burst in. In the first place, every Englishwoman knows how to write; in the second, even if she does not she has only to take her own life for subject and write the truth about that and not fiction or poetry for our interest to be so keenly roused that—that in short we cannot wait but must read the packet at once.

Thus pressed you did by degrees and with many delays—there was the war for example, and Miss Kidd died, and you and Lilian Harris retired from the Guild, and a testimonial was given you in a casket, and many thousands of working women tried to say how you had changed their lives—tried to say what they will feel for you to their dying day—after all these interruptions you did at last gather the papers together and finally put them in my hands early this May. There they were, typed and docketed with a few snapshots and rather faded photographs stuck between the pages. And when at last I began to read, there started up in my mind's eye the figures that I had seen all those years ago at Newcastle with such bewilderment and curiosity. But they were no longer addressing a large meeting in Newcastle from a platform, dressed in their best clothes. The hot June day with its banners and its ceremonies had vanished, and instead one looked back into the past of the women who had stood there; into the four-roomed houses of miners, into the homes of small shopkeepers and agricultural labourers, into the fields and factories of fifty or sixty years ago. Mrs Burrows, for example, had worked in the Lincolnshire fens when she was eight with forty or fifty other children, and an old man had followed the gang with a long whip in his hand 'which he did not forget to use'. That was a strange reflection. Most of the women had started work at seven or eight, earning a penny on Saturday for washing a doorstep, or twopence a week for carrying suppers to the men at the iron foundry. They had gone into factories when they were fourteen. They had worked from seven in the morning till eight or nine at night and had made thirteen or fifteen shillings a week. Out of this money they had saved some pence with which to buy their mother gin—she was often very tired in the evening and had borne perhaps thirteen children in as many years; or they fetched opium to assuage some miserable old woman's ague in the fens. Old Betty Rollett killed herself when she could get no more. They had seen half-starved women standing in rows to be paid for their match-boxes while they snuffed the roast meat of their employer's dinner cooking within. The smallpox had raged in Bethnal Green\* and they had known that the boxes went on being made in the sick-room and were sold to the public with the

infection still thick on them. They had been so cold working in the wintry fields that they could not run when the ganger gave them leave. They had waded through floods when the Wash overflowed its banks. Kind old ladies had given them parcels of food which had turned out to contain only crusts of bread and rancid bacon rind. All this they had done and seen and known when other children were still dabbling in seaside pools and spelling out fairy tales by the nursery fire. Naturally their faces had a different look on them. But they were, one remembered, firm faces, faces with something indomitable in their expression. Astonishing though it seems, human nature is so tough that it will take such wounds, even at the tenderest age, and survive them. Keep a child mewed up in Bethnal Green and she will somehow snuff the country air from seeing the yellow dust on her brother's boots, and nothing will serve her but she must go there and see the 'clean ground', as she calls it, for herself. It was true that at first the 'bees were very frightening', but all the same she got to the country and the blue smoke and the cows came up to her expectation. Put girls, after a childhood of minding smaller brothers and washing doorsteps, into a factory when they are fourteen and their eyes will turn to the window and they will be happy because, as the workroom is six storeys high, the sun can be seen breaking over the hills, 'and that was always such a comfort and a help'. Still stranger, if one needs additional proof of the strength of the human instinct to escape from bondage and attach itself whether to a country road or to a sunrise over the hills, is the fact that the highest ideals of duty flourish in an obscure hat factory as surely as on a battlefield. There were women in Christies' felt-hat factory,\* for example, who worked for 'honour'. They gave their lives to the cause of putting straight stitches into the bindings of men's hat brims. Felt is hard and thick; it is difficult to push the needle through; there are no rewards or glory to be won; but such is the incorrigible idealism of the human mind that there were 'trimmers' in those obscure places who would never put a crooked stitch in their work and ruthlessly tore out the crooked stitches of others. And as they drove in their straight stitches they revered Queen Victoria and thanked God, drawing up to the fire, that they were all married to good Conservative working men.

Certainly that story explained something of the force, of the obstinacy, which one had seen in the faces of the speakers at Newcastle. And then, if one went on reading these papers, one came upon other signs of the extraordinary vitality of the human spirit. That inborn energy which no

amount of childbirth and washing up can quench had reached out, it seemed, and seized upon old copies of magazines; had attached itself to Dickens; had propped the poems of Burns against a dish cover to read while cooking. They read at meals; they read before going to the mill. They read Dickens and Scott and Henry George and Bulwer Lytton and Ella Wheeler Wilcox and Alice Meynell and would like 'to get hold of any good history of the French Revolution, not Carlyle's, please', and B. Russell on China, and William Morris and Shelley and Florence Barclay and Samuel Butler's Notebooks\*—they read with the indiscriminate greed of a hungry appetite, that crams itself with toffee and beef and tarts and vinegar and champagne all in one gulp. Naturally such reading led to argument. The younger generation had the audacity to say that Queen Victoria was no better than an honest charwoman who had brought up her children respectably. They had the temerity to doubt whether to sew straight stitches into men's hat brims should be the sole aim and end of a woman's life. They started arguments and even held rudimentary debating societies on the floor of the factory. In time the old trimmers even were shaken in their beliefs and came to think that there might be other ideals in the world besides straight stitches and Queen Victoria. Strange ideas indeed were seething in their brain. A girl, for instance, would reason, as she walked along the streets of a factory town, that she had no right to bring a child into the world if that child must earn its living in a mill. A chance saying in a book would fire her imagination to dream of future cities where there were to be baths and kitchens and washhouses and art galleries and museums and parks. The minds of working women were humming and their imaginations were awake. But how were they to realize their ideals? How were they to express their needs? It was hard enough for middle-class women with some amount of money and some degree of education behind them. But how could women whose hands were full of work, whose kitchens were thick with steam, who had neither education nor encouragement nor leisure remodel the world according to the ideas of working women? It was then, I suppose, sometime in the eighties, that the Women's Guild crept modestly and tentatively into existence. For a time it occupied an inch or two of space in the *Co-operative News* which called itself The Women's Corner. It was there that Mrs Acland asked, 'Why should we not hold our Co-operative mothers' meetings, when we may bring our work and sit together, one of us reading some Co-operative work aloud, which may afterwards be discussed?'\* And on April 18th, 1883, she announced that the Women's

Guild now numbered seven members. It was the Guild then that drew to itself all that restless wishing and dreaming. It was the Guild that made a central meeting place where formed and solidified all that was else so scattered and incoherent. The Guild must have given the older women, with their husbands and children, what 'clean ground' had given to the little girl in Bethnal Green, or the view of day breaking over the hills had given the girls in the hat factory. It gave them in the first place the rarest of all possessions—a room where they could sit down and think remote from boiling saucepans and crying children; and then that room became not merely a sitting-room and a meeting place, but a workshop where, laying their heads together, they could remodel their houses, could remodel their lives, could beat out this reform and that. And, as the membership grew, and twenty or thirty women made a practice of meeting weekly, so their ideas increased, and their interests widened. Instead of discussing merely their own taps and their own sinks and their own long hours and little pay, they began to discuss education and taxation and the conditions of work in the country at large. The women who had crept modestly in 1883 into Mrs Acland's sitting-room to sew and 'read some Co-operative work aloud', learnt to speak out, boldly and authoritatively, about every question of civic life. Thus it came about that Mrs Robson and Mrs Potter and Mrs Wright at Newcastle in 1913 were asking not only for baths and wages and electric light, but also for Adult Suffrage and the Taxation of Land Values and Divorce Law Reform. Thus in a year or two they were to demand peace and disarmament and the spread of Co-operative principles, not only among the working people of Great Britain, but among the nations of the world. And the force that lay behind their speeches and drove them home beyond the reach of eloquence was compact of many things—of men with whips, of sick-rooms where match-boxes were made, of hunger and cold, of many and difficult childbirths, of much scrubbing and washing up, of reading Shelley and William Morris and Samuel Butler over the kitchen table, of weekly meetings of the Women's Guild, of Committees and Congresses at Manchester and elsewhere. And this lay behind the speeches of Mrs Robson and Mrs Potter and Mrs Wright. The papers which you sent me certainly threw some light upon the old curiosities and bewilderments which had made that Congress so memorable, and so thick with unanswered questions.

But that the pages here printed should mean all this to those who cannot supplement the written word with the memory of faces and the sound of

voices is perhaps unlikely. It cannot be denied that the chapters here put together do not make a book—that as literature they have many limitations. The writing, a literary critic might say, lacks detachment and imaginative breadth, even as the women themselves lacked variety and play of feature. Here are no reflections, he might object, no view of life as a whole, and no attempt to enter into the lives of other people. Poetry and fiction seem far beyond their horizon. Indeed, we are reminded of those obscure writers before the birth of Shakespeare who never travelled beyond the borders of their own parishes, who read no language but their own, and wrote with difficulty, finding few words and those awkwardly. And yet since writing is a complex art, much infected by life, these pages have some qualities even as literature that the literate and instructed might envy. Listen, for instance, to Mrs Scott, the felt-hat worker: ‘I have been over the hill-tops when the snow drifts were over three feet high, and six feet in some places. I was in a blizzard in Hayfield and thought I should never get round the corners. But it was life on the moors; I seemed to know every blade of grass and where the flowers grew and all the little streams were my companions.’ Could she have said that better if Oxford had made her a Doctor of Letters? Or take Mrs Layton’s description of a match-box factory in Bethnal Green and how she looked through the fence and saw three ladies ‘sitting in the shade doing some kind of fancy work’. It has something of the accuracy and clarity of a description by Defoe. And when Mrs Burrows brings to mind that bitter day when the children were about to eat their cold dinner and drink their cold tea under the hedge and the ugly woman asked them into her parlour saying, ‘Bring these children into my house and let them eat their dinner there,’ the words are simple, but it is difficult to see how they could say more. And then there is a fragment of a letter from Miss Kidd—the sombre purple figure who typed as if the weight of the world were on her shoulders. ‘When I was a girl of seventeen,’ she writes, ‘my then employer, a gentleman of good position and high standing in the town, sent me to his home one night, ostensibly to take a parcel of books, but really with a very different object. When I arrived at the house all the family were away, and before he would allow me to leave he forced me to yield to him. At eighteen I was a mother.’ Whether that is literature or not literature I do not presume to say, but that it explains much and reveals much is certain. Such then was the burden that rested on that sombre figure as she sat typing your letters, such were the memories she brooded as she guarded your door with her grim and indomitable fidelity.

But I will quote no more. These pages are only fragments. These voices are beginning only now to emerge from silence into half articulate speech. These lives are still half hidden in profound obscurity. To express even what is expressed here has been a work of labour and difficulty. The writing has been done in kitchens, at odds and ends of leisure, in the midst of distractions and obstacles—but really there is no need for me, in a letter addressed to you, to lay stress upon the hardship of working women's lives. Have not you and Lilian Harris given your best years—but hush! you will not let me finish that sentence and therefore, with the old messages of friendship and admiration, I will make an end.

## WHY?

WHEN the first number of *Lysistrata* appeared, I confess that I was deeply disappointed. It was so well printed, on such good paper. It looked established, prosperous. As I turned the pages it seemed to me that wealth must have descended upon Somerville, and I was about to answer the request of the editor for an article with a negative when I read, greatly to my relief, that one of the writers was badly dressed, and gathered from another that the women's colleges still lack power and prestige. At this I plucked up heart, and a crowd of questions that have been pressing to be asked rushed to my lips saying: 'Here is our chance.'\*

I should explain that like so many people nowadays I am pestered with questions. I find it impossible to walk down the street without stopping, it may be in the middle of the road, to ask Why? Churches, public houses, parliaments, shops, loudspeakers, motor cars, the drone of an aeroplane in the clouds, and men and women all inspire questions. Yet what is the point of asking questions of oneself? They should be asked openly in public. But the great obstacle to asking questions openly in public is, of course, wealth. The little twisted sign that comes at the end of a question has a way of making the rich writhe; power and prestige come down upon it with all their weight. Questions, therefore, being sensitive, impulsive and often foolish, have a way of picking their asking place with care. They shrivel up in an atmosphere of power, prosperity, and time-worn stone. They die by the dozen on the threshold of great newspaper offices. They slink away to less favoured, less flourishing quarters where people are poor and therefore have nothing to give, where they have no power and therefore have nothing to lose. Now the questions that have been pestering me to ask them decided, whether rightly or wrongly, that they could be asked in *Lysistrata*. They said, 'We do not expect you to ask us in——' here they named some of our most respectable dailies and weeklies; 'nor in——' here they named some of our most venerable institutions. 'But, thank Heaven!' they exclaimed, 'are not women's colleges poor and young? Are they not inventive, adventurous? Are they not out to create a new——'



‘The editor forbids feminism,’\* I interposed severely.

‘What is feminism?’ they screamed with one accord, and as I did not answer at once, a new question was flung at me, ‘Don’t you think it high time that a new——?’ But I stopped them by reminding them that they had only two thousand words at their disposal, upon which they consulted together, and finally put forward the request that I should introduce one or two of the simplest, tamest, and most obvious among them. For example, there is the question that always bobs up at the beginning of term when societies issue their invitations and universities open their doors—why lecture, why be lectured?

In order to place this question fairly before you, I will describe, for memory has kept the picture bright, one of those rare but, as Queen Victoria would have put it, never-to-be-sufficiently-lamented occasions when in deference to friendship, or in a desperate attempt to acquire information about, perhaps, the French Revolution,\* it seemed necessary to attend a lecture. The room to begin with had a hybrid look—it was not for sitting in, nor yet for eating in. Perhaps there was a map on the wall; certainly there was a table on a platform, and several rows of rather small, rather hard, comfortless little chairs. These were occupied intermittently, as if they shunned each other’s company, by people of both sexes, and some had notebooks and were tapping their fountain pens, and some had none and gazed with the vacancy and placidity of bull frogs at the ceiling. A large clock displayed its cheerless face, and when the hour struck in strode a harried-looking man, a man from whose face nervousness, vanity, or perhaps the depressing and impossible nature of his task had removed all traces of ordinary humanity. There was a momentary stir. He had written a book, and for a moment it is interesting to see people who have written books. Everybody gazed at him. He was bald and not hairy; had a mouth and a chin; in short he was a man like another, although he had written a book. He cleared his throat and the lecture began. Now, the human voice is an instrument of varied power; it can enchant and it can soothe; it can rage and it can despair; but when it lectures it almost always bores. What he said was sensible enough; there was learning in it and argument and reason; but as the voice went on attention wandered. The face of the clock seemed abnormally pale; the hands too suffered from some infirmity. Had they the gout? Were they swollen? They moved so slowly. They reminded one of the painful progress of a three-legged fly that has survived the winter. How many flies

on an average survive the English winter, and what would be the thoughts of such an insect on waking to find itself being lectured on the French Revolution? The enquiry was fatal. A link had been lost—a paragraph dropped. It was useless to ask the lecturer to repeat his words; on he plodded with dogged pertinacity. The origin of the French Revolution was being sought for—also the thoughts of flies. Now there came one of those flat stretches of discourse when minute objects can be seen coming for two or three miles ahead. ‘Skip!’ we entreated him—vainly. He did not skip. He went on; then there was a joke; then it seemed that the windows wanted washing; then a woman sneezed; then the voice quickened; then there was a peroration; and then—thank Heaven! the lecture was over.

Why, since life holds only so many hours, waste one of them on being lectured? Why, since printing presses have been invented these many centuries, should he not have printed his lecture instead of speaking it? Then, by the fire in winter, or under an apple tree in summer, it could have been read, thought over, discussed; the difficult ideas pondered, the argument debated. It could have been thickened and stiffened. There would have been no need of those repetitions and dilutions with which lectures have to be watered down and brightened up, so as to attract the attention of a miscellaneous audience too apt to think about noses and chins, women sneezing and the longevity of flies.

It may be, I told these questions, that there is some reason, imperceptible to outsiders, which makes lectures an essential part of university discipline. But why—here another rushed to the forefront—why, if lectures are necessary as a form of education, should they not be abolished as a form of entertainment? Never does the crocus flower or the beech tree redden but there issue simultaneously from all the universities of England, Scotland and Ireland a shower of notes in which desperate secretaries entreat So-and-So and So-and-So to come up and address them upon art or literature or politics or morality—and why?

In the old days, when newspapers were scarce and carefully lent about from hall to rectory, such laboured methods of rubbing up minds and imparting ideas were no doubt essential. But now, when every day of the week scatters our tables with articles and pamphlets in which every shade of opinion is expressed, far more tersely than by word of mouth, why continue an obsolete custom which not merely wastes time and temper, but incites the most debased of human passions—vanity, ostentation, self-assertion, and the

desire to convert? Why encourage your elders to turn themselves into prigs and prophets, when they are ordinary men and women? Why force them to stand on a platform for forty minutes while you reflect upon the colour of their hair and the longevity of flies? Why not let them talk to you and listen to you, naturally and happily, on the floor? Why not create a new form of society founded on poverty and equality? Why not bring together people of all ages and both sexes and all shades of fame and obscurity so that they can talk, without mounting platforms or reading papers or wearing expensive clothes or eating expensive food? Would not such a society be worth, even as a form of education, all the papers on art and literature that have ever been read since the world began? Why not abolish prigs and prophets? Why not invent human intercourse? Why not try?

Here, being sick of the word ‘why,’ I was about to indulge myself with a few reflections of a general nature upon society as it was, as it is, as it might be, with a few fancy pictures of Mrs Thrale entertaining Dr Johnson, of Lady Holland amusing Lord Macaulay\* thrown in, when such a clamour arose among the questions that I could hardly hear myself think. The cause of the clamour was soon apparent. I had incautiously and foolishly used the word ‘literature.’ Now if there is one word that excites questions and puts them in a fury it is this word ‘literature.’ There they were, screaming and crying, asking questions about poetry and fiction and criticism, each demanding to be heard, each certain that his was the only question that deserved an answer. At last, when they had destroyed all my fancy pictures of Lady Holland and Dr Johnson, one insisted, for he said that foolish and rash as he might be he was less so than the others, that he should be asked. And his question was, why learn English literature at universities when you can read it for yourselves in books? But I said that it is foolish to ask a question that has already been answered—English literature is, I believe, already taught at the universities. Besides, if we are going to start an argument about it, we should need at least twenty volumes, whereas we have only about seven hundred words remaining. Still, as he was importunate, I said I would ask the question and introduce it to the best of my ability, without expressing any opinion of my own, by copying down the following fragment of dialogue.

The other day I went to call upon a friend of mine who earns her living as a publisher’s reader. The room was a little dark, it seemed to me, when I went in. Yet, as the window was open and it was a fine spring day, the darkness must have been spiritual—the effect of some private sorrow I feared. Her first

words as I came in confirmed my fears. ‘Alas, poor boy!’ she exclaimed, tossing the manuscript she was reading to the ground with a gesture of despair.

Had some accident happened to one of her relations, I asked, motoring or climbing?

‘If you call three hundred pages on the evolution of the Elizabethan sonnet an accident,’ she said.

‘Is that all?’ I replied with relief.

‘All?’ she retaliated. ‘Isn’t it enough?’ And, beginning to pace up and down the room she exclaimed, ‘Once he was a clever boy; once he was worth talking to; once he cared about English literature. But now——’ She threw out her hands as if words failed her—but not at all. There followed such a flood of lamentation and vituperation—but reflecting how hard her life was, reading manuscripts day in, day out, I excused her—that I could not follow the argument. All I could gather was that this lecturing about English literature—‘If you want to teach them to read English,’ she threw in, ‘teach them to read Greek’—all this passing of examinations in English literature, which led to all this writing about English literature, was bound in the end to be the death and burial of English literature. ‘The tombstone,’ she was proceeding, ‘will be a bound volume of——’ when I stopped her and told her not to talk such nonsense. ‘Then tell me,’ she said, standing over me with her fists clenched, ‘Do they write any better for it? Is poetry better, is fiction better, is criticism better now that they have been taught how to read English literature?’

As if to answer her own question she read a passage from the manuscript on the floor. ‘And each the spit and image of the other!’ she groaned, lifting it wearily to its place with the manuscripts on the shelf.

‘But think of all they must know,’ I tried to argue.

‘Know?’ she echoed me. ‘Know? What d’you mean by “know”?’ As that was a difficult question to answer offhand, I passed it over by saying, ‘Well, at any rate they’ll be able to make their livings and teach other people.’ Whereupon she lost her temper and, seizing the unfortunate work upon the Elizabethan sonnet, whizzed it across the room. The rest of the visit passed in picking up the fragments of a vase that had belonged to her grandmother.

Now, of course, a dozen other questions clamour to be asked about churches and parliaments and public houses and shops and loudspeakers and

men and women; but mercifully time is up; silence falls.

**LOOKING ON**

## THUNDER AT WEMBLEY

It is nature that is the ruin of Wembley; yet it is difficult to see what steps Lord Stevenson, Lieutenant-General Sir Travers Clarke, and the Duke of Devonshire\* could have taken to keep her out. They might have eradicated the grass and felled the chestnut trees; even so the thrushes would have got in, and there would always have been the sky. At Earls Court and the White City,\* so far as memory serves, there was little trouble from this source. The area was too small; the light too brilliant. If a single real moth strayed in to dally with the arc lamps he was at once transformed into a dizzy reveller; if a laburnum tree shook her tassels, spangles of limelight floated in the violet and crimson air. Everything was intoxicated and transformed. But at Wembley nothing is changed and nobody is drunk. They say, indeed, that there is a restaurant where each diner is forced to spend a guinea upon his dinner.\* What vistas of cold ham that statement calls forth! What pyramids of rolls! What gallons of tea and coffee! For it is unthinkable that there should be champagne, plovers' eggs, or peaches at Wembley. And for six and eightpence two people can buy as much ham and bread as they need. Six and eightpence is not a large sum; but neither is it a small sum. It is a moderate sum, a mediocre sum. It is the prevailing sum at Wembley. You look through an open door at a regiment of motor cars aligned in avenues.\* They are not opulent and powerful; they are not flimsy and cheap. Six and eightpence seems to be the price of each of them. It is the same with the machines for crushing gravel. One can imagine better; one can imagine worse. The machine before us is a serviceable type and costs, inevitably, six and eightpence. Dress fabrics, rope, table linen, old masters, sugar, wheat, filigree silver, pepper, birds' nests (edible, and exported to Hong Kong), camphor, bees-wax, rattans, and the rest—why trouble to ask the price? One knows beforehand—six and eightpence. As for the buildings themselves, those vast, smooth, grey palaces, no vulgar riot of ideas tumbled expensively in their architect's head; equally, cheapness was abhorrent to him, and vulgarity anathema. Per perch, rod, or square foot, however ferro-concrete palaces are sold, they too work out at six and eightpence.

But then, just as one is beginning a little wearily to fumble with those two fine words—democracy, mediocrity—nature asserts herself where one would least look to find her—in clergymen, school children, girls, young men, invalids in bath-chairs. They pass quietly, silently, in coveys, in groups, sometimes alone. They mount the enormous staircases; they stand in queues to have their spectacles rectified gratis; to have their fountain-pens filled gratis; they gaze respectfully into sacks of grain; glance reverently at mowing machines from Canada;\* now and again stoop to remove some paper bag or banana skin and place it in the receptacles provided for that purpose at frequent intervals along the avenues. But what has happened to our contemporaries? Each is beautiful; each is stately. Can it be that one is seeing human beings for the first time? In streets they hurry; in houses they talk; they are bankers in banks; sell shoes in shops. Here against the enormous background of ferro-concrete Britain, of rosy Burma,\* at large, unoccupied, they reveal themselves simply as human beings, creatures of leisure, civilisation, and dignity; a little languid perhaps, a little attenuated, but a product to be proud of. Indeed they are the ruin of the Exhibition. The Duke of Devonshire and his colleagues should have kept them out. As you watch them trailing and flowing, dreaming and speculating, admiring this coffee-grinder, that milk and cream separator, the rest of the show becomes insignificant. And what, one asks, is the spell it lays upon them? How, with all this dignity of their own, can they bring themselves to believe in that?

But this cynical reflection, at once so chill and so superior, was made, of course, by the thrush. Down in the Amusement Compound, by some grave oversight on the part of the Committee, several trees and rhododendron bushes have been allowed to remain; and these, as anybody could have foretold, attract the birds. As you wait your turn to be hoisted into mid-air, it is impossible not to hear the thrush singing. You look up, and discover a whole chestnut tree with its blossoms standing; you look down, and see ordinary grass, scattered with petals, harbouring insects, sprinkled with stray wild flowers. The gramophone does its best; they light a horse-shoe of fairy-lamps above the Jack and Jill;\* a man bangs a bladder and implores you to come and tickle monkeys; boatloads of serious men are poised on the heights of the scenic railway; but all is vain. The cry of ecstasy that should have split the sky as the boat dropped to its doom patters from leaf to leaf, dies, falls flat, while the thrush proceeds with his statement. And then some woman in the row of red-brick villas outside the grounds comes out and wrings a dish-



cloth in her backyard. All this the Duke of Devonshire should have prevented.

The problem of the sky, however, remains. Is it, one wonders, lying back limp but acquiescent in a green deckchair, part of the Exhibition? Is it lending itself with exquisite tact to show off to the best advantage snowy Palestine,\* ruddy Burma, sand-coloured Canada, and the minarets and pagodas of our possessions in the East? So quietly it suffers all these domes and palaces to melt into its breast; receives them with such sombre and tender discretion; so exquisitely allows the rear lamp of Jack and Jill and the Monkey-Teasers to bear themselves like stars. But even as we watch and admire what we would fain credit to the forethought of Lieutenant-General Sir Travers Clarke, a rushing sound is heard. Is it the wind or is it the British Empire Exhibition? It is both. The wind is rising and shuffling along the avenues; the Massed Bands of Empire are assembling and marching to the Stadium. Men like pin-cushions, men like pouter pigeons, men like pillar-boxes, pass in procession.\* Dust swirls after them. Admirably impassive, the bands of Empire march on. Soon they will have entered the fortress; soon the gates will have clanged. But let them hasten! For either the sky has misread her directions, or some appalling catastrophe is impending. The sky is livid, lurid, sulphurine. It is in violent commotion. It is whirling water-spouts of cloud into the air; of dust in the Exhibition. Dust swirls down the avenues, hisses and hurries like erected cobras round the corners. Pagodas are dissolving in dust. Ferro-concrete is fallible. Colonies are perishing and dispersing in spray of inconceivable beauty and terror which some malignant power illuminates. Ash and violet are the colours of its decay. From every quarter human beings come flying—clergymen, school children, invalids in bath-chairs. They fly with outstretched arms, and a vast sound of wailing rolls before them, but there is neither confusion nor dismay. Humanity is rushing to destruction, but humanity is accepting its doom. Canada opens a frail tent of shelter. Clergymen and school children gain its portals. Out in the open, under a cloud of electric silver, the bands of Empire strike up. The bagpipes neigh. Clergy, school children, and invalids group themselves round the Prince of Wales in butter.\* Cracks like the white roots of trees spread themselves across the firmament. The Empire is perishing; the bands are playing; the Exhibition is in ruins. For that is what comes of letting in the sky.

## THE CINEMA

PEOPLE say that the savage no longer exists in us, that we are at the fag end of civilisation, that everything has been said already and that it is too late to be ambitious. But these philosophers have presumably forgotten the movies. They have never seen the savages of the twentieth century watching the pictures. They have never sat themselves in front of the screen and thought how, for all the clothes on their backs and the carpets at their feet, no great distance separates them from those bright-eyed naked men who knocked two bars of iron together and heard in that clangour a foretaste of the music of Mozart.

The bars in this case of course are so highly wrought and so covered over with accretions of alien matter that it is extremely difficult to hear anything distinctly. All is bubble bubble, swarm and chaos. We are peering over the edge of a cauldron in which fragments seem to simmer, and now and again some vast shape heaves and seems about to haul itself up out of chaos and the savage in us starts forward with delight. Yet, to begin with, the art of the cinema seems a simple and even a stupid art. That is the King shaking hands with a football team; that is Sir Thomas Lipton's yacht; that is Jack Horner winning the Grand National.\* The eye licks it all up instantaneously and the brain, agreeably titillated, settles down to watch things happening without bestirring itself to think. For the ordinary eye, the English unaesthetic eye, is a simple mechanism, which takes care that the body does not fall down coal-holes, provides the brain with toys and sweetmeats and can be trusted to go on behaving like a competent nursemaid until the brain comes to the conclusion that it is time to wake up. What is its surprise then to be roused suddenly in the midst of its agreeable somnolence and asked for help? The eye is in difficulties. The eye says to the brain, 'Something is happening which I do not in the least understand. You are needed.' Together they look at the King, the boat, the horse, and the brain sees at once that they have taken on a quality which does not belong to the simple photograph of real life. They have become not more beautiful, in the sense in which pictures are beautiful, but shall we call it (our vocabulary is miserably insufficient) more

real, or real with a different reality from that which we perceive in daily life. We behold them as they are when we are not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it. As we gaze we seem to be removed from the pettiness of actual existence, its cares, its conventions. The horse will not knock us down. The King will not grasp our hands. The wave will not wet our feet. Watching the antics of our kind from this post of vantage we have time to feel pity and amusement, to generalise, to endow one man with the attributes of a race; watching boats sail and waves break we have time to open the whole of our mind wide to beauty and to register on top of this the queer sensation—beauty will continue to be beautiful whether we behold it or not. Further, all this happened, we are told, ten years ago. We are beholding a world which has gone beneath the waves. Brides are emerging from the Abbey;\* ushers are ardent; mothers are tearful; guests are joyful; and it is all over and done with. The war opened its chasm at the feet of all this innocence and ignorance. But it was thus that we danced and pirouetted, thus that the sun shone and the clouds scudded, up to the very end. The brain adds all this to what the eye sees upon the screen.

But the picture makers seem dissatisfied with these obvious sources of interest—the wonders of the actual world, flights of gulls, or ships on the Thames; the fascination of contemporary life—the Mile End Road,\* Piccadilly Circus. They want to be improving, altering, making an art of their own—naturally, for so much seems to be within their scope. So many arts at first stood ready to offer their help. For example, there was literature. All the famous novels of the world with their well known characters and their famous scenes only asked to be put on the films. What could be easier, what could be simpler? The cinema fell upon its prey with immense rapacity and to this moment largely subsists upon the body of its unfortunate victim. But the results have been disastrous to both. The alliance is unnatural. Eye and brain are torn asunder ruthlessly as they try vainly to work in couples. The eye says, ‘Here is Anna Karenina,’ \* and a voluptuous lady in black velvet wearing pearls comes before us. The brain exclaims, ‘That is no more Anna Karenina than it is Queen Victoria!’ For the brain knows Anna almost entirely by the inside of her mind—her charm, her passion, her despair, whereas all the emphasis is now laid upon her teeth, her pearls and her velvet. The cinema proceeds, ‘Anna falls in love with Vronsky’—that is to say the lady in black velvet falls into the arms of a gentleman in uniform and they kiss with enormous succulence, great deliberation, and infinite gesticulation

on a sofa in an extremely well appointed library. So we lurch and lumber through the most famous novels of the world. So we spell them out in words of one syllable written in the scrawl of an illiterate schoolboy. A kiss is love. A smashed chair is jealousy. A grin is happiness. Death is a hearse. None of these things has the least connection with the novel that Tolstoy wrote and it is only when we give up trying to connect the pictures with the book that we guess from some scene by the way—a gardener mowing the lawn outside, for example, or a tree shaking its branches in the sunshine—what the cinema might do if it were left to its own devices.

But what then are its own devices? If it ceased to be a parasite in what fashion would it walk erect? At present it is only from hints and accidents that one can frame any conjecture. For instance at a performance of *Dr Caligari*\* the other day a shadow shaped like a tadpole suddenly appeared at one corner of the screen. It swelled to an immense size, quivered, bulged and sank back again into nonentity. For a moment it seemed to embody some monstrous diseased imagination of the lunatic's brain. For a moment it seemed as if thought could be conveyed by shape more effectively than by words. The monstrous quivering tadpole seemed to be fear itself, and not the statement 'I am afraid.' In fact, the shadow was accidental, and the effect unintentional. But if a shadow at a certain moment can suggest so much more than the actual gestures, the actual words of men and women in a state of fear, it seems plain that the cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression. Terror has besides its ordinary forms the shape of a tadpole; it burgeons, bulges, quivers, disappears. Anger might writhe like an infuriated worm in black zigzags across a white sheet. Anna and Vronsky need no longer scowl and grimace. They have at their command—but here the imagination fumbles and is balked. For what characteristics does thought possess which can be rendered visible to the eye without the help of words? It has speed and slowness; dart-like directness and vaporous circumlocution. But it has also an inveterate tendency especially in moments of emotion to make images run side by side with itself, to create a likeness of the thing thought about, as if by so doing it took away its sting, or made it beautiful and comprehensible. In Shakespeare, as everybody knows, the most complex ideas, the most intense emotions form chains of images, through which we pass, however rapidly and completely they change, as up the loops and spirals of a twisting stair. But obviously the poet's images are not to be cast in bronze or traced with pencil and paint.

They are compact of a thousand suggestions, of which the visual is only the most obvious or the uppermost. Even the simplest image such as ‘My love’s like a red, red rose, that’s newly sprung in June’\* presents us with moisture and warmth and the glow of crimson and the softness of petals inextricably mixed and strung upon the lilt of a rhythm which suggests the emotional tenderness of love. All this, which is accessible to words and to words alone, the cinema must avoid.

But if so much of our thinking and feeling is connected with seeing there must be some residue of visual emotion not seized by artist or painter-poet which may await the cinema. That such symbols will be quite unlike the real objects which we see before us seems highly probable. Something abstract, something moving, something calling only for the very slightest help from words or from music to make itself intelligible—of such movements, of such abstractions the films may in time to come be composed. And once this prime difficulty is solved, once some new symbol for expressing thought is found, the film maker has enormous riches at his command. Physical realities, the very pebbles on the beach, the very quivers of the lips, are his for the asking. His Vronsky and his Anna are there in the flesh. If to this reality he could add emotion, and thought, then he would begin to haul his booty in hand over hand. Then as smoke can be seen pouring from Vesuvius,\* we should be able to see wild and lovely and grotesque thoughts pouring from men in dress suits and women with shingled heads. We should see these emotions mingling together and affecting each other. We should see violent changes of emotion produced by their collision. The most fantastic contrasts could be flashed before us with a speed which the writer can only toil after in vain. The past could be unrolled, distances could be annihilated. And those terrible dislocations which are inevitable when Tolstoy has to pass from the story of Anna to the story of Levin could be bridged by some device of scenery. We should have the continuity of human life kept before us by the repetition of some object common to both lives.

All this guessing and clumsy turning over of unknown forces points at any rate away from any art we know in the direction of an art which we can only surmise. It points down a long road strewn with obstacles of every sort. For the film maker must come by his convention, as painters and writers and musicians have done before him. He must make us believe that what he shows us, fantastic though it seems, has some relation with the great veins and arteries of our existence. He must connect it with what we are pleased to

call reality. He must make us believe that our loves and hates lie that way too. How slow a process this is bound to be, and attended with what pain and ridicule and indifference can easily be foretold when we remember how painful novelty is, how the smallest twig even upon the oldest tree offends our sense of propriety. And here it is not a question of a new twig, but of a new trunk and new roots from the earth upwards.

Yet remote as it is, intimations are not wanting that the emotions are accumulating, the time is coming, and the art of the cinema is about to be brought to birth. Watching crowds, watching the chaos of the streets in the lazy way in which faculties detached from use watch and wait, it seems sometimes as if movements and colours, shapes and sounds had come together and waited for someone to seize them and convert their energy into art; then, uncaught, they disperse and fly asunder again. At the cinema for a moment through the mists of irrelevant emotions, through the thick counterpane of immense dexterity and enormous efficiency one has glimpses of something vital within. But the kick of life is instantly concealed by more dexterity, further efficiency.

For the cinema has been born the wrong end first. The mechanical skill is far in advance of the art to be expressed. It is as if the savage tribe instead of finding two bars of iron to play with had found scattering the sea shore fiddles, flutes, saxophones, grand pianos by Erard and Bechstein,\* and had begun with incredible energy but without knowing a note of music to hammer and thump upon them all at the same time.

## STREET HAUNTING: A LONDON ADVENTURE

No one perhaps has ever felt passionately towards a lead pencil. But there are circumstances in which it can become supremely desirable to possess one; moments when we are set upon having an object, an excuse for walking half across London between tea and dinner. As the foxhunter hunts in order to preserve the breed of horses, and the golfer plays in order that open spaces may be preserved from the builders, so when the desire comes upon us to go street rambling the pencil does for a pretext, and getting up we say, 'Really I must buy a pencil,' as if under cover of this excuse we could indulge safely in the greatest pleasure of town life in winter—rambling the streets of London.

The hour should be the evening and the season winter, for in winter the champagne brightness of the air and the sociability of the streets are grateful. We are not then taunted as in the summer by the longing for shade and solitude and sweet airs from the hayfields. The evening hour, too, gives us the irresponsibility which darkness and lamplight bestow. We are no longer quite ourselves. As we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six, we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one's own room. For there we sit surrounded by objects which perpetually express the oddity of our own temperaments and enforce the memories of our own experience. That bowl on the mantelpiece, for instance, was bought at Mantua\* on a windy day. We were leaving the shop when the sinister old woman plucked at our skirts and said she would find herself starving one of these days, but, 'Take it!' she cried, and thrust the blue and white china bowl into our hands as if she never wanted to be reminded of her quixotic generosity. So, guiltily, but suspecting nevertheless how badly we had been fleeced, we carried it back to the little hotel where, in the middle of the night, the innkeeper quarrelled so violently with his wife that we all leant out into the courtyard to look, and saw the vines laced about among the pillars and the stars white in the sky. The moment was stabilized, stamped like a coin indelibly among a million that slipped by imperceptibly. There, too, was the melancholy Englishman, who rose among the coffee cups and



the little iron tables and revealed the secrets of his soul—as travellers do. All this—Italy, the windy morning, the vines laced about the pillars, the Englishman and the secrets of his soul—rise up in a cloud from the china bowl on the mantelpiece. And there, as our eyes fall to the floor, is that brown stamp on the carpet. Mr Lloyd George made that. ‘The man’s a devil!’ said Mr Cummings,\* putting the kettle down with which he was about to fill the teapot so that it burnt a brown ring on the carpet.

But when the door shuts on us, all that vanishes. The shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye. How beautiful a street is in winter! It is at once revealed and obscured. Here vaguely one can trace symmetrical straight avenues of doors and windows; here under the lamps are floating islands of pale light through which pass quickly bright men and women, who, for all their poverty and shabbiness, wear a certain look of unreality, an air of triumph, as if they had given life the slip, so that life, deceived of her prey, blunders on without them. But, after all, we are only gliding smoothly on the surface. The eye is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure. It floats us smoothly down a stream, resting, pausing, the brain sleeps perhaps as it looks.

How beautiful a London street is then, with its islands of light, and its long groves of darkness, and on one side of it perhaps some treesprinkled, grass-grown space where night is folding herself to sleep naturally and, as one passes the iron railing, one hears those little cracklings and stirrings of leaf and twig which seem to suppose the silence of fields all round them, an owl hooting, and far away the rattle of a train in the valley. But this is London, we are reminded; high among the bare trees are hung oblong frames of reddish yellow light—windows; there are points of brilliance burning steadily like low stars—lamps; this empty ground, which holds the country in it and its peace, is only a London square, set about by offices and houses where at this hour fierce lights burn over maps, over documents, over desks where clerks sit turning with wetted forefingers the files of endless correspondences; or more suffusedly the firelight wavers and the lamplight falls upon the privacy of some drawing-room, its easy chairs, its papers, its china, its inlaid table, and the figure of a woman, accurately measuring out the precise number of spoons of tea which——She looks at the door as if she heard a ring downstairs and somebody asking, is she in?



But here we must stop peremptorily. We are in danger of digging deeper than the eye approves; we are impeding our passage down the smooth stream by catching at some branch or root. At any moment, the sleeping army may stir itself and wake in us a thousand violins and trumpets in response; the army of human beings may rouse itself and assert all its oddities and sufferings and sordidities. Let us dally a little longer, be content still with surfaces only—the glossy brilliance of the motor omnibuses; the carnal splendour of the butchers’ shops with their yellow flanks and purple steaks; the blue and red bunches of flowers burning so bravely through the plate glass of the florists’ windows.

For the eye has this strange property: it rests only on beauty; like a butterfly it seeks out colour and basks in warmth. On a winter’s night like this, when nature has been at pains to polish and preen herself, it brings back the prettiest trophies, breaks off little lumps of emerald and coral as if the whole earth were made of precious stone. The thing it cannot do (one is speaking of the average unprofessional eye) is to compose these trophies in such a way as to bring out their more obscure angles and relationships. Hence after a prolonged diet of this simple, sugary fare, of beauty pure and uncomposed, we become conscious of satiety. We halt at the door of the boot shop and make some little excuse, which has nothing to do with the real reason, for folding up the bright paraphernalia of the streets and withdrawing to some duskier chamber of the being where we may ask, as we raise our left foot obediently upon the stand, ‘What, then, is it like to be a dwarf?’

She came in escorted by two women who, being of normal size, looked like benevolent giants beside her. Smiling at the shop girls, they seemed to be at once disclaiming any lot in her deformity and assuring her of their protection. She wore the peevish yet apologetic expression usual on the faces of the deformed. She needed their kindness, yet she resented it. But when the shop girl had been summoned and the giantesses, smiling indulgently, had asked for shoes for ‘this lady’ and the girl had pushed the little stand in front of her, the dwarf stuck her foot out with an impetuosity which seemed to claim all our attention. Look at that! Look at that! she seemed to demand of us all, as she thrust her foot out, for behold it was the shapely, perfectly proportioned foot of a well-grown woman. It was arched; it was aristocratic. Her whole manner changed as she looked at it resting on the stand. She looked soothed and satisfied. Her manner became full of self-confidence. She sent for shoe after shoe; she tried on pair after pair. She got up and pirouetted

before a glass which reflected the foot only in yellow shoes, in fawn shoes, in shoes of lizard skin. She raised her little skirts and displayed her little legs. She was thinking that, after all, feet are the most important part of the whole person; women, she said to herself, have been loved for their feet alone. Seeing nothing but her feet, she imagined perhaps that the rest of her body was of a piece with those beautiful feet. She was shabbily dressed, but she was ready to lavish any money upon her shoes. And as this was the only occasion upon which she was not afraid of being looked at but positively craved attention, she was ready to use any device to prolong the choosing and fitting. Look at my feet, look at my feet, she seemed to be saying, as she took a step this way and then a step that way. The shop girl good-humouredly must have said something flattering, for suddenly her face lit up in an ecstasy. But, after all, the giantesses, benevolent though they were, had their own affairs to see to; she must make up her mind; she must decide which to choose. At length, the pair was chosen and, as she walked out between her guardians, with the parcel swinging from her finger, the ecstasy faded, knowledge returned, the old peevishness, the old apology came back, and by the time she had reached the street again she had become a dwarf.

But she had changed the mood; she had called into being an atmosphere which, as we followed her out into the street, seemed actually to create the humped, the twisted, the deformed. Two bearded men, brothers, apparently, stone-blind, supporting themselves by resting a hand on the head of a small boy between them, marched down the street. On they came with the unyielding yet tremulous tread of the blind, which seems to lend to their approach something of the terror and inevitability of the fate that has overtaken them. As they passed, holding straight on, the little convoy seemed to cleave asunder the passers-by with the momentum of its silence, its directness, its disaster. Indeed, the dwarf had started a hobbling grotesque dance to which everybody in the street now conformed: the stout lady tightly swathed in shiny sealskin; the feeble-minded boy sucking the silver knob of his stick; the old man squatted on a doorstep as if, suddenly overcome by the absurdity of the human spectacle, he had sat down to look at it—all joined in the hobble and tap of the dwarf's dance.

In what crevices and crannies, one might ask, did they lodge, this maimed company of the halt and the blind? Here, perhaps, in the top rooms of these narrow old houses between Holborn and the Strand, where people have such queer names, and pursue so many curious trades, are gold beaters, accordion

pleaters, cover buttons, or others who support life, with even greater fantasticality, upon a traffic in cups without saucers, china umbrella handles, and highly coloured pictures of martyred saints. There they lodge, and it seems as if the lady in the sealskin jacket must find life tolerable, passing the time of day with the accordion pleater, or the man who covers buttons; life which is so fantastic cannot be altogether tragic. They do not grudge us, we are musing, our prosperity; when, suddenly, turning the corner, we come upon a bearded Jew, wild, hunger-bitten, glaring out of his misery; or pass the humped body of an old woman flung abandoned on the step of a public building with a cloak over her like the hasty covering thrown over a dead horse or donkey. At such sights the nerves of the spine seem to stand erect; a sudden flare is brandished in our eyes; a question is asked which is never answered. Often enough these derelicts choose to lie not a stone's throw from theatres, within hearing of barrel organs, almost, as night draws on, within touch of the sequined cloaks and bright legs of diners and dancers. They lie close to those shop windows where commerce offers to a world of old women laid on doorsteps, of blind men, of hobbling dwarfs, sofas which are supported by the gilt necks of proud swans; tables inlaid with baskets of many coloured fruit; sideboards paved with green marble the better to support the weight of boars' heads, gilt baskets, candelabra; and carpets so softened with age that their carnations have almost vanished in a pale green sea.

Passing, glimpsing, everything seems accidentally but miraculously sprinkled with beauty, as if the tide of trade which deposits its burden so punctually and prosaically upon the shores of Oxford Street had this night cast up nothing but treasure. With no thought of buying, the eye is sportive and generous; it creates; it adorns; it enhances. Standing out in the street, one may build up all the chambers of a vast imaginary house and furnish them at one's will with sofa, table, carpet. That rug will do for the hall. That alabaster bowl shall stand on a carved table in the window. Our merrymakings shall be reflected in that thick round mirror. But, having built and furnished the house, one is happily under no obligation to possess it; one can dismantle it in the twinkling of an eye, build and furnish another house with other chairs and other glasses. Or let us indulge ourselves at the antique jewellers, among the trays of rings and the hanging necklaces. Let us choose those pearls, for example, and then imagine how, if we put them on, life would be changed. It becomes instantly between two and three in the morning; the lamps are burning very white in the deserted streets of Mayfair. Only motor cars are

abroad at this hour, and one has a sense of emptiness, of airiness, of secluded gaiety. Wearing pearls, wearing silk, one steps out on to a balcony which overlooks the gardens of sleeping Mayfair. There are a few lights in the bedrooms of great peers returned from Court, of silk-stockinged footmen, of dowagers who have pressed the hands of statesmen. A cat creeps along the garden wall. Love-making is going on sibilantly, seductively in the darker places of the room behind thick green curtains. Strolling sedately as if he were promenading a terrace beneath which the shires and counties of England lie sun-bathed, the aged Prime Minister\* recounts to Lady So-and-So with the curls and the emeralds the true history of some great crisis in the affairs of the land. We seem to be riding on the top of the highest mast of the tallest ship; and yet at the same time we know that nothing of this sort matters; love is not proved thus, nor great achievements completed thus; so that we sport with the moment and preen our feathers in it lightly, as we stand on the balcony watching the moonlit cat creep along Princess Mary's garden wall.

But what could be more absurd? It is, in fact, on the stroke of six; it is a winter's evening; we are walking to the Strand to buy a pencil. How, then, are we also on a balcony, wearing pearls in June? What could be more absurd? Yet it is nature's folly, not ours. When she set about her chief masterpiece, the making of man, she should have thought of one thing only. Instead, turning her head, looking over her shoulder, into each one of us she let creep instincts and desires which are utterly at variance with his main being, so that we are streaked, variegated, all of a mixture; the colours have run. Is the true self this which stands on the pavement in January, or that which bends over the balcony in June? Am I here, or am I there? Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves? Circumstances compel unity; for convenience' sake a man must be a whole. The good citizen when he opens his door in the evening must be banker, golfer, husband, father; not a nomad wandering the desert, a mystic staring at the sky, a debauchee in the slums of San Francisco, a soldier heading a revolution, a pariah howling with scepticism and solitude. When he opens his door, he must run his fingers through his hair and put his umbrella in the stand like the rest.

But here, none too soon, are the second-hand bookshops. Here we find anchorage in these thwarting currents of being; here we balance ourselves after the splendours and miseries of the streets. The very sight of the

bookseller's wife with her foot on the fender, sitting beside a good coal fire, screened from the door, is sobering and cheerful. She is never reading, or has only the newspaper; her talk, when it leaves bookselling, as it does so gladly, is about hats; she likes a hat to be practical, she says, as well as pretty. Oh no, they don't live at the shop; they live at Brixton; she must have a bit of green to look at. In summer a jar of flowers grown in her own garden is stood on the top of some dusty pile to enliven the shop. Books are everywhere; and always the same sense of adventure fills us. Second-hand books are wild books, homeless books; they have come together in vast flocks of variegated feather, and have a charm which the domesticated volumes of the library lack. Besides, in this random miscellaneous company we may rub against some complete stranger who will, with luck, turn into the best friend we have in the world. There is always a hope, as we reach down some grayish-white book from an upper shelf, directed by its air of shabbiness and desertion, of meeting here with a man who set out on horseback over a hundred years ago to explore the woollen market in the midlands and Wales; an unknown traveller, who stayed at inns, drank his pint, noted pretty girls and serious customs, wrote it all down stiffly, laboriously for sheer love of it (the book was published at his own expense); was infinitely prosy, busy, and matter-of-fact, and so let flow in without his knowing it the very scent of hollyhocks and the hay together with such a portrait of himself as gives him forever a seat in the warm corner of the mind's inglenook.\* One may buy him for eighteen pence now. He is marked three and sixpence, but the bookseller's wife, seeing how shabby the covers are and how long the book has stood there since it was bought at some sale of a gentleman's library in Suffolk, will let it go at that.

Thus, glancing round the bookshop, we make other such sudden capricious friendships with the unknown and the vanished whose only record is, for example, this little book of poems, so fairly printed, so finely engraved, too, with a portrait of the author. For he was a poet and drowned untimely,\* and his verse, mild as it is and formal and sententious, sends forth still a frail fluty sound like that of a piano organ played in some back street resignedly by an old Italian organ-grinder in a corduroy jacket. There are travellers, too, row upon row of them, still testifying, indomitable spinsters that they were, to the discomforts that they endured and the sunsets they admired in Greece when Queen Victoria was a girl; a tour in Cornwall with a visit to the tin mines was thought worthy of voluminous record. People

went slowly up the Rhine and did portraits of each other in Indian ink, sitting reading on deck beside a coil of rope; they measured the pyramids; were lost to civilization for years; converted negroes in pestilential swamps. This packing up and going off, exploring deserts and catching fevers, settling in India for a lifetime, penetrating even to China and then returning to lead a parochial life at Edmonton, tumbles and tosses upon the dusty floor like an uneasy sea, so restless the English are, with the waves at their very door. The waters of travel and adventure seem to break upon little islands of serious effort and lifelong industry stood in jagged columns upon the floor. In these piles of puce-bound volumes with gilt monograms on the back, thoughtful clergymen expound the gospels; scholars are to be heard with their hammers and their chisels chipping clear the ancient texts of Euripides and Aeschylus.\* Thinking, annotating, expounding goes on at a prodigious rate all round us and over everything, like a punctual, everlasting tide, washes the ancient sea of fiction. Innumerable volumes tell how Arthur loved Laura and they were separated and they were unhappy and then they met and they were happy ever after, as was the way when Victoria ruled these islands.

The number of books in the world is infinite, and one is forced to glimpse and nod and go on after a moment of talk, a flash of understanding, as, in the street outside, one catches a word in passing and from a chance phrase fabricates a lifetime. It is about a woman called Kate that they are talking, how 'I said to her, quite straight last night ... if you don't think I'm worth a penny stamp, I said ...' But who Kate is, and to what crisis in their friendship the penny stamp refers, we shall never know; for Kate sinks under the warmth of their volubility; and here, at the street corner, another page of the volume of life is laid open by the sight of two men consulting under the lamp-post. They are spelling out the latest wire from Newmarket in the stop press news.\* Do they think, then, that fortune will ever convert their rags into fur and broadcloth, sling them with watch-chains, and plant diamond pins where there is now a ragged open shirt? But the main stream of walkers at this hour sweeps too fast to let us ask such questions. They are wrapt, in this short passage from work to home, in some narcotic dream, now that they are free from the desk, and have the fresh air on their cheeks. They put on those bright clothes which they must hang up and lock the key upon all the rest of the day, and are great cricketers, famous actresses, soldiers who have saved their country at the hour of need. Dreaming, gesticulating, often muttering a few words aloud, they sweep over the Strand and across Waterloo Bridge

whence they will be swung in long rattling trains, still dreaming, to some prim little villa in Barnes or Surbiton where the sight of the clock in the hall and the smell of the supper in the basement puncture the dream.

But we are come to the Strand now, and as we hesitate on the kerb, a little rod about the length of one's finger begins to lay its bar across the velocity and abundance of life. 'Really I must—really I must'—that is it. Without investigating the demand, the mind cringes to the accustomed tyrant. One must, one always must, do something or other; it is not allowed one simply to enjoy oneself. Was it not for this reason that, some time ago, we fabricated that excuse, and invented the necessity of buying something? But what was it? Ah, we remember, it was a pencil. Let us go then and buy this pencil. But just as we are turning to obey the command, another self disputes the right of the tyrant to insist. The usual conflict comes about. Spread out behind the rod of duty we see the whole breadth of the river Thames—wide, mournful, peaceful. And we see it through the eyes of somebody who is leaning over the Embankment on a summer evening, without a care in the world. Let us put off buying the pencil; let us go in search of this person (and soon it becomes apparent that this person is ourselves). For if we could stand there where we stood six months ago, should we not be again as we were then—calm, aloof, content? Let us try then. But the river is rougher and greyer than we remembered. The tide is running out to sea. It brings down with it a tug and two barges, whose load of straw is tightly bound down beneath tarpaulin covers. There is, too, close by us, a couple leaning over the balustrade murmuring with that curious lack of self-consciousness which lovers have, as if the importance of the affair they are engaged on claims without question the indulgence of the human race. The sights we see and the sounds we hear now have none of the quality of the past; nor have we any share in the serenity of the person who, six months ago, stood precisely where we stand now. His is the happiness of death; ours the insecurity of life. He has no future; the future is even now invading our peace. It is only when we look at the past and take from it the element of uncertainty that we can enjoy perfect peace. As it is, we must turn, we must cross the Strand again, we must find a shop where, even at this hour, they will be ready to sell us a pencil.

It is always an adventure to enter a new room; for the lives and characters of its owners have distilled their atmosphere into it, and directly we enter it we breast some new wave of emotion. Here, without a doubt, in the stationer's shop people had been quarrelling. Their anger shot through the air.

They both stopped; the old woman—they were husband and wife evidently—retired to a back room; the old man whose rounded forehead and globular eyes would have looked well on the frontispiece of some Elizabethan folio, stayed to serve us. ‘A pencil, a pencil,’ he repeated, ‘certainly, certainly.’ He spoke with the distraction yet effusiveness of one whose emotions have been roused and checked in full flood. He began opening box after box and shutting them again. He said that it was very difficult to find things when they kept so many different articles. He launched into a story about some legal gentleman who had got into deep waters owing to the conduct of his wife. He had known him for years; he had been connected with the Temple\* for half a century, he said, as if he wished his wife in the back room to overhear him. He upset a box of rubber bands. At last, exasperated by his incompetence, he pushed the swing door open and called out roughly, ‘Where d’you keep the pencils?’ as if his wife had hidden them. The old lady came in. Looking at nobody, she put her hand with a fine air of righteous severity upon the right box. There were pencils. How then could he do without her? Was she not indispensable to him? In order to keep them there, standing side by side in forced neutrality, one had to be particular in one’s choice of pencils; this was too soft, that too hard. They stood silently looking on. The longer they stood there, the calmer they grew; their heat was going down, their anger disappearing. Now, without a word said on either side, the quarrel was made up. The old man, who would not have disgraced Ben Jonson’s\* title-page, reached the box back to its proper place, bowed profoundly his good-night to us, and they disappeared. She would get out her sewing; he would read his newspaper; the canary would scatter them impartially with seed. The quarrel was over.

During these minutes in which a ghost has been sought for, a quarrel composed, and a pencil bought, the streets had become completely empty. Life had withdrawn to the top floor, and lamps were lit. The pavement was dry and hard; the road was of hammered silver. Walking home through the desolation one could tell oneself the story of the dwarf, of the blind men, of the party in the Mayfair mansion, of the quarrel in the stationer’s shop. Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others. One could become a washerwoman, a publican, a street singer. And what greater delight and wonder can there be than to leave the straight lines of personality and deviate



into those footpaths that lead beneath brambles and thick tree trunks into the heart of the forest where live those wild beasts, our fellow men?

That is true: to escape is the greatest of pleasures; street haunting in winter the greatest of adventures. Still as we approach our own doorstep again, it is comforting to feel the old possessions, the old prejudices, fold us round, and shelter and enclose the self which has been blown about at so many street corners, which has battered like a moth at the flame of so many inaccessible lanterns, sheltered and enclosed. Here again is the usual door; here the chair turned as we left it and the china bowl and the brown ring on the carpet. And here—let us examine it tenderly, let us touch it with reverence—is the only spoil we have retrieved from the treasures of the city, a lead pencil.

## THE SUN AND THE FISH

It is an amusing game especially for a dark winter's morning. One says to the eye Athens; Segesta;\* Queen Victoria; and one waits, as submissively as possible, to see what will happen next. And perhaps nothing happens, and perhaps a great many things happen, but not the things one might expect. The old lady in horn spectacles—our late Queen—is vivid enough; but somehow she has allied herself with a soldier in Piccadilly who is stooping to pick up a coin; with a yellow camel who is swaying through an archway in Kensington Gardens; with a kitchen chair and a distinguished old gentleman waving his hat. Dropped years ago into the mind, she has become stuck about with all sorts of alien matter. When one says Queen Victoria, one draws up the most heterogeneous collection of objects, which it will take a week at least to sort. On the other hand one may say to oneself Mont Blanc at dawn; the Taj Mahal in the moonlight; and the mind remains a blank. For a sight will only survive in the queer pool in which we deposit our memories if it has the good luck to ally itself with some other emotion by which it is preserved. Sights marry, incongruously, morganatically (like the Queen and the camel) and so keep each other alive. Mont Blanc, the Taj Mahal, sights which we travelled and toiled to see, fade and perish and disappear because they failed to find the right mate. On our death-beds it is possible we shall see nothing more majestic than a cat and an old woman in a sunbonnet. The great sights will have died for lack of mates.

So, on this dark winter's morning, when the real world has faded, let us see what the eye can do for us. Show me the eclipse, we say to the eye; let us see that strange spectacle again.\* And we see at once—but the mind's eye is only by courtesy an eye; it is a nerve which hears and smells, which transmits heat and cold, which is attached to the brain and rouses the mind to discriminate and speculate—it is only for brevity's sake that we say that we 'see' at once a railway station at night. A crowd is gathered at a barrier; but how curious a crowd! Mackintoshes are slung over their arms; in their hands they carry little cases. They have a provisional, extemporised look. They have that moving and disturbing unity which comes from the consciousness

that they (but here it would be more proper to say 'we') have a purpose in common. Never was there a stranger purpose than that which brought us together that June night in Euston Railway Station. We were come to see the dawn. Trains like ours were starting all over England at that very moment to see the dawn. All noses were pointing North. When for a moment we halted in the depths of the country, there were the pale yellow lights of motor cars also pointing North. There was no sleep, no fixity in England that night. All were travelling North. All were thinking of the dawn. As the night wore on the sky, which was the object of so many million thoughts, assumed greater substance and prominence than usual. The consciousness of the whitish soft canopy above us increased in weight as the hours passed. When in the chill early morning we were turned out on a Yorkshire road-side, our senses had orientated themselves differently from usual. We were no longer in the same relation to people, houses and trees; we were related to the whole world. We had come, not to lodge in the bedroom of an Inn; we were come for a few hours of disembodied intercourse with the sky.

Everything was very pale. The river was pale and the fields, brimming with grasses and tasselled flowers which should have been red, had no colour in them, but lay there whispering and waving round colourless farm-houses. Now the farm-house door would open and out would step to join the procession the farmer and his family in their Sunday clothes, neat, dark and silent as if they were going up hill to church; or sometimes women merely leant on the window sills of the upper rooms watching the procession pass with amused contempt, it appeared—they have come such hundreds of miles, and for what? they seemed to say—in complete silence. We had an odd sense of keeping an appointment with an actor of such vast proportions that he would come silently and be everywhere.

By the time we were at the meeting place, on a high fell where the hills stretched their limbs out over the flowing brown moorland below, we had put on too—though we were cold and with our feet stood in red bog water were likely to be still colder, though some of us were squatted on mackintoshes among cups and plates, eating, and others were fantastically accoutred and none were at their best—still we had put on a certain dignity. Rather, perhaps, we had put off the little badges and signs of individuality. We were strung out against the sky in outline and had the look of statues standing prominent on the ridge of the world. We were very, very old; we were men and women of the primeval world come to salute the dawn. So the

worshippers at Stonehenge must have looked among tussocks of grass and boulders of rock. Suddenly from the motor car of some Yorkshire Squire, there bounded four large lean, red dogs, hounds of the ancient world, hunting dogs, they seemed, leaping with their noses close to the ground on the track of boar or deer. Meanwhile, the sun was rising. A cloud glowed as a white shade glows when the light is slowly turned up behind it. Golden wedge-shaped streamers fell down from it and marked the trees in the valley green and the villages blue-brown. In the sky behind us there swam white islands in pale blue lakes. The sky was open and free there, but in front of us a soft snow bank had massed itself. Yet, as we looked, we saw it proving worn and thin in patches. The gold momentarily increased, melting the whiteness to a fiery gauze, and this grew frailer and frailer till, for one instant, we saw the sun in full splendour. Then there was a pause. There was a moment of suspense, like that which precedes a race. The starter held his watch in his hand counting the seconds. Now they were off.

The sun had to race through the clouds and to reach the goal, which was a thin transparency to the right, before the sacred seconds were up. He started. The clouds flung every obstacle in his way. They clung, they impeded. He dashed through them. He could be felt flashing and flying, when he was invisible. His speed was tremendous. Here he was out and bright; now he was under and lost. But always one felt him flying and thrusting through the murk to his goal. For one second he emerged and showed himself to us through our glasses, a hollowed sun, a crescent sun. It was a proof perhaps that he was doing his best for us. Now he went under his last effort. Now he was completely blotted out. The moments passed. Watches were held in hand after hand. The sacred twenty-four seconds were begun. Unless he could win through before the last one was over he was lost. Still one felt him tearing and racing behind the clouds to win free; but the clouds held him. They spread; they thickened; they slackened, they muffled his speed. Of the twenty-four seconds only five remained and still he was obscured. And, as the fatal seconds passed and we realised that the sun was being defeated, had now indeed lost the race, all the colour began to go from the moor. The blue turned to purple; the white became livid as at the approach of a violent but windless storm. Pink faces went green, and it became colder than ever. This was the defeat of the sun then, and this was all, so we thought, turning in disappointment from the dull cloud blanket in front of us to the moors behind. They were livid, they were purple; but suddenly one became aware

that something more was about to happen; something unexpected, awful, unavoidable. The shadow growing darker and darker over the moor was like the heeling over of a boat, which, instead of righting itself at the critical moment, turns a little further and then a little further; and suddenly capsizes. So the light turned and heeled over and went out. This was the end. The flesh and blood of the world was dead and only the skeleton was left. It hung beneath us, frail; brown; dead; withered. Then, with some trifling movement, this profound obeisance of the light, this stooping down and abasement of all splendour was over. Lightly, on the other side of the world up it rose; it sprang up as if the one movement, after a second's tremendous pause, completed the other and the light which had died here, rose again elsewhere. Never was there such a sense of rejuvenescence and recovery. All the convalescences and respite of life seemed rolled into one. Yet at first, so pale and frail and strange the light was sprinkled rainbow-like in a hoop of colour, that it seemed as if the earth could never live decked out in such frail tints. It hung beneath us, like a cage, like a hoop, like a globe of glass. It might be blown out; it might be stove in. But steadily and surely our relief broadened and our confidence established itself as the great paint brush washed in woods, dark on the valley, and massed the hills blue above them. The world became more and more solid; it became populous; it became a place where an infinite number of farm-houses, of villages, of railway lines have lodgment; until the whole fabric of civilisation was modelled and moulded. But still the memory endured that the earth we stand on is made of colour; colour can be blown out; and then we stand on a dead leaf; and we who tread the earth securely now have seen it dead.

But the eye has not done with us yet. In pursuit of some logic of its own, which we cannot follow immediately, it now presents us with a picture, or generalised impression rather, of London on a hot summer day, when, to judge by the sense of concussion and confusion the London season is at its height. It takes us a moment to realise first that we are in some public gardens, next from the asphalt and the paperbags strewn about that it must be the Zoological Garden,\* and then without further preparation we are presented with the complete and perfect effigy of two lizards. After destruction calm; after ruin steadfastness—that perhaps is the logic of the eye. At any rate one lizard is mounted immobile on the back of another, with only the twinkle of a gold eye-lid or the suction of a green flank to show that they are living flesh, and not made of bronze. All human passion seems

furtive and feverish beside this still rapture. Time seems to have stopped and we are in the presence of immortality. The tumult of the world has fallen from us like a crumbling cloud. Tanks cut in the level blackness enclose squares of immortality, worlds of settled sunshine, where there is neither rain nor cloud. There the inhabitants perform for ever evolutions whose intricacy, because it has no reason, seems the more sublime. Blue and silver armies, keeping a perfect distance for all their arrow-like quickness, shoot first this way, then that. The discipline is perfect, the control absolute; reason there is none. The most majestic of human evolutions seems feeble and fluctuating compared with the fishes'. Each of these worlds too, which measures perhaps four feet by five is as perfect in its order as in its method. For forests, they have half a dozen bamboo canes; for mountains, sand-hills; in the curves and crinkles of a sea-shell lie for them all adventure, all romance. The rise of a bubble, negligible elsewhere, is here an event of the highest performance. The silver drop bores its way up a spiral staircase through the water to burst against the sheet of glass which seems laid flat across the top. Nothing exists needlessly. The fish themselves seem to have been shaped deliberately and slipped into the world only to be themselves. They neither work nor weep. In their shape is their reason. For what other purpose, except the sufficient one of perfect existence, can they have been thus made, some so round, some so thin, some with radiating fins upon their backs, others lined with red electric light, others undulating like white pancakes on a frying pan, some armoured in blue mail, some given prodigious claws, some outrageously fringed with huge whiskers? More care has been spent upon half a dozen fish than upon all the races of mankind. Under our tweed and silk is nothing but a monotony of pink nakedness. Poets are not transparent to the backbone as these fish are. Bankers have no claws. Kings and Queens themselves wear neither ruffs nor frills. In short, if we were to be turned naked, into an Aquarium—but enough. The eye shuts now. It has shown us a dead world and an immortal fish.

## THE DOCKS OF LONDON

‘WHITHER, O splendid ship,’ the poet asked\* as he lay on the shore and watched the great sailing ship pass away on the horizon. Perhaps, as he imagined, it was making for some port in the Pacific; but one day almost certainly it must have heard an irresistible call and come past the North Foreland and the Reculvers, and entered the narrow waters of the Port of London, sailed past the low banks of Gravesend and Northfleet and Tilbury, up Erith Reach and Barking Reach and Gallion’s Reach, past the gas works and the sewage works till it found, for all the world like a car on a parking ground, a space reserved for it in the deep waters of the docks. There it furled its sails and dropped anchor.

However romantic and free and fitful they may seem, there is scarcely a ship on the seas that does not come to anchor in the Port of London in time. From a launch in midstream one can see them swimming up the river with all the marks of their voyage still on them.\* Liners come, high-decked, with their galleries and their awnings and their passengers grasping their bags and leaning over the rail, while the lascars tumble and scurry below—home they come, a thousand of these big ships every week of the year to anchor in the docks of London. They take their way majestically through a crowd of tramp steamers, and colliers and barges heaped with coal and swaying red sailed boats, which, amateurish though they look, are bringing bricks from Harwich or cement from Colchester—for all is business; there are no pleasure boats on this river. Drawn by some irresistible current, they come from the storms and calms of the sea, its silence and loneliness to their allotted anchorage. The engines stop; the sails are furled; and suddenly the gaudy funnels and the tall masts show up incongruously against a row of workmen’s houses, against the black walls of huge warehouses. A curious change takes place. They have no longer the proper perspective of sea and sky behind them, and no longer the proper space in which to stretch their limbs. They lie captive, like soaring and winged creatures who have got themselves caught by the leg and lie tethered on dry land.

With the sea blowing its salt into our nostrils, nothing can be more

stimulating than to watch the ships coming up the Thames—the big ships and the little ships, the battered and the splendid ships, from India, from Russia, from South America, ships from Australia coming from silence and danger and loneliness past us, home to harbour. But once they drop anchor, once the cranes begin their dipping and their swinging, it seems as if all romance were over. If we turn and go past the anchored ships towards London, we see surely the most dismal prospect in the world. The banks of the river are lined with dingy, decrepit-looking warehouses. They huddle on land that has become flat and slimy mud. The same air of decrepitude and of being run up provisionally stamps them all. If a window is broken, broken it remains. A fire that has lately blackened and blistered one of them seems to have left it no more forlorn and joyless than its neighbours. Behind the masts and funnels lies a sinister dwarf city of workmen's houses. In the foreground cranes and warehouses, scaffolding and gasometers line the banks with a skeleton architecture.

When, suddenly, after acres and acres of this desolation one floats past an old stone house standing in a real field, with real trees growing in clumps, the sight is disconcerting. Can it be possible that there is earth, that there once were fields and crops beneath this desolation and disorder? Trees and fields seem to survive incongruously like a sample of another civilization among the wall-paper factories and soap factories that have stamped out old lawns and terraces. Still more incongruously one passes an old grey country church which still rings its bells, and keeps its churchyard green as if country people were still coming across the fields to service. Further down, an inn with swelling bow windows still wears a strange air of dissipation and pleasure making. In the middle years of the nineteenth century it was a favourite resort of pleasure makers, and figured in some of the most famous divorce cases of the time. Now pleasure has gone and labour has come; and it stands derelict like some beauty in her midnight finery looking out over mud flats and candle works, while malodorous mounds of earth, upon which trucks are perpetually tipping fresh heaps, have entirely consumed the fields where, a hundred years ago, lovers wandered and picked violets.

As we go on steaming up the river to London we meet its refuse coming down. Barges heaped with old buckets, razor blades, fish tails, newspapers and ashes—whatever we leave on our plates and throw into our dustbins—are discharging their cargoes upon the most desolate land in the world. The long mounds have been fuming and smoking and harbouring innumerable rats and



growing a rank coarse grass and giving off a gritty, acrid air for fifty years. The dumps get higher and higher, and thicker and thicker, their sides more precipitous with tin cans, their pinnacles more angular with ashes year by year. But then, past all this sordidity, sweeps indifferently a great liner, bound for India. She takes her way through rubbish barges, and sewage barges, and dredgers out to sea. A little further, on the left hand, we are suddenly surprised—the sight upsets all our proportions once more—by what appear to be the stateliest buildings ever raised by the hand of man. Greenwich Hospital\* with all its columns and domes comes down in perfect symmetry to the water's edge, and makes the river again a stately waterway where the nobility of England once walked at their ease on green lawns, or descended stone steps to their pleasure barges. As we come closer to the Tower Bridge the authority of the city begins to assert itself. The buildings thicken and heap themselves higher. The sky seems laden with heavier, purpler clouds. Domes swell; church spires, white with age, mingle with the tapering, pencil-shaped chimneys of factories. One hears the roar and the resonance of London itself. Here at last, we have landed at that thick and formidable circle of ancient stone, where so many drums have beaten and heads have fallen, the Tower of London itself. This is the knot, the clue, the hub of all those scattered miles of skeleton desolation and ant-like activity. Here growls and grumbles that rough city song that has called the ships from the sea and brought them to lie captive beneath its warehouses.

Now from the dock side we look down into the heart of the ship that has been lured from its voyaging and tethered to the dry land. The passengers and their bags have disappeared; the sailors have gone too. Indefatigable cranes are now at work, dipping and swinging, swinging and dipping. Barrels, sacks, crates are being picked up out of the hold and swung regularly on shore. Rhythmically, dexterously, with an order that has some aesthetic delight in it, barrel is laid by barrel, case by case, cask by cask, one behind another, one on top of another, one beside another in endless array down the aisles and arcades of the immense low-ceiled, entirely plain and unornamented warehouses. Timber, iron, grain, wine, sugar, paper, tallow, fruit—whatever the ship has gathered from the plains, from the forests, from the pastures of the whole world is here lifted from its hold and set in its right place. A thousand ships with a thousand cargoes are being unladen every week. And not only is each package of this vast and varied merchandise picked up and set down accurately, but each is weighed and opened, sampled and recorded,

and again stitched up and laid in its place, without haste, or waste, or hurry, or confusion by a very few men in shirtsleeves, who, working with the utmost organization in the common interest—for buyers will take their word and abide by their decision—are yet able to pause in their work and say to the casual visitor, ‘Would you like to see what sort of thing we sometimes find in sacks of cinnamon? Look at this snake!’

A snake, a scorpion, a beetle, a lump of amber, the diseased tooth of an elephant, a basin of quicksilver—these are some of the rarities and oddities that have been picked out of this cast merchandise and stood on a table. But with this one concession to curiosity, the temper of the docks is severely utilitarian. Oddities, beauties, rarities may occur, but if so, they are instantly tested for their mercantile value. Laid on the floor among the circles of elephant tusks is a heap of larger and browner tusks than the rest. Brown they well may be, for these are the tusks of mammoths that have lain frozen in Siberian ice for fifty thousand years; but fifty thousand years are suspect in the eyes of the ivory expert. Mammoth ivory tends to warp; you cannot extract billiard balls from mammoths, but only umbrella handles and the backs of the cheaper kind of hand-glass. Thus if you buy an umbrella or a looking-glass not of the finest quality, it is likely that you are buying the tusk of a brute that roamed through Asian forests before England was an island.

One tusk makes a billiard ball, another serves for a shoe-horn—every commodity in the world has been examined and graded according to its use and value. Trade is ingenious and indefatigable beyond the bounds of imagination. None of all the multitudinous products and waste products of the earth but has been tested and found some possible use for. The bales of wool that are being swung from the hold of an Australian ship are girt, to save space, with iron hoops; but the hoops do not litter the floor; they are sent to Germany and made into safety razors. The wool itself exudes a coarse greasiness. This grease, which is harmful to blankets, serves, when extracted, to make face cream. Even the burrs that stick in the wool of certain breeds of sheep have their use, for they prove that the sheep undoubtedly were fed on certain rich pastures. Not a burr, not a tuft of wool, not an iron hoop is unaccounted for. And the aptness of everything to its purpose, the forethought and readiness which have provided for every process, come, as if by the back door, to provide that element of beauty which nobody in the docks has ever given half a second of thought to. The warehouse is perfectly fit to be a warehouse; the crane to be a crane. Hence beauty begins to steal in.

The cranes dip and swing, and there is rhythm in their regularity. The warehouse walls are open wide to admit sacks and barrels; but through them one sees all the roofs of London, its masts and spires, and the unconscious, vigorous movements of men lifting and unloading. Because barrels of wine require to be laid on their sides in cool vaults all the mystery of dim lights, all the beauty of low arches is thrown in as an extra.

The wine vaults present a scene of extraordinary solemnity. Waving long blades of wood to which lamps have been fixed, we peer about, in what seems to be a vast cathedral, at cask after cask lying in a dim sacerdotal atmosphere, gravely maturing, slowly ripening. We might be priests worshipping in the temple of some silent religion and not merely wine tasters and Customs Officers as we wander, waving our lamps up this aisle, down that. A yellow cat precedes us; otherwise the vaults are empty of all human life. Here side by side the objects of our worship lie swollen with sweet liquor, spouting red wine if tapped. A winy sweetness fills the vaults like incense. Here and there a gas jet flares, not indeed to give light, or because of the beauty of the green and grey arches which it calls up in endless procession, down avenue after avenue, but simply because so much heat is required to mellow the wine. Use produces beauty as a by-product. From the low arches a white cotton-wool-like growth depends. It is a fungus, but whether lovely or loathsome matters not; it is welcome because it proves that the air possesses the right degree of dampness for the health of the precious fluid.

Even the English language has adapted itself to the needs of commerce. Words have formed round objects and taken their exact outline. One may look in the dictionary in vain for the warehouse meaning of ‘valinch’, ‘shive’, ‘shirt’, and ‘flogger’, but in the warehouse they have formed naturally on the tip of the tongue. So too the light stroke on either side of the barrel which makes the bung start has been arrived at by years of trial and experiment. It is the quickest, the most effective of actions. Dexterity can go no further.

The only thing, one comes to feel, that can change the routine of the docks is a change in ourselves. Suppose, for instance, that we gave up drinking claret, or took to using rubber instead of wool for our blankets, the whole machinery of production and distribution would rock and reel and seek about to adapt itself afresh. It is we—our tastes, our fashions, our needs—that make the cranes dip and swing, that call the ships from the sea. Our body is their master. We demand shoes, furs, bags, stoves, oil, rice puddings, candles; and

they are brought us. Trade watches us anxiously to see what new desires are beginning to grow in us, what new dislikes. One feels an important, a complex, a necessary animal as one stands on the quayside watching the cranes hoist this barrel, that crate, that other bale from the holds of the ships that have come to anchor. Because one chooses to light a cigarette, all those barrels of Virginian tobacco are swung on shore. Flocks upon flocks of Australian sheep have submitted to the shears because we demand woollen overcoats in winter. As for the umbrella that we swing idly to and fro, a mammoth who roared through the swamps fifty thousand years ago has yielded up its tusk to make the handle.

Meanwhile the ship flying the Blue Peter\* moves slowly out of the dock; it has turned its bows to India or Australia once more. But in the Port of London, lorries jostle each other in the little street that leads from the dock—for there has been a great sale, and the cart horses are struggling and striving to distribute the wool over England.

## OXFORD STREET TIDE

DOWN in the docks one sees things in their crudity, their bulk, their enormity. Here in Oxford Street they have been refined and transformed. The huge barrels of damp tobacco have been rolled into innumerable neat cigarettes laid in silver paper. The corpulent bales of wool have been spun into thin vests and soft stockings. The grease of sheep's thick wool has become scented cream for delicate skins. And those who buy and those who sell have suffered the same city change. Tripping, mincing, in black coats, in satin dresses, the human form has adapted itself no less than the animal product. Instead of hauling and heaving, it deftly opens drawers, rolls out silk on counters, measures and snips with yard sticks and scissors.

Oxford Street, it goes without saying, is not London's most distinguished thoroughfare. Moralists have been known to point the finger of scorn at those who buy there, and they have the support of the dandies. Fashion has secret crannies off Hanover Square, round about Bond Street, to which it withdraws discreetly to perform its more sublime rites. In Oxford Street there are too many bargains, too many sales, too many goods marked down to one and eleven three that only last week cost two and six. The buying and selling is too blatant and raucous. But as one saunters towards the sunset—and what with artificial light and mounds of silk and gleaming omnibuses, a perpetual sunset seems to brood over the Marble Arch\*—the garishness and gaudiness of the great rolling ribbon of Oxford Street has its fascination. It is like the pebbly bed of a river whose stones are forever washed by a bright stream. Everything glitters and twinkles. The first spring day brings out barrows frilled with tulips, violets, daffodils in brilliant layers. The frail vessels eddy vaguely across the stream of the traffic. At one corner seedy magicians are making slips of coloured paper expand in magic tumblers into bristling forests of splendidly tinted flora—a subaqueous flower garden. At another, tortoises repose on litters of grass. The slowest and most contemplative of creatures display their mild activities on a foot or two of pavement, jealously guarded from passing feet. One infers that the desire of man for the tortoise, like the desire of the moth for the star, is a constant element in human nature.

Nevertheless, to see a woman stop and add a tortoise to her string of parcels is perhaps the rarest sight that human eyes can look upon.

Taking all this into account—the auctions, the barrows, the cheapness, the glitter—it cannot be said that the character of Oxford Street is refined. It is a breeding ground, a forcing house of sensation. The pavement seems to sprout horrid tragedies; the divorces of actresses, the suicides of millionaires occur here with a frequency that is unknown in the more austere pavements of the residential districts. News changes quicker than in any other part of London. The press of people passing seems to lick the ink off the placards and to consume more of them and to demand fresh supplies of later editions faster than elsewhere. The mind becomes a glutinous slab that takes impressions and Oxford Street rolls off upon it a perpetual ribbon of changing sights, sounds and movement. Parcels slap and hit; motor omnibuses graze the kerb; the blare of a whole brass band in full tongue dwindles to a thin reed of sound. Buses, vans, cars, barrows stream past like the fragments of a picture puzzle; a white arm rises; the puzzle runs thick, coagulates, stops; the white arm sinks, and away it streams again, streaked, twisted, higgledy-piggledy, in perpetual race and disorder. The puzzle never fits itself together, however long we look.

On the banks of this river of turning wheels our modern aristocrats have built palaces just as in ancient days the Dukes of Somerset and Northumberland, the Earls of Dorset and Salisbury lined the Strand with their stately mansions. The different houses of the great firms testify to the courage, initiative, the audacity of their creators much as the great houses of Cavendish and Percy\* testify to such qualities in some far-away shire. From the loins of our merchants will spring the Cavendishes and the Percys of the future. Indeed, the great Lords of Oxford Street are as magnanimous as any Duke or Earl who scattered gold or doled out loaves to the poor at his gates. Only their largesse takes a different form. It takes the form of excitement, of display, of entertainment, of windows lit up by night, of banners flaunting by day. They give us the latest news for nothing. Music streams from their banqueting rooms free. You need not spend more than one and eleven three to enjoy all the shelter that high and airy halls provide; and the soft pile of carpets, and the luxury of lifts, and the glow of fabrics, and carpets and silver. Percy and Cavendish could give no more. These gifts of course have an object—to entice the shilling and eleven pennies as freely from our pockets as possible; but the Percys and the Cavendishes were not munificent either

without hope of some return, whether it was a dedication from a poet or a vote from a farmer. And both the old lords and the new added considerably to the decoration and entertainment of human life.

But it cannot be denied that these Oxford Street palaces are rather flimsy abodes—perching-grounds rather than dwelling-places. One is conscious that one is walking on a strip of wood laid upon steel girders, and that the outer wall, for all its florid stone ornamentation, is only thick enough to withstand the force of the wind. A vigorous prod with an umbrella point might well inflict irreparable damage upon the fabric. Many a country cottage built to house farmer or miller when Queen Elizabeth was on the throne will live to see these palaces fall into the dust. The old cottage walls, with their oak beams and their layers of honest brick soundly cemented together still put up a stout resistance to the drills and bores that attempt to introduce the modern blessing of electricity. But any day of the week one may see Oxford Street vanishing at the tap of a workman's pick as he stands perilously balanced on a dusty pinnacle knocking down walls and façades as lightly as if they were made of yellow cardboard and sugar icing.

And again the moralists point the finger of scorn. For such thinness, such papery stone and powdery brick reflect, they say, the levity, the ostentation, the haste and irresponsibility of our age. Yet perhaps they are as much out in their scorn as we should be if we asked of the lily that it should be cast in bronze, or of the daisy that it should have petals of imperishable enamel. The charm of modern London is that it is not built to last; it is built to pass. Its glassiness, its transparency, its surging waves of coloured plaster give a different pleasure and achieve a different end from that which was desired and attempted by the old builders and their patrons, the nobility of England. Their pride required the illusion of permanence. Ours, on the contrary, seems to delight in proving that we can make stone and brick as transitory as our own desires. We do not build for our descendants, who may live up in the clouds or down in the earth, but for ourselves and our own needs. We knock down and rebuild as we expect to be knocked down and rebuilt. It is an impulse that makes for creation and fertility. Discovery is stimulated and invention on the alert.

The palaces of Oxford Street ignore what seemed good to the Greeks, to the Elizabethan, to the eighteenth-century nobleman; they are overwhelmingly conscious that unless they can devise an architecture that shows off the dressing-case, the Paris frock, the cheap stockings, and the jar

of bath salts to perfection, their palaces, their mansions and motor cars and the little villas out at Croydon and Surbiton where their shop assistants live, not so badly after all, with a gramophone and wireless, and money to spend at the movies—all this will be swept to ruin. Hence they stretch stone fantastically; crush together in one wild confusion the styles of Greece, Egypt, Italy, America; and boldly attempt an air of lavishness, opulence, in their effort to persuade the multitude that here unending beauty, ever fresh, ever new, very cheap and within the reach of everybody, bubbles up every day of the week from an inexhaustible well. The mere thought of age, of solidity, of lasting for ever is abhorrent to Oxford Street.

Therefore if the moralist chooses to take his afternoon walk along this particular thoroughfare, he must tune his strain so that it receives into it some queer, incongruous voices. Above the racket of van and omnibus we can hear them crying. God knows, says the man who sells tortoises, that my arm aches; my chance of selling a tortoise is small; but courage! there may come along a buyer; my bed tonight depends on it; so on I must go, as slowly as the police allow, wheeling tortoises down Oxford Street from dawn till dusk. True, says the great merchant, I am not thinking of educating the mass to a higher standard of aesthetic sensibility. It taxes all my wits to think how I can display my goods with the minimum of waste and the maximum of effectiveness. Green dragons on the top of Corinthian columns may help;\* let us try. I grant, says the middle-class woman, that I linger and look and barter and cheapen and turn over basket after basket of remnants hour by hour. My eyes glisten unseemly I know, and I grab and pounce with disgusting greed. But my husband is a small clerk in a bank; I have only fifteen pounds a year to dress on; so here I come, to linger and loiter and look, if I can, as well dressed as my neighbours. I am a thief, says a woman of that persuasion, and a lady of easy virtue into the bargain. But it takes a good deal of pluck to snatch a bag from a counter when a customer is not looking; and it may contain only spectacles and old bus tickets after all. So here goes!

A thousand such voices are always crying aloud in Oxford Street. All are tense, all are real, all are urged out of their speakers by the pressure of making a living, finding a bed, somehow keeping afloat on the bounding, careless, remorseless tide of the street. And even a moralist, who is, one must suppose, since he can spend the afternoon dreaming, a man with a balance in the bank—even a moralist must allow that this gaudy, bustling, vulgar street reminds us that life is a struggle; that all building is perishable; that all



display is vanity; from which we may conclude—but until some adroit shopkeeper has caught on to the idea and opened cells for solitary thinkers hung with green plush and provided with automatic glow-worms and a sprinkling of genuine death's-head moths to induce thought and reflection, it is vain to try to come to a conclusion in Oxford Street.

## EVENING OVER SUSSEX: REFLECTIONS IN A MOTOR CAR

EVENING is kind to Sussex, for Sussex is no longer young, and she is grateful for the veil of evening as an elderly woman is glad when a shade is drawn over a lamp, and only the outline of her face remains. The outline of Sussex is still very fine. The cliffs stand out to sea, one behind another. All Eastbourne, all Bexhill, all St Leonards,\* their parades and their lodging houses, their bead shops and their sweet shops and their placards and their invalids and charabancs, are all obliterated. What remains is what there was when William came over from France ten centuries ago:\* a line of cliffs running out to sea. Also the fields are redeemed. The freckle of red villas on the coast is washed over by a thin lucid lake of brown air, in which they and their redness are drowned. It was still too early for lamps; and too early for stars.

But, I thought, there is always some sediment of irritation when the moment is as beautiful as it is now. The psychologists must explain; one looks up, one is overcome by beauty extravagantly greater than one could expect—there are now pink clouds over Battle;\* the fields are mottled, marbled—one's perceptions blow out rapidly like air balls\* expanded by some rush of air, and then, when all seems blown to its fullest and tautest, with beauty and beauty and beauty, a pin pricks; it collapses. But what is the pin? So far as I could tell, the pin had something to do with one's own impotency. I cannot hold this—I cannot express this—I am overcome by it—I am mastered. Somewhere in that region one's discontent lay; and it was allied with the idea that one's nature demands mastery over all that it receives; and mastery here meant the power to convey what one saw now over Sussex so that another person could share it. And further, there was another prick of the pin: one was wasting one's chance; for beauty spread at one's right hand, at one's left; at one's back too; it was escaping all the time; one could only offer a thimble to a torrent that could fill baths, lakes.

But relinquish, I said (it is well known how in circumstances like these the

self splits up and one self is eager and dissatisfied and the other stern and philosophical), relinquish these impossible aspirations; be content with the view in front of us, and believe me when I tell you that it is best to sit and soak; to be passive; to accept; and do not bother because nature has given you six little pocket knives with which to cut up the body of a whale.

While these two selves then held a colloquy about the wise course to adopt in the presence of beauty, I (a third party now declared itself) said to myself, how happy they were to enjoy so simple an occupation. There they sat as the car sped along, noticing everything: a hay stack; a rust red roof; a pond; an old man coming home with his sack on his back; there they sat, matching every colour in the sky and earth from their colour box, rigging up little models of Sussex barns and farmhouses in the red light that would serve in the January gloom. But I, being somewhat different, sat aloof and melancholy. While they are thus busied, I said to myself: Gone, gone; over, over; past and done with, past and done with. I feel life left behind even as the road is left behind. We have been over that stretch, and are already forgotten. There, windows were lit by our lamps for a second; the light is out now. Others come behind us.

Then suddenly a fourth self (a self which lies in ambush, apparently dormant, and jumps upon one unawares. Its remarks are often entirely disconnected with what has been happening, but must be attended to because of their very abruptness) said: 'Look at that.' It was a light; brilliant, freakish; inexplicable. For a second I was unable to name it. 'A star'; and for that second it held its odd flicker of unexpectedness and danced and beamed. 'I take your meaning,' I said. 'You, erratic and impulsive self that you are, feel that the light over the downs there emerging, dangles from the future. Let us try to understand this. Let us reason it out. I feel suddenly attached not to the past but to the future. I think of Sussex in five hundred years to come. I think much grossness will have evaporated. Things will have been scorched up, eliminated. There will be magic gates. Draughts fan-blown by electric power will cleanse houses. Lights intense and firmly directed will go over the earth, doing the work. Look at the moving light in that hill; it is the headlight of a car. By day and by night Sussex in five centuries will be full of charming thoughts, quick, effective beams.'

The sun was now low beneath the horizon. Darkness spread rapidly. None of my selves could see anything beyond the tapering light of our headlamps on the hedge. I summoned them together. 'Now,' I said, 'comes the season of

making up our accounts. Now we have got to collect ourselves; we have got to be one self. Nothing is to be seen any more, except one wedge of road and bank which our lights repeat incessantly. We are perfectly provided for. We are warmly wrapped in a rug; we are protected from wind and rain. We are alone. Now is the time of reckoning. Now I, who preside over the company, am going to arrange in order the trophies which we have all brought in. Let me see; there was a great deal of beauty brought in today: farmhouses; cliffs standing out to sea; marbled fields; mottled fields; red feathered skies; all that. Also there was disappearance and the death of the individual. The vanishing road and the window lit for a second and then dark. And then there was the sudden dancing light, that was hung in the future. What we have made then today,' I said, 'is this: that beauty; death of the individual; and the future. Look, I will make a little figure for your satisfaction; here he comes. Does this little figure advancing through beauty, through death, to the economical, powerful and efficient future when houses will be cleansed by a puff of hot wind satisfy you? Look at him; there on my knee.' We sat and looked at the figure we had made that day. Great sheer slabs of rock, tree tufted, surrounded him. He was for a second very, very solemn. Indeed it seemed as if the reality of things were displayed there on the rug. A violent thrill ran through us; as if a charge of electricity had entered in to us. We cried out together: 'Yes, yes,' as if affirming something, in a moment of recognition.

And then the body who had been silent up to now began its song, almost at first as low as the rush of the wheels: 'Eggs and bacon; toast and tea; fire and a bath; fire and a bath; jugged hare,' it went on, 'and red currant jelly; a glass of wine; with coffee to follow, with coffee to follow—and then to bed; and then to bed.'

'Off with you,' I said to my assembled selves. 'Your work is done. I dismiss you. Good-night.'

And the rest of the journey was performed in the delicious society of my own body.

## FLYING OVER LONDON

FIFTY or sixty aeroplanes were collected in the shed like a flock of grasshoppers. The grasshopper has the same enormous thighs, the same little boatshaped body resting between its thighs, and if touched with a blade of grass, he, too, springs high into the air.

The mechanics ran the aeroplane out onto the turf; and Flight-Lieutenant Hopgood, at whose invitation we had come to make our first flight, stooped down and made the engine roar. A thousand pens have described the sensation of leaving earth; 'The earth drops from you,' they say; one sits still and the world has fallen. It is true that the earth fell, but what was stranger was the downfall of the sky. One was not prepared within a moment of taking off to be immersed in it, alone with it, to be in the thick of it. Habit has fixed the earth immovably in the centre of the imagination like a hard ball; everything is made to the scale of houses and streets. And as one rises up into the sky, as the sky pours down over one, this little hard granular knob, with its carvings and frettings, dissolves, crumbles, loses its domes, its pinnacles, its firesides, its habits, and one becomes conscious of being a little mammal, hot-blooded, hard boned, with a clot of red blood in one's body, trespassing up here in a fine air; repugnant to it, unclean, anti-pathetic. Vertebrae, ribs, entrails, and red blood belong to the earth; to the world of Brussels sprouts and sheep going awkwardly on four pointed legs. Here are winds tapering, vanishing, and the untimed manœuvre of clouds, and nothing permanent, but vanishing and melting at the touch of each other without concussion, and the fields that with us are meted into yards and grow punctually wheat and barley are here made and remade perpetually with flourishes of rain and flights of hail and spaces tranquil as the deep sea, and then all is chop and change, breeze and motion. Yet, though we flew through territories with never a hedge or stick to divide them, nameless, unowned, so inveterately anthropocentric is the mind that instinctively the aeroplane becomes a boat and we are sailing towards a harbour and there we shall be received by hands that lift themselves from swaying garments; welcoming, accepting. Wraiths (our aspirations and imaginations) have their home here; and in spite of our

vertebrae, ribs, and entrails, we are also vapour and air, and shall be united.

Here, Flight-Lieutenant Hopgood, by a touch on the lever, turned the nose of the Moth\* downwards. Nothing more fantastic could be imagined. Houses, streets, banks, public buildings, and habits and mutton and Brussels sprouts had been swept into long spirals and curves of pink and purple like that a wet brush makes when it sweeps mounds of paint together. One could see through the Bank of England; all the business houses were transparent; the River Thames was as the Romans saw it, as paleolithic man saw it, at dawn from a hill shaggy with wood, with the rhinoceros digging his horn into the roots of rhododendrons. So immortally fresh and virginal London looked and England was earth merely, merely the world. Flight-Lieutenant Hopgood kept his finger still on the lever which turns the plane downwards. A spark glinted on a greenhouse. There rose a dome, a spire, a factory-chimney, a gasometer. Civilization in short emerged; hands and minds worked again; and the centuries vanished and the wild rhinoceros was chased out of sight for ever. Still we descended. Here was a garden; here a football field. But no human being was yet visible; England looked like a ship that sails unmanned. Perhaps the race was dead, and we should board the world like that ship's company who found the ship sailing with all her sails set, and the kettle on the fire, but not a soul on board.\* Yet a spot down there, something squat and minute, might be a horse—or a man. ... But Hopgood touched another lever and we rose again like a spirit shaking contamination from its wings, shaking gasometers and factories and football fields from its feet.

It was a moment of renunciation. We prefer the other we seemed to say. Wraiths and sand dunes and mist; imagination; this we prefer to the mutton and the entrails. It was the idea of death that now suggested itself; not being received and welcomed; not immortality but extinction. For the clouds above were black. Across them there passed in single file a flight of gulls, livid white against the leaden background, holding on their way with the authority of owners, having rights, and means of communication unknown to us, an alien, a privileged race. But where there are gulls only, life is not. Life ends; life is dowsed in that cloud as lamps are dowsed with a wet sponge. That extinction has become now desirable. For it was odd in this voyage to note how blindly the tide of the soul and its desires rolled this way and that, carrying consciousness like a feather on the top, marking the direction, not controlling it. And so we swept on now up to death.

Hopgood's head cased in leather with a furry rim to it had the semblance

of a winged pilot, of Charon's\* head, remorselessly conducting his passenger to the wet sponge which annihilates. For the mind (one can but repeat these things without claiming sense or truth for them—merely that they were such) is convinced in its own fastness, in its solitude, of extinction, and what is more, proud of it, as if it deserved extinction, extinction profited it more and were more desirable than prolongation on other terms by other wills.

'Charon', the mind prayed to the back of Flight-Lieutenant Hopgood, 'carry me on; thrust me deep, deep; till every glimmer of light in me, of heat of knowledge, even the tingling I feel in my toes is dulled; after all this living, all this scratching and tingling of sensation, that too—darkness, dullness, the black wet—will be also a sensation.' And such is the incurable vanity of the human mind that the cloud, the wet sponge that was to extinguish, became, now that one thought of a contact with one's own mind, a furnace in which we roared up, and our death was a fire; brandished at the summit of life, many tongued, blood red, visible over land and sea. Extinction! The word is consummation.

Now we were in the skirts of the cloud and the wings of the aeroplane were spattered with hail; hail shot past silver and straight like the flash of steel railway lines. Innumerable arrows shot at us, down the august avenue of our approach.

Then Charon turned his head with its fringe of fur and laughed at us. It was an ugly face, with high cheek bones, and little deep sunk eyes, and all down one cheek was a crease where he had been cut and stitched together. Perhaps he weighed fifteen stone; he was oak limbed and angular. But for all this nothing now remained of Flight-Lieutenant Hopgood but a flame such as one sees blown thin and furtive at a street corner; a flame that for all its agility can hardly escape death. Such was the Flight-Lieutenant become; and ourselves too, so that the clinging hands, the embraces, the companionship of those about to die together was vanished; there was no flesh. However, just as one comes to the end of an avenue of trees and finds a pond with ducks on it, and nothing but lead-coloured water, so we came through the avenue of hail and out into a pool so still, so quiet, with haze above and cloud below it, so that we seemed to float as a duck floats on a pond. But the haze above us was compact of whiteness. As colour runs to the end of a paint brush, so the blue of the sky had run into one blob beneath it. It was white above us. And now the ribs and the entrails of the sprout-eating mammal began to be frozen, pulverized, frozen to lightness and whiteness of this spectral universe, and

nothingness. For no clouds voyaged and lumbered up there; with light fondling them and masses breaking off their slopes or again towering and swelling. Here was no feather, no crease to break the steep wall ascending for ever up, for ever and ever.

And those yellowish lights, Hopgood and oneself, were put out effectively as the sun blanches the flame on a coal. No sponge effaced us, with its damp snout. Nothingness was poured down upon us like a mound of white sand. Then as if some part of us kept its ponderosity, down we fell into fleeciness, substance, and colour; all the colours of pounded plums and dolphins and blankets and seas and rain clouds crushed together, staining—purple, black, steel, all this soft ripeness seethed about us, and the eye felt as a fish feels when it slips from the rock into the depths of the sea.

For a time we were muffled in the clouds. Then the fairy earth appeared, lying far, far below, a mere slice or knife blade of colour floating. It rose towards us with extreme speed, broadening and lengthening; forests appeared on it and seas; and then again an uneasy dark blot which soon began to be pricked with spires and blown into bubbles and domes. Nearer and nearer we came together and had again the whole of civilization spread beneath us, silent, empty, like a demonstration made for our instruction; the river with the steamers that bring coal and iron; the churches, the factories, the railways. Nothing moved; nobody worked the machine, until in some field on the outskirts of London one saw a dot actually and certainly move. Though the dot was the size of a bluebottle and its movement minute, reason insisted that it was a horse and it was galloping, but all speed and size were so reduced that the speed of the horse seemed very, very slow, and its size minute. Now, however, there were often movements in the streets, as of sliding and stopping; and then gradually the vast creases of the stuff beneath began moving, and one saw in the creases millions of insects moving. In another second they became men, men of business, in the heart of the white city buildings.

Through a pair of Zeiss\* glasses one could indeed now see the tops of the heads of separate men and could distinguish a bowler from a cap, and could thus be certain of social grades—which was an employer, which was a working man. And one had to change perpetually air values into land values. There were blocks in the city of traffic sometimes almost a foot long; these had to be translated into eleven or twelve Rolls Royces in a row with city magnates waiting furious; and one had to add up the fury of the magnates;



and say—even though it was all silent and the block was only a few inches in length, how scandalous the control of the traffic is in the City of London.

But with a turn of his wrist Flight-Lieutenant Hopgood flew over the poor quarters,\* and there through the Zeiss glasses one could see people looking up at the noise of the aeroplane, and could judge the expression on their faces. It was not one that one sees ordinarily. It was complex. ‘And I have to scrub the steps,’ it seemed to say grudgingly. All the same, they saluted, they sent us greeting; they were capable of flight. And after all, here the head was turned down again and the scrubbing brush was grasped tightly, to fall on the pavement wouldn’t be nice. And they shook their heads; but they looked up at us again. But further on, over Oxford Street perhaps it was, nobody noticed us at all, but went on jostling each other with some furious desire absorbing them, for a sight of something (there was a yellowish flash as we passed overhead) in a shop window. Further, by Bayswater perhaps, where the press was thinner, a face, a figure, something odd in hat or person suddenly caught one’s eye. And then it was odd how one became resentful of all the flags and surfaces and of the innumerable windows symmetrical as avenues, symmetrical as forest groves, and wished for some opening, and to push indoors and be rid of surfaces. Up in Bayswater a door did open, and instantly, of course, there appeared a room, incredibly small, of course, and ridiculous in its attempt to be separate and itself, and then it was a woman’s face, young, perhaps, at any rate with a black cloak and a red hat that made the furniture—here a bowl, there a sideboard with apples on it, cease to be interesting because the power that buys a mat, or sets two colours together, became perceptible, as one may say that the haze over an electric fire becomes perceptible. Everything had changed its values seen from the air. Personality was outside the body, abstract. And one wished to be able to animate the heart, the legs, the arms with it, to do which it would be necessary to be there, so as to collect; so as to give up this arduous game, as one flies through the air, of assembling things that lie on the surface.

And then the field curved round us, and we were caught in an eddy of green cloth and white racing palings that flew round us like tape, and touched earth and went at an enormous speed, pitching, bumping upon a rocky surface, hard curves, after the plumes of air. We had landed, and it was over.

As a matter of fact, the flight had not begun; for when Flight-Lieutenant Hopgood stooped and made the engine roar, he had found a defect of some

sort in the machine, and raising his head, he had said very sheepishly, ‘’Fraid it’s no go today.’

So we had not flown after all.

## WHY ART TODAY FOLLOWS POLITICS\*

I HAVE been asked by the Artists International Association\* to explain as shortly as I can why it is that the artist at present is interested, actively and genuinely, in politics. For it seems that there are some people to whom this interest is suspect.

That the writer is interested in politics needs no saying. Every publisher's list, almost every book that is now issued, brings proof of the fact.

The historian today is writing not about Greece and Rome in the past, but about Germany and Spain in the present; the biographer is writing lives of Hitler and Mussolini,\* not of Henry the Eighth and Charles Lamb; the poet introduces Communism and Fascism into his lyrics; the novelist turns from the private lives of his characters to their social surroundings and their political opinions.

Obviously the writer is in such close touch with human life that any agitation in it must change his angle of vision. Either he focuses his sight upon the immediate problem; or he brings his subject matter into relation with the present; or in some cases, so paralysed is he by the agitation of the moment that he remains silent.

But why should this agitation affect the painter and the sculptor, it may be asked? He is not concerned with the feelings of his model, but with its form.

The rose and the apple have no political views. Why should he not spend his time contemplating them, as he has always done, in the cold north light that still falls through his studio window?

To answer this question is not easy, for to understand why the artist—the plastic artist—is affected by the state of society we must try to define the relations of the artist to society, and this is difficult, partly because no such definition has ever been made.

But that there is some sort of understanding between them, most people would agree; and in times of peace it may be said roughly to run as follows:

The artist on his side held that since the value of his work depended upon freedom of mind, security of person, and immunity from practical affairs—

for to mix art with politics he held was to adulterate it—he was absolved from political duties; sacrificed many of the privileges that the active citizen enjoyed; and in return created what is called a work of art.

Society on its side bound itself to run the State in such a manner that it paid the artist a living wage; asked no active help from him; and considered itself repaid by those works of art which have always formed one of its chief claims to distinction.

With many lapses and breaches on both sides the contract has been kept; society has accepted the artist's work in lieu of other services, and the artist, living for the most part precariously on a pittance, has written or painted without regard for the political agitations of the moment.

Thus it would be impossible, when we read Keats, or look at the pictures of Titian and Velasquez, or listen to the music of Mozart or Bach to say what was the political condition of the age or the country in which these works were created.

And if it were otherwise—if the 'Ode to a Nightingale' were inspired by hatred of Germany; if *Bacchus and Ariadne* symbolized the conquest of Abyssinia; if *Figaro*\* expounded the doctrine of Hitler we should feel cheated and imposed upon, as if, instead of bread made with flour, we were given bread made with plaster.

But if it is true that some such contract existed between the artist and society in times of peace it by no means follows that the artist is independent of society. Materially, of course, he depends upon it for his bread and butter.

Art is the first luxury to be discarded in times of stress; the artist is the first of the workers to suffer. But intellectually also he depends upon society.

Society is not only his paymaster, but his patron. If the patron becomes too busy or too distracted to exercise his critical faculty the artist will work in a vacuum and his art will suffer and perhaps perish from lack of understanding.

Again, if the patron is neither poor nor indifferent, but dictatorial—if he will only buy pictures that flatter his vanity or serve his politics—then again the artist is impeded and his work becomes worthless.

And even if there are some artists who can afford to disregard the patron, either because they have private means, or have learnt in the course of time to form their own style and to depend upon tradition, these are for the most part only the older artists, whose work is already done. Even they, however, are by no means immune.

For though it would be easy to stress the point absurdly, still it is a fact that the practice of art, far from making the artist out of touch with his kind, rather increases his sensibility.

It breeds in him a feeling for the passions and needs of mankind in the mass which the citizen whose duty it is to work for a particular country or for a particular party has no time and perhaps no need to cultivate.

Thus even if he be ineffective, he is by no means apathetic. Perhaps, indeed, he suffers more than the active citizen because he has no obvious duty to discharge.

For such reasons then it is clear that the artist is affected as powerfully as other citizens when society is in chaos, although the disturbance affects him in different ways. His studio now is far from being a cloistered spot where he can contemplate his model or his apple in peace.

It is besieged by voices, all disturbing, some for one reason, some for another.

First there is the voice which cries: I cannot protect you; I cannot pay you. I am so tortured and distracted that I can no longer enjoy your works of art.

Then there is the voice which asks for help: Come down from your ivory tower, leave your studio, it cries, and use your gifts as doctor, as teacher, not as artist.

Again there is the voice which warns the artist that unless he can show good cause why art benefits the State he will be made to help it actively—by making airplanes, by firing guns.

And finally, there is the voice which many artists in other countries have already heard and had to obey—the voice which proclaims that the artist is the servant of the politician.

You shall only practise your art, it says, at our bidding. Paint us pictures, carve us statues that glorify our gospels. Celebrate Fascism; celebrate Communism. Preach what we bid you preach. On no other terms shall you exist.

With all these voices crying and conflicting in his ears, how can the artist still remain at peace in his studio contemplating his model or his apple in the cold light that comes through the studio window?

He is forced to take part in politics: he must form himself into societies like the Artists International Association.

Two causes of supreme importance to him are in peril. The first is his own

survival: the other is the survival of his art.

## THOUGHTS ON PEACE IN AN AIR RAID

THE Germans were over this house last night and the night before that. Here they are again.\* It is a queer experience, lying in the dark and listening to the zoom of a hornet which may at any moment sting you to death. It is a sound that interrupts cool and consecutive thinking about peace. Yet it is a sound—far more than prayers and anthems—that should compel one to think about peace. Unless we can think peace into existence we—not this one body in this one bed but millions of bodies yet to be born—will lie in the same darkness and hear the same death rattle overhead. Let us think what we can do to create the only efficient air-raid shelter while the guns on the hill go pop pop pop and the searchlights finger the clouds and now and then, sometimes close at hand, sometimes far away, a bomb drops.

Up there in the sky young Englishmen and young German men are fighting each other. The defenders are men, the attackers are men. Arms are not given to Englishwomen either to fight the enemy or to defend herself. She must lie weaponless tonight. Yet if she believes that the fight going on up in the sky is a fight by the English to protect freedom, by the Germans to destroy freedom, she must fight, so far as she can, on the side of the English. How far can she fight for freedom without firearms? By making arms, or clothes or food. But there is another way of fighting for freedom without arms; we can fight with the mind. We can make ideas that will help the young Englishman who is fighting up in the sky to defeat the enemy.

But to make ideas effective, we must be able to fire them off. We must put them into action. And the hornet in the sky rouses another hornet in the mind. There was one zooming in *The Times* this morning—a woman's voice saying, 'Women have not a word to say in politics.' There is no woman in the Cabinet; nor in any responsible post. All the idea makers who are in a position to make ideas effective are men.\* That is a thought that damps thinking, and encourages irresponsibility. Why not bury the head in the pillow, plug the ears, and cease this futile activity of idea-making? Because there are other tables besides officer tables and conference tables. Are we not leaving the young Englishman without a weapon that might be of value to

him if we give up private thinking, tea-table thinking, because it seems useless? Are we not stressing our disability because our ability exposes us perhaps to abuse, perhaps to contempt? 'I will not cease from mental fight,' Blake wrote.\* Mental fight means thinking against the current, not with it.

That current flows fast and furious. It issues in a spate of words from the loudspeakers and the politicians. Every day they tell us that we are a free people, fighting to defend freedom. That is the current that has whirled the young airman up into the sky and keeps him circling there among the clouds. Down here, with a roof to cover us and a gas mask handy, it is our business to puncture gas bags and discover seeds of truth. It is not true that we are free. We are both prisoners tonight—he boxed up in his machine with a gun handy; we lying in the dark with a gas mask handy. If we were free we should be out in the open, dancing, at the play, or sitting at the window talking together. What is it that prevents us? 'Hitler!' the loudspeakers cry with one voice. Who is Hitler? What is he? Aggressiveness, tyranny, the insane love of power made manifest, they reply. Destroy that, and you will be free.

The drone of the planes is now like the sawing of a branch overhead. Round and round it goes, sawing and sawing at a branch directly above the house. Another sound begins sawing its way in the brain. 'Women of ability'—it was Lady Astor speaking in *The Times* this morning—'are held down because of a subconscious Hitlerism in the hearts of men.' Certainly we are held down. We are equally prisoners tonight—the Englishmen in their planes, the Englishwomen in their beds. But if he stops to think he may be killed; and we too. So let us think for him. Let us try to drag up into consciousness the subconscious Hitlerism that holds us down. It is the desire for aggression; the desire to dominate and enslave. Even in the darkness we can see that made visible. We can see shop windows blazing; and women gazing; painted women; dressed-up women; women with crimson lips and crimson fingernails. They are slaves who are trying to enslave. If we could free ourselves from slavery we should free men from tyranny. Hitlers are bred by slaves.

A bomb drops. All the windows rattle. The anti-aircraft guns are getting active. Up there on the hill under a net tagged with strips of green and brown stuff to imitate the hues of autumn leaves, guns are concealed. Now they all fire at once. On the nine o'clock radio we shall be told 'Forty-four enemy planes were shot down during the night, ten of them by anti-aircraft fire.'



And one of the terms of peace, the loudspeakers say, is to be disarmament. There are to be no more guns, no army, no navy, no air force in the future. No more young men will be trained to fight with arms. That rouses another mind-hornet in the chambers of the brain—another quotation. ‘To fight against a real enemy, to earn undying honour and glory by shooting total strangers, and to come home with my breast covered with medals and decorations, that was the summit of my hope. ... It was for this that my whole life so far had been dedicated, my education, training, everything. ...’

Those were the words of a young Englishman who fought in the last war. In the face of them, do the current thinkers honestly believe that by writing ‘Disarmament’ on a sheet of paper at a conference table they will have done all that is needful? Othello’s occupation will be gone; but he will remain Othello.\* The young airman up in the sky is driven not only by the voices of loudspeakers; he is driven by voices in himself—ancient instincts, instincts fostered and cherished by education and tradition. Is he to be blamed for those instincts? Could we switch off the maternal instinct at the command of a table full of politicians? Suppose that imperative among the peace terms was: ‘Child-bearing is to be restricted to a very small class of specially selected women,’ would we submit? Should we not say, ‘The maternal instinct is a woman’s glory. It was for this that my whole life has been dedicated, my education, training, everything. ...’ But if it were necessary, for the sake of humanity, for the peace of the world, that child-bearing should be restricted, the maternal instinct subdued, women would attempt it. Men would help them. They would honour them for their refusal to bear children. They would give them other openings for their creative power. That too must make part of our fight for freedom. We must help the young Englishmen to root out from themselves the love of medals and decorations. We must create more honourable activities for those who try to conquer in themselves their fighting instinct, their subconscious Hitlerism. We must compensate the man for the loss of his gun.

The sound of sawing overhead has increased. All the searchlights are erect. They point at a spot exactly above this roof. At any moment a bomb may fall on this very room. One, two, three, four, five, six ... the seconds pass. The bomb did not fall. But during those seconds of suspense all thinking stopped. All feeling, save one dull dread, ceased. A nail fixed the whole being to one hard board. The emotion of fear and of hate is therefore sterile, unfertile. Directly that fear passes, the mind reaches out and

instinctively revives itself by trying to create. Since the room is dark it can create only from memory. It reaches out to the memory of other Augusts—in Bayreuth, listening to Wagner; in Rome, walking over the Campagna; in London. Friends' voices come back. Scraps of poetry return. Each of those thoughts, even in memory, was far more positive, reviving, healing and creative than the dull dread made of fear and hate. Therefore if we are to compensate the young man for the loss of his glory and of his gun, we must give him access to the creative feelings. We must make happiness. We must free him from the machine. We must bring him out of his prison into the open air. But what is the use of freeing the young Englishman if the young German and the young Italian remain slaves?

The searchlights, wavering across the flat, have picked up the plane now. From this window one can see a little silver insect turning and twisting in the light. The guns go pop pop pop. Then they cease. Probably the raider was brought down behind the hill. One of the pilots landed safe in a field near here the other day. He said to his captors, speaking fairly good English, 'How glad I am that the fight is over!' Then an Englishman gave him a cigarette, and an Englishwoman made him a cup of tea. That would seem to show that if you can free the man from the machine, the seed does not fall upon altogether stony ground. The seed may be fertile.

At last all the guns have stopped firing. All the searchlights have been extinguished. The natural darkness of a summer's night returns. The innocent sounds of the country are heard again. An apple thuds to the ground. An owl hoots, winging its way from tree to tree. And some half-forgotten words of an old English writer come to mind: 'The huntsmen are up in America. ...'\* Let us send these fragmentary notes to the huntsmen who are up in America, to the men and women whose sleep has not yet been broken by machine-gun fire, in the belief that they will rethink them generously and charitably, perhaps shape them into something serviceable. And now, in the shadowed half of the world, to sleep.

## **EXPLANATORY NOTES**

Any annotator of Woolf's essays must begin by acknowledging his or her indebtedness to Andrew McNeillie's edition of *The Essays of Virginia Woolf* [1904–28] (4 vols. London: Hogarth Press, 1986–94); two further volumes, covering 1929–41, are being edited by Stuart N. Clarke. While some of the notes in this volume expand on McNeillie's annotations and others shed light on words or phrases not glossed in the *Essays*, my work would have been all the more challenging without McNeillie's pioneering scholarship. I would also like to record my thanks to Dr Alexandra Harris for helping me prepare the texts of the essays.

### **THE DECAY OF ESSAY-WRITING**

**British Museum:** the British Museum opened in 1759. Despite an ambitious programme of expansion in the nineteenth century the Museum, in Great Russell St, London, could not find enough space for the books delivered to it (from the beginning the Museum was entitled to receive a copy of every book registered at Stationers's Hall) and in 1904–5 a Newspaper Library was built at Colindale, north London. In 1911 the Copyright Act ensured that a copy of every book, periodical and newspaper published in Great Britain had by law to be deposited with the Museum. In 1998, the British Museum and the British Library (formed in 1973) were finally separated when the new British Library at St Pancras opened its doors.

**Montaigne:** the *Essais* of Michel de Montaigne (1533–92), widely seen as the inventor of the modern essay, were published in 1580, 1588, and 1595 and were first translated into English in 1603.

the essays of Elia: written by Charles Lamb (1775–1834), they appeared as *Elia* (1823 and 1828) and *The Last Essays of Elia* (1833).

**Homer and Aeschylus:** Homer was a Greek epic poet of the eighth century BC; Aeschylus was a Greek tragedian who lived from 525 to 456 BC.

## **MODERN FICTION**

[Fielding ... Jane Austen:](#) Henry Fielding (1707–54); Jane Austen (1775–1817).



[Mr Wells, Mr Bennett, and Mr Galsworthy](#): H. G. Wells (1866–1946); Arnold Bennett (1867–1931); and John Galsworthy (1867–1933).

Mr Hardy ... Mr Conrad ... Long Ago: Thomas Hardy (1840–1928); Joseph Conrad (1857–1924); and W. H. Hudson (1841–1922), who published his book of South American stories, *The Purple Land*, in 1885, his novel, *Green Mansions*, in 1904, and his acclaimed account of his childhood, *Far Away and Long Ago*, in 1918.

[The Old Wives' Tale, George Cannon, Edwin Clayhanger](#): Bennett published *The Old Wives' Tale* in 1908. George Cannon and Edwin Clayhanger feature in his 'Clayhanger' novels: *Clayhanger* (1910), *Hilda Lessways* (1911), *These Twain* (1916), and *The Roll Call* (1918).

**Five Towns:** the 'Potteries' region of the English midlands, where Bennett had been born and brought up and which he recreated as the 'Five Towns' in *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902) and other works. There were actually six towns, Tunstall, Burslem, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent, Longton, and Fenton (all subsequently absorbed into Stoke-on-Trent), to which Bennett gave the names Turnhill, Bursley, Hanbridge, Longshaw, and Knype.

[Joans and his Peters](#): Wells published his novel *Joan and Peter* in 1918.

**Monday or Tuesday:** the title Woolf chose for the only collection of short fiction she published in her lifetime. *Monday or Tuesday* appeared, with woodcuts by Woolf's sister Vanessa Bell (1879–1961), in 1921. Its eight short pieces epitomize the new kind of fiction Woolf argues for in this essay.

James Joyce ... Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man ... Little Review:

James Joyce (1882–1941). His *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) was first published serially in the *Egoist* in 1914–15 and the first thirteen episodes and part of the fourteenth episode of his *Ulysses* (1922) first appeared in the *Little Review* from 1918 until 1920, when the magazine's editors were arrested and subsequently convicted (1921) of having published an obscene libel.

The scene in the cemetery: see the 'Hades' chapter of *Ulysses*.



‘Youth’ ... Mayor of Casterbridge: ‘Youth’ (1902) by Joseph Conrad;  
Thomas Hardy published *The Mayor of Casterbridge* in 1886.

Tristram Shandy or even Pendennis: *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–67) by Laurence Sterne (1713–68); *The History of Pendennis* (1848–50) by William Makepeace Thackeray (1811–63).

Tchekov ... 'Gusev': 'Gusev' appears in *The Witch and Other Stories* by the Russian writer Anton Chekhov (1860–1904). It had been published in an English translation by Constance Garnett (1861–1946) in 1918.

‘Learn to make yourself ... love towards them’: this quotation comes from a Russian story called ‘The Village Priest’ by Elena Militsina. See Elena Militsina and Mikhail Saltykov, *The Village Priest and Other Stories*, trans. Beatrix L. Tollemache (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1918), 34.

[Meredith:](#) George Meredith (1828–1909).

## **THE MODERN ESSAY**

Mr Rhys ... important than its past: this essay was in origin a review of *Modern English Essays 1870 to 1920* (5 vols.; London and Toronto: J. M. Dent, 1922), ed. Ernest Rhys (1850–1946). ‘Siranney the Persian’, or ‘Siranez the Persian’, as Rhys calls him (*Modern English Essays*, vol i, p. viii), remains unidentified.

**Fleet Street ... Spinoza ... Cheapside:** Fleet Street was once synonymous with the British newspaper press. The essay about 'God and Spinoza' is 'A Word about Spinoza' by Matthew Arnold (1822–88), *Modern English Essays*, i. 36–53, and the essay about 'turtles and Cheapside' is 'Ramblings in Cheapside' by Samuel Butler (1835–1902), *ibid.* ii. 161–80. In the late nineteenth century Cheapside was one of London's most notable commercial centres.

Lamb ... Bacon: for Charles Lamb see note to p. 4. Francis Bacon (1561–1626), author of *The Advancement of Learning* (1605).



Mark Pattison's ... Macaulay ... Froude ... M. Grün: Mark Pattison (1813–84); Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800–59); and James Anthony Froude (1818–94). In his essay 'Montaigne', Pattison discusses Alphonse Grün's life of Montaigne, published in 1855. For Montaigne see note to p. 3.

[the Fortnightly Review](#): founded in 1865.

Mr Hutton ... are very sad: the quotation is taken from an essay entitled 'John Stuart Mill's "Autobiography"' by Richard Holt Hutton (1826–97), *Modern English Essays*, i. 122–35.

Walter Pater ... Leonardo da Vinci: Walter Pater (1839–94) published his ‘Notes on Leonardo Da Vinci’ in *The Renaissance* (1873).

learned ... the mother of Mary: from 'Notes on Leonardo Da Vinci': see previous note. The two short quotes that follow are also from this source.

a gentleman of Polish extraction: Joseph Conrad: see note to p. 6.

[Sir Thomas Browne and ... Swift](#): Sir Thomas Browne (1605–82); Jonathan Swift (1667–1745).

Stevenson ... To sit still ... where and what you are—: Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–94) is represented in Rhys's survey by 'Walking Tours', *Modern English Essays*, ii. 181–92.



a wound in the solicitor is a very serious thing ... Tottenham Court Road:  
all details taken from Butler's 'Ramblings in Cheapside' essay.

Universal Review: founded in 1888.

**Addison:** Joseph Addison (1672–1719).

Mr Birrell and Mr Beerbohm: Augustine Birrell (1850–1933); Max Beerbohm (1872–1956).

Carlyle: Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881).

‘A Cloud of Pinafores’ ... [Leslie Stephen](#): for Beerbohm see earlier note to p. 17. Woolf’s essay was originally published anonymously in the *TLS* and so readers of that journal would have been unaware that this essay by Leslie Stephen (1832–1904) was being discussed by his daughter. She praises her father’s essay warmly further on in this essay.

Henley: W. E. Henley (1849–1903).

[Belloc](#): Hilaire Belloc (1870–1953).



the only remark ... masquerading with a fountain pen: what the shepherd is alleged to have said from his upland vantage point is: 'I never come here but it seems like a different place down below, and as though it were not the place where I have gone afoot with sheep under the hills. It seems different when you are looking down at it' (*Modern English Essays*, iv. 59).

Mr Lucas, Mr Lynd, or Mr Squire: E. V. Lucas (1868–1938); Robert Lynd (1879–1949), and J. C. Squire (1884–1958).

[Mr Clutton Brock ... Albert Hall](#): Arthur Clutton Brock (1868–1924). The Royal Albert Hall in Kensington, London, opened in 1871.

The Magic Flute: opera by Mozart (1791).

Nay, retire men ... to Scorn ...: from Francis Bacon's 'Of Great Place' essay.

With courteous and precise cynicism ... perfumed ...: from J. C. Squire's  
'A Dead Man' essay.

Vernon Lee: the pseudonym of Violet Paget (1856–1935).

## **HOW IT STRIKES A CONTEMPORARY**

Milton and Keats: John Milton (1608–74); John Keats (1795–1821).



[Robert Elsmere ... Stephen Phillips](#): *Robert Elsmere* (1888) is the most famous novel of Mary Augusta (better known as Mrs Humphry) Ward (1851–1920); Stephen Phillips (1864–1915) was a preposterously overpraised dramatic poet.

the Dryden ... the Arnold: John Dryden (1631–1700); Samuel Johnson (1709–84); S. T. Coleridge (1772–1834). For Arnold see note to p. 13.

**Flaubert:** Gustave Flaubert (1821–80), author of *Madame Bovary* (1857).

Hardy ... Conrad: see note to p. 6.

Waverley ... Don Juan ... Prometheus Unbound: Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), *Waverley* (1814); William Wordsworth (1770–1850), *The Excursion* (1814); S. T. Coleridge, ‘Kubla Khan’ (1816); George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788–1824), *Don Juan* (1819–24); William Hazlitt (1778–1830) was one of the greatest prose stylists of the nineteenth century; Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813); John Keats, *Hyperion* (1820); and P. B. Shelley (1792–1822), *Prometheus Unbound* (1820).

[Yeats ... Ulysses](#): W. B. Yeats (1865–1939); W. H. Davies (1871–1940); Walter de la Mare (1873–1956); D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930); for Beerbohm see p. 17. For *Far Away and Long Ago* and *Ulysses*, see notes to pp. 6 and 10 above.

recent publication of *The Watsons*: Jane Austen (1775–1817), *The Watsons* was written around 1803–5, but was not published until 1871. It was republished in 1923.

‘We enter ... with passion’ ... in the year 1880: Matthew Arnold, in his  
‘General Introduction’ to T. H. Ward (ed.), *The English Poets* (1880), vol. i,  
p. xlv.



did he, or did he not marry his sister?: he did not, but he was very closely attached to his half-sister Augusta.

Lady Hester Stanhope: lived from 1776 to 1839.

**MR BENNETT AND MRS BROWN**

Arnold Bennett ... 'I admit ... big novelist': for Arnold Bennett, see notes to pp. 6 and 7. Bennett made his comment in a magazine essay of March 1923 entitled 'Is the Novel Decaying?'.

**The Georgians:** novelists who began to publish or came to prominence after Edward VII had been succeeded by George V (who reigned until 1936) in 1910.

King Edward: Edward VII: reigned from 1901 to 1910.

Wells, Mr Galsworthy, and Mr Bennett: see note to p. 6.

Kipps ... *The Old Wives' Tale*: Arthur Kipps is the draper's-assistant hero of *Kipps*, H. G. Wells's novel of 1905. The sisters in Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale* (see p. 7) are Constance and Sophia Baines.

Pendennis: see note to p. 11.



We see the Major ... Foker: all characters in *Pendennis*.

[Samuel Butler ... The Way of All Flesh:](#) for Samuel Butler see note to p. 13.  
His posthumous novel *The Way of All Flesh* was published in 1903.

Lewishams: in H. G. Wells's *Love and Mr Lewisham* (1900).

[Mrs Garnett ... The Idiot](#): the complete works of the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–81) were translated by Constance Garnett (see note to p. 11). Dostoevsky published *Crime and Punishment* in 1866 and *The Idiot* in 1868.

**Mr Dick ... Mr Micawber:** Mr Dick and Mr and Mrs Micawber are characters in *David Copperfield* (1849–50) by Charles Dickens (1812–70); Mr Brooke is a character in *Middlemarch* (1871–2) by George Eliot (1819–80), whose real name was Mary Ann (later Marian) Evans.

Raskolnikov ... Alyosha?: the first three are the heroes of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, and *The Possessed* (1872) respectively. Alyosha is a central character in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

## CHARACTER IN FICTION

[the only person in this room](#): this essay first saw life as a paper read to the Heretics Society on 18 May 1924.

Mr Arnold Bennett ... 'The foundation ... oblivion will be its portion ...':  
see note to p. 32.



Mr Wells ... I will call the Georgians: for Edward VII and George V see notes to p. 32. All these writers have already been identified in the notes apart from Lytton Strachey (1880–1932), author of *Eminent Victorians* (1918) and other works, and T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), author of *The Waste Land* (1922) and other works.

on or about December 1910 human character changed: apart from the death of Edward VII earlier in the year, new aesthetic tools were brought into play in November 1910, when the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition opened in London. 'Post-Impressionism', a term coined by Woolf's friend the artist and critic Roger Fry (1866–1934) in relation to French painting of the 1885–1905 period—Cézanne, Seurat, Vlaminck, etc.—first came into use around this time.

the plays of Bernard Shaw continue to record it: for instance, in *Heartbreak House* (1919) by George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950).

[the Daily Herald](#): national newspaper founded in 1912.

[Agamemnon ... married life of the Carlyles](#): the *Agamemnon* is a Greek tragedy by Aeschylus (525–456 BC). Clytemnestra was the wife of Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae, whom she kills on his return from the Trojan War. Woolf was fascinated by the intense and tumultuous married life of Jane Welsh Carlyle (1801–66) and Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), and wrote about it on a number of occasions. See, for example, ‘The Letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle’, in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, i. 1904–1912 (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), 54–8.

[Richmond to Waterloo](#): Virginia Woolf and her husband, the writer on political affairs Leonard Woolf (1880–1969), lived at Hogarth House, Richmond-upon-Thames, a mainly residential borough in south-west Greater London, from 1915 to 1924.

Dr Watson in Sherlock Holmes is real to him: these two famous characters first meet in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), by Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930).

War and Peace ... Villette: all these novels have already been glossed apart from *War and Peace* (1865–9) by Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910); *Vanity Fair* (1847–8) by W. M. Thackeray (1811–1863); and *Villette* (1853) by Charlotte Brontë (1816–55).



Mr Hardy has written no novel since 1895: when his last novel, *Jude the Obscure*, had provoked uproar because of its frankness and alleged obscenity.

Tristram Shandy or Pride and Prejudice: see notes to pp. 11 and 26 above.

**Camberwell ... Utopia:** Camberwell is a district of south-east London. H. G. Wells outlined his vision of a more enlightened and cheery future in works such as *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and *Men Like Gods* (1923).

**Doulton's factory ... Mile End Road:** the Doulton Pottery Building was situated at 28 Black Prince Road, Lambeth. The factory had ornate terracotta walls. As far as Woolf was concerned, the Mile End Road, in London's East End, was synonymous with the rougher side of life in the capital.

[Hilda Lessways ... Maud:](#) for *Hilda Lessways* see note to p. 7. *Maud: A Monodrama* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–92) was published in 1855.

The bailiwick of Turnhill ... farthest of the cottages: from Book 1, chapter 1 of *Hilda Lessways*. For the 'Five Towns', see note to p. 7.

**Albert or Balmoral:** named after Prince Albert (1819–1861), cousin and Prince Consort of Queen Victoria (reigned 1837–1901), having married her in 1840, and Balmoral Castle, the principal country residence of the British monarch in Scotland following its purchase by the royal family in 1848 and extensive rebuilding in the 1850s, respectively.

Mr Forster: E. M. Forster (1879–1970).



**Factory Acts:** introduced to protect workers from employers who permitted dangerous and unscrupulous practices in their workplaces, Factory Acts were passed in 1809, 1823, 1833, 1844, 1847, and 1863.

Mr Joyce and Mr Eliot ... Ulysses: see notes to pp. 10 and 38.

Mr Eliot has written some of the loveliest lines in modern poetry: both Eliot's *Poems* (1919) and *The Waste Land* (1922) had been published by the Hogarth Press, the latter in 1923.

[Queen Victoria](#): *Queen Victoria*, by Lytton Strachey, was published in 1921.

[Lord Macaulay's essays](#): Macaulay's *Essays Critical and Historical* were published in 1843.

[Mr Prufrock](#): the persona of T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', first published in 1915 and collected in *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917).

## **'IMPASSIONED PROSE'**

De Quincey ... 'his natural vocation lay towards poetry': Thomas De Quincey (1785–1859). The quotation is found in De Quincey's *Autobiographic Sketches*. See *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, 16 vols. (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1863–83), xiv. 197.

‘trepidations of innumerable fugitives’ ... on the desert island: see De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, in *Works*, i. 273. The ‘laurelled coach’ appears in ‘The Glory of Motion’, the first essay in ‘The English Mail Coach’ (1849); the ‘phantom woodcutter’ is found in ‘Introduction to the World of Strife’, one of the *Autobiographic Sketches*.



Mr Binyon ... easily appearing overdressed: Laurence Binyon (1869–1943) made these comments (slightly altered by Woolf) in *Tradition and Reaction in Modern Poetry* (Oxford: The English Association, Pamphlet No. 63, Apr. 1926), 12 and 13.

Browne ... Emily Brontë: these writers have been glossed, with the exceptions of Walter Savage Landor (1775–1864), John Ruskin (1819–1900); and Emily Brontë (1818–48).

the immortal works of Bradshaw and Baedeker: the indispensable *Bradshaw's Railway Guide*, which first appeared in 1839, was the brainchild of George Bradshaw (1801–53). Karl Baedeker (1801–59) published a series of celebrated travel guides from 1829 onwards. His son took over the business when he died and up until the Second World War no visit to any European city would have been complete without consulting the internationally famous Baedeker guide to it.

[Browning ... Peacock](#): Robert Browning (1812–89); Thomas Love Peacock (1785–1866).

‘to meditate too much and to observe too little’: see De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, in *Works*, i. 211.

a vault seemed to open ... fled away continually: see De Quincey,  
*Autobiographic Sketches*, in *Works*, xix. 16–17.

‘modes of impassioned prose ... the whole music’: for all four of these quotations see De Quincey, *Works*, i, Preface, p. xvii.

Spanish Military Nun ... Oh! verdure ... only to betray: see De Quincey,  
*The Spanish Military Nun*, in *Works*, iii. 55.



‘a prepossessing young female’: an allusion to Ann of Oxford Street, the young prostitute in *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*.

‘the old hackneyed roll-call ... a man’s life’: De Quincey in a letter to the Scots writer James Hogg (1770–1835), 21 September 1850. Quoted in Thomas De Quincey, *Uncollected Writings* (2 vols. 1890), i. 358.

the neighbouring town of Manchester: where De Quincey was born.

‘palm ... that ear ever heard’: for the significance of ‘palm’ and ‘solemn wind’ to De Quincey, see *Autobiographic Sketches*, in *Works*, xiv. 14 and 15 respectively.

the war with the mill hands ... with admirable particularity: another allusion to 'Introduction to the World of Strife'. The imaginary kingdom was called Gombroon.

the coaches gathering at the post office ... Lamb asleep in his chair ... dark London night: the first details are drawn from 'The Glory of Motion'; the essay ends with a woman mourning her son who has died in battle. The surprised couple appear in 'The Vision of Sudden Death', the second part of *The English Mail Coach*. For De Quincey on Lamb, see *Works*, viii. 108–160, and for Ann see *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, in *Works*, i. 169 ff.

Suspiria de Profundis: first published in 1845.

Eton ... 'Levana and Our Ladies of Sorrow': see De Quincey, *Suspiria de Profundis*, in *Works*, xvi. 22–32.

## **HOW SHOULD ONE READ A BOOK?**



King John ... Tess of the D'Urbervilles: Magna Carta was sealed by King John (reigned 1199–1216) on 15 June 1215 at Runnymede, Berkshire. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* was published in 1667. Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* appeared in 1891.

Queen Victoria ... six months before her time: Queen Victoria ascended the throne on 20 June 1837.

**Zoological Gardens:** the Zoological Gardens in Regent's Park, London (aka London Zoo), were first opened to the public in 1828.

[Defoe ... Robinson Crusoe](#): Daniel Defoe (1660–1731) wrote *The Life and Strange and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (first published in 1719).

‘my father called me ... confined by the gout’: slightly adapted from the fourth paragraph of the opening chapter of the novel.

‘Matrimony ... Hannah till you mentioned her’: all three quotations are taken from the first chapter of *Emma* (1816) by Jane Austen.

Jane Austen ... Kipling: the dates of these authors, apart from Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), have already been glossed.

**Captain Scott ... in the snow:** Captain Robert Falcon Scott (1868–1912) reached the South Pole on 18 January 1912 only to find that the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen (1872–1928) had beaten him to it by just over a month. Scott and the four members of his team froze to death during their attempted return journey from the Pole.



Thackeray ... in *Vanity Fair*: see note to p. 43. For the Waterloo chapters, see [chapter 28](#) onwards.

Clarissa Harlowe ... Anna Karenina: Samuel Richardson (1689–1761) published *Clarissa: or The History of a Young Lady* in 1748–9. *Anna Karenina* (1875–8) is by Tolstoy.

Dryden, Johnson: see note to p. 24.

## **POETRY, FICTION AND THE FUTURE**

[Atalanta ... Prometheus](#): *Atalanta in Calydon* was a dramatic poem published in 1865 by Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909). For Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, see p. 26.

[George Gissing](#): he lived from 1857 to 1903 and his novels include *The Nether World* (1889) and *New Grub Street* (1891).

[Xenocrates ... Charing Cross Road](#): Xenocrates was head of the Academy, established by Plato, from 339 to 314 BC. Eudoxus of Cnidus (c.400–c.350 BC) was an outstanding mathematician; Eudoxa is the feminine form of his name. Thessaly was a region of north-eastern classical Greece and the Charing Cross Road is in central London.

Keats ... 'jug jug to dirty ears': Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' was written in 1818–19; the 'modern poet' in question is T. S. Eliot, the quotation occurring in 'A Game of Chess', the second part of *The Waste Land*.

Oscar Wilde: Wilde (1854–1900), was synonymous with aestheticism.



Byron in Don Juan: see note to p. 26.

Hamlet's ... Measure for Measure: Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was first acted in 1602 and his tragicomedy *Measure for Measure* was written in 1604.

**Proust:** Marcel Proust (1871–1922) was the author of *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*) which appeared between 1913 and 1927.

Meredith's ... Richard Feverel: see [chapter 19](#) of *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, a History of a Father and Son* (1859) by George Meredith (1828–1909).

Tristram Shandy: see note to p. 11.

**Ibsen:** the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) had a profound affect on James Joyce, Bernard Shaw and the Modernist movement in general through plays such as *Hedda Gabler* (1890).

## **CRAFTSMANSHIP**

The title of this series ... talk is called 'Craftsmanship': this piece originated as a BBC radio talk broadcast on 29 April 1937.

[‘Passing Russell Square’](#): Russell Square was the nearest tube station to Tavistock Square, where the Woolfs lived at No. 52.



[‘Passing away saith the world ...’ ... King’s Cross](#): ‘Passing away, Saith the World’ is a poem by Christina Rossetti (1830–94). The second quote is based on the opening lines of ‘Tithonus’ (1860) by Alfred, Lord Tennyson:

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,  
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,  
Man comes and tills the fields and lies beneath,  
And after many a summer dies the swan.

King's Cross is the next stop after Russell Square on the northbound Piccadilly line.

casements ... alien corn: see seventh stanza of 'Ode to a Nightingale' (1819) by Keats:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!  
No hungry generations tread thee down;  
The voice I hear this passing night was heard  
In ancient days by emperor and clown:  
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path  
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,  
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;  
The same that oft-times hath  
Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas in fairy lands forlorn.

For Ruth, driven by famine from her native land and forced to work in the fields of her kinsman, see Ruth 2: 3.

[Michelin Guide ... Baedeker](#): maps and guidebooks produced originally by André and Édouard Michelin who founded the Michelin Tyre Company in 1888. For Baedeker see note to p. 56.

[ducal house of Bedford](#): Bedford Square, built on part of the metropolitan estate of the Earls and Dukes of Bedford, whose family name is Russell, is quite near both Russell Square and Tavistock Square and all three are in Bloomsbury.

‘incarnadine’ ... ‘multitudinous seas’: see *Macbeth*, II. ii. 59–62.

[Antony and Cleopatra](#): tragedy by Shakespeare, written 1606–7.



she has gone a-roving ... fair maid: from the 'Maid of Amsterdam', a song which first appeared in Robert Heywood's play *The Rape of Lucrece* in 1608.

[Society for Pure English](#): founded in 1913. Early members included E. M. Forster, Roger Fry, and Thomas Hardy.

## **THE NEW BIOGRAPHY**

‘The aim of biography ... transmission of personality’: see Sidney Lee, *Principles of Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 25–6. When Woolf’s father, Leslie Stephen, resigned his editorship of the *Dictionary of National Biography* in 1890 he was succeeded (from 1891) by Sir Sidney Lee (1859–1926). The *DNB* would eventually comprise 29,120 lives.

Shakespeare or another King Edward the Seventh: Lee published *A Life of William Shakespeare* in 1898 (it ran to many subsequent editions) and *King Edward VII: A Biography* in 1925 and 1927.

**Izaak Walton or Mrs Hutchinson:** Izaak Walton (1593–1683) wrote lives of John Donne (1640) and George Herbert (1670) among others. *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson* by Lucy Hutchinson (b. 1620) was published in 1806.

Boswell spoke ... ‘...stark insensibility’: in his *The Life of Samuel Johnson LL.D*, first published in 1791, James Boswell (1740–95) records the following exchange with his subject about Johnson’s fourteen months (1728–9) as an undergraduate at Pembroke College, Oxford: ‘JOHNSON: “I had no notion that I was wrong or irreverent to my tutor.” BOSWELL: “That, Sir, was great fortitude of mind.” JOHNSON: “No, Sir; stark insensibility.”’

**Tennyson or of Gladstone:** Woolf has in mind Hallam Tennyson, *Life of Alfred Tennyson* (2 vols., 1897) and John Morley (1838–1923), *Life of Gladstone* (3 vols., 1903).

Mr Strachey ... the size of a novel: Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (1918); André Maurois, *Ariel* (1923).



[Some People ... and of Byron:](#) *Some People* (1927) was published by Harold Nicholson (1886–1968), husband, since 1913, of Woolf's close friend and lover Vita Sackville-West (1892–1962). At the time he published *Some People*, Nicholson was a diplomat in Berlin. He had previously written *Tennyson: Aspects* (1923) and *Byron: The Last Journey* (1924).

Lord Curzon ... Voltaire: George Nathaniel, 1st Marquis Curzon (1859–1925) is one of the subjects Nicolson writes about in *Some People*. Curzon was viceroy of India from 1899–1905 and Foreign Secretary in 1919–24. He had a reputation for quarrelsomeness. In 1917 he bought Bodiam Castle near Bognor Regis in Sussex. For Max Beerbohm see note to p. 17. ‘Voltaire’ was the pseudonym of François-Marie Arouet (1694–1778).

‘Tears, Idle Tears’: poem by Tennyson.

**Lord Oxford or Lady Colefax:** Herbert Henry Asquith, 1st Earl of Oxford and Asquith (1852–1928), Liberal prime minister 1908–16; Lady Sybil Colefax (1874–1950) was a society hostess.

Commoner of Pembroke ... in his nineteenth year: see note to p. 96.

**Pitt and Burke and Sir Joshua Reynolds:** William Pitt, 1st Earl of Chatham (1708–78); Edmund Burke (1729–97); Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–92).

[Lord Morley](#): the journalist, politician, and biographer John Morley (see note to p. 97) was created Viscount Morley of Blackburn in 1908.

## **ON BEING ILL**

[De Quincey ... Proust](#): for Thomas De Quincey and Marcel Proust, see notes to pp. 55 and 81.



the tragedy of Lear: Shakespeare's *King Lear* dates from 1604–5 and was performed at court in 1606.

[Babel](#): see Genesis 11: 1–9.

**Chloral:** chloral hydrate is a very strong sedative. The poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–82) became addicted to it and the scientific popularizer John Tyndall (1820–93) died of an accidental overdose of it.

C.L ... A.R ... K.T: unidentified and probably imaginary.

[Morning Post ... reads the Bishop of Lichfield:](#) the Bishop of Lichfield at this time was the Rt. Revd. John Augustine Kempthorne (1864–1946). The *Morning Post* national newspaper was founded in 1772 and was absorbed with the *Daily Telegraph* in 1937.

**Beachy Head?**: a headland on the East Sussex coast, 171 metres high and notorious as a suicide spot.

**Pepys:** Samuel Pepys (1633–1703), whose famous diary opens on 1 January 1660.

**Pericles ... George the Fourth:** Pericles (c.495–429 BC), was a statesman who presided over Athens' golden age; the legendary Arthur first emerges as a figure of romance in the *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c.1138) of Geoffrey of Monmouth (d. 1155), a medieval tradition which culminates in the *Morte d'Arthur* (finished in 1470, printed in 1485) of Sir Thomas Malory (d. 1471); Charlemagne (c.742–814) was crowned Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas Day 800; the far from popular George IV reigned from 1820 to 1830.



[The Decline ... Golden Bowl](#): Edward Gibbon (1737–94) published his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in six volumes between 1776 and 1788. *The Golden Bowl* (1904) is the last great novel of Henry James (1843–1916).

and oft at eve ... meadows: from *Comus* (1637) by John Milton.

wandering ... the slow, unwilling wind: from *Prometheus Unbound* (1820)  
by Shelley.

La Bruyère: Jean de La Bruyère (1645–96).

Rimbaud ... sans défauts: from *Une Saison en enfer* (1873) by Arthur Rimbaud (1854–91).

**Mallarmé:** Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–98).

[Augustus Hare ... Waterford and Canning](#): Augustus J. C. Hare (1834–1903), *The Story of Two Noble Lives, Being Memorials of Charlotte, Countess Canning, and Louisa, Marchioness of Waterford* (London: G. Allen, 1893).

So Hare, too ... the oddity of it all remains: all the details that follow between this point in the essay until the end refer to incidents or people discussed in Hare's book.



Beckford's mania for castle building: William Beckford (1759–1844), author of the Gothic novel *Vathek* (1786). His mania was largely expended, indeed exhausted, on Fonthill Abbey in Wiltshire.

**the Solent:** a sea channel between the coast of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

**Irish famine and the Indian Mutiny:** the Irish Famine (1845–51); the Indian Mutiny began on 10 May 1857.

Watts: the painter George Frederic Watts (1817–1904).

**LESLIE STEPHEN**

[By the time ... stroll across the Cornish moors:](#) Leslie Stephen (1832–1904) had one child by his first wife and four by his second, Julia Stephen (Vanessa, Thoby, Adeline Virginia, and Adrian): Julia also had three children from her first marriage. As an undergraduate at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, Stephen had been a fine oarsman and he was one of the most distinguished mountaineers of his generation. The family home was 22 Hyde Park Gate, London.

History of English Thought ... he ever wrote: Stephen published *A History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* in 1876, *The Science of Ethics* in 1882, and *The Playground of Europe* in 1871.

he would burst, not into song ... suited his mood: aspects of her father that Woolf incorporates into *To the Lighthouse* in the character of Mr Ramsay.

**Lady Ritchie:** Lady Anne (‘Annie’) Isabella Thackeray Ritchie (1837–1919), Leslie Stephen’s sister-in-law. Elder daughter of W. M. Thackeray. Like her father, she was a novelist.



**‘I am the most easily bored of men’**: see Frederic William Maitland, *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* (1906; London: Duckworth, 1910), 434: ‘I am, I think, one of the most easily bored of mankind.’ Repr. in *Sir Leslie Stephen’s Mausoleum Book*, ed. Alan Bell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 89.

South African War: the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902).

Fitzjames ... the great Duke himself: Sir James Fitzjames Stephen (1829–94); Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington (1769–1852).

He had no special love ... but he kept his word: Woolf's sister, Vanessa Stephen enrolled at Arthur Cope's School of Art in South Kensington in 1896, and under her married name, Vanessa Bell, she went on to become a distinguished painter.

‘jack of all trades and master of none’: in his Mausoleum Book, Stephen wrote: ‘The sense in which I do take myself to be a failure is this: I have scattered myself too much ... Unluckily, what with journalism and dictionary making I have been a jack of all trades.’ See *Sir Leslie Stephen’s Mausoleum Book*, ed. Bell, 93.

[Lowell](#): James Russell Lowell (1819–91), poet, critic, and American ambassador to London from 1880 to 1885.

## **THE ART OF BIOGRAPHY**

[Johnson, Boswell, and Lockhart](#): for Boswell, see note to p. 96; Samuel Johnson wrote a vivid *Life of Mr Richard Savage* (1744) and *The Lives of the English Poets* (1779–81); John Gibson Lockhart (1794–1854) published his *Life of Burns* in 1828 and his *Memoirs of the Life of Walter Scott* in 1837–8.

Froude's Carlyle ... fallible human being: James Anthony Froude published his controversial *Reminiscences* of Carlyle in 1881; Edmund Gosse (1849–1928) made his remarks in *Father and Son* (1907).



[Eminent Victorians ... Elizabeth and Essex](#): Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) comprises four iconoclastic essays on the lives of Cardinal Henry E. Manning (1808–92), cardinal-archbishop of Westminster from 1865 until his death; the nursing reformer Florence Nightingale (1820–1910); Thomas Arnold (1795–1842), headmaster of Rugby School from 1828; and the distinguished British soldier General Charles Gordon (1833–85). Strachey's *Elizabeth and Essex: A Tragic History* (1928) was his last fulllength work.

**Falstaff:** the corpulent and roguish Sir John Falstaff appears in Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part 1*, *Henry IV Part 2*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Albert's death: Prince Albert died in 1861.

Had he lived: Strachey died in 1932.

[Micawber and Miss Bates](#): for Micawber see p. 34; Miss Bates is a character in Jane Austen's *Emma* (1814).

## **THE FEMININE NOTE IN FICTION**

Mr Courtney ... the book before us: this essay is a review of W. L Courtney (1850–1928), *The Feminine Note in Fiction* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1904).

Mrs Humphry Ward: see note to p. 23.

**Sappho:** 7th century BC Greek lyric poet. She was born on the island of Lesbos.



‘close analytic miniature work’: Courtney, *Feminine Note in Fiction*, p. XXXV.

## **WOMEN NOVELISTS**

[Mr Brimley Johnson](#): this essay is a review of R. Brimley Johnson, *The Women Novelists* (London: Collins, 1918).

Miss Burney ... Dr Burney's daughter: Frances ('Fanny') Burney (1752–1840) was the author of *Evelina* (1778), *Cecilia* (1782), *Camilla* (1796), and *The Wanderer* (1814). She was the daughter of the organist, minor composer, and historian of music, Dr Charles Burney (1726–1814).

‘possible for a woman to write novels and be respectable’: Brimley Johnson,  
*Women Novelists*, 68.

‘coarseness ... to speak in their presence’: *ibid.* 210.

‘imitation has not been ... of women novelists’: *ibid.* 53.

‘Women are born preachers ... thoroughly emotional and feminine’: *ibid.*  
210, 207, 212.

Becky Sharp ... Mr Woodhouse: characters in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and Austen's *Emma* respectively.

## **WOMEN AND FICTION**



Sappho ... birth of Christ: see p. 127.

about the year 1000 ... in Japan: Lady Murasaki (?978–?1031) wrote *The Tale of Genji* around 1001–1015. It was being translated into English (6 vols., 1925–33) by Arthur Waley (1889–1966).

‘so far at least as law ...’ ... in the time of the Stuarts: the source of the quotation is untraced. In England, the Stuart dynasty commenced when James VI of Scotland inherited the Tudor thrones of England and Wales, and Ireland in 1603 and ended with the ousting of James II in the ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688.

Keats and Carlyle and Flaubert: see pp. 23, 17, and 25.

Jane Austen ... and two were unmarried: Jane Austen and Emily Brontë did not marry.

[Wuthering Heights](#): Emily Brontë's novel was published in 1847. The other novels mentioned here have already been glossed.

When George Eliot ... was scandalized: this was in the mid-1850s. The writer G. H. Lewes (1817–78) was already married, but he and Eliot lived together until his death.

a voter: women over 30 won the right to vote in 1918 and women between 21 and 30 gained it in 1929.

## **PROFESSIONS FOR WOMEN**



When your secretary invited me to come here ... your Society: in 1931, the political activist and Secretary of the London branch of the National Society for Women's Service, Philippa ('Pippa') Strachey (1872–1968), invited Woolf to address its members.

[Aphra Behn ... Harriet Martineau](#): Aphra Behn (1640–89), acclaimed by Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* as the first English woman to earn her living by writing. See Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. Morag Shiach (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 82–5; Harriet Martineau (1802–76).

[The Angel in the House](#): *The Angel in the House* (1854–63), an extraordinarily popular sequence of poems in praise of married love, was written by Coventry Patmore (1823–96).

five hundred pounds a year?: see Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. Shiach, 137.

rooms of your own: [ibid.](#)

## **MEMORIES OF A WORKING WOMEN'S GUILD**

[When you asked me ... papers by working women:](#) this essay first appeared in a different form in 1930. It was revised as Woolf's 'Introductory Letter' to Margaret Llewellyn Davies (ed.), *Life as We Have Known It by Co-Operative Working Women* (London: Hogarth Press, 1931). From 1889 to 1921 Margaret Llewellyn Davies (1861–1944) was general secretary of the Women's Co-operative Guild (founded 1883). For authoritative histories of the Guild, see Catherine Webb, *The Woman with the Basket: The History of the Women's Co-operative Guild 1883–1927* (Manchester: Co-operative Wholesale Society, 1927); Gillian Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women: The Women's Co-operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War* (London: UCL Press Ltd, 1998).

a hot June morning in Newcastle in the year 1913: Woolf was there with Leonard Woolf (see note to p. 39).

reform of the Divorce Laws ... a Government measure: in 1913 there were only 577 divorces in England and Wales, a figure largely due to the difficulty of getting a marriage annulled, especially for a wife. Only in 1923 did the Divorce Act make the grounds for divorce the same for both spouses. David Lloyd George (1863–1945) led a Land Campaign from 1909 against the landed interest and the topic was an increasingly a hot issue in political circles in 1913. Though a Minimum Wage was much discussed at this time it was only incorporated into British law in 1999 following the National Minimum Wage Act of 1998. For the Women's Co-operative Guild's 'Minimum Wage Campaign', including its Great Petition of 1910, see Webb, *The Woman with the Basket*, 115–22. Chapter 10 of the same book covers 'The Care of Maternity' (ibid. 123–33). For the Trades Boards Act, see ibid. 114. Adult Suffrage: see note to p. 137, above. See also, 'Campaigns', ch. 10 of Gillian Scott's *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women*, 93–128.



The head office of the Guild ... was then in Hampstead: located at 29  
Winchester Road, Hampstead, Margaret Llewellyn Davies's home address.

[Miss Kidd](#): see Margaret Llewellyn Davies's 'A Guild Office Clerk' in Llewellyn Davies (ed.), *Life as We Have Known It*, 73–80; quote from p. 76.

deep purple ... The colour seemed somehow symbolical: purple symbolizes, among other things, justice.

[Miss Lilian Harris](#): the life long companion of Margaret Llewellyn Davies was Lilian Harris (1866–1949), who also retired from the Guild in 1921.

**Einstein:** Albert Einstein (1879–1955) was all the rage in the early 1920s following scientific verification of his General Theory of Relativity (1916) in 1919 and his Nobel Prize for Physics in 1921.

half-starved women standing ... match-boxes ... Bethnal Green: the very poorly paid employees of the Bryant and May match factory in Bethnal Green, east London, went on strike in 1888 in protest at the appalling conditions under which they were made to work, including a fourteenhour day, as well as the severe health problems associated with working with white or yellow phosphorus.

Christies' felt-hat factory: see Mrs Scott, JP, 'A Felt Hat Worker', in Llewellyn Davies (ed.), *Life as We Have Known It*, 81–101.

**Burns ... and Samuel Butler's Notebooks:** Robert Burns (1759–96); Henry George (1839–1937), American political theorist who advocated the nationalization of land and a tax on its increment value; Edward George Earle Lytton, 1st Baron Lytton (1803–73), author of *Eugene Aram* (1832), *The Coming Race* (1871), and other novels; Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850–1919), American author of romantic and sentimental verse; Alice Meynell (1847–1922), poet; Thomas Carlyle's *History of the French Revolution* appeared in 1837; Bertrand Russell's *The Problem of China* was published in 1922; William Morris (1834–96), poet, writer, and socialist; the English novelist Florence Barclay (1862–1921) was author of the phenomenally popular *The Rosary* (1909); Samuel Butler's *Notebooks* were published posthumously in 1912.



sometime in the eighties ... 'Why ... be discussed?': for 'The Beginnings' of the Guild, see Webb, *The Woman with the Basket*, 17–35 and Scott, in notes to pp. 146, 147 *Feminism and Politics*, 13–34.

## **WHY?**

When the first number ... 'Here is our chance': the first issue of *Lysistrata* was edited by Rose Marie Hodgson, an undergraduate at Somerville College, Oxford (founded solely for women in 1879, though only admitted to the University as a full college in 1957) and Woolf's 'Why?' appeared in the second number of the magazine (May 1934, pp. 5–12). In comparison with the old and established men's colleges, Somerville and her sister institutions were distinctly poor. The final article in the first issue of *Lysistrata* was a 'Manifesto' written by M. Corbett and B. Morrison, in which Woolf would have read: 'Criticism is often levelled at the Oxford undergraduette. It is said with much truth that she is badly dressed, and, further, that she has failed to play her part in the life of the University ... The economic situation of women is also far more precarious than that of men. The colleges are poorer and cannot offer the same facilities, either to dons or undergraduettes, as the men's colleges' (*Lysistrata*, 1, No. 1 (Feb. 1934), 65–8).

**‘The editor forbids feminism’**: in fact, in her ‘Editorial’, Hodgson wrote: ‘... *Lysistrata* will ... give precedence to contributions from the women’s colleges. This fact, united to the name *Lysistrata*, might indicate a feminist policy. However, contributions from men will also be printed, indeed, the only feminist article in this issue is by John Norman. *Lysistrata* has no policy beyond a desire to encourage literary talent, to keep an entirely open mind on all subjects, and to avoid what is merely topical’ (*Lysistrata*, 1, No. 1 (Feb. 1934), 3–4).

the French Revolution: 1789–99.

[Mrs Thrale ... Lord Macaulay](#): Hester Thrale (1741–1821) was a very close friend of Samuel Johnson between 1764 and 1784; Elizabeth Vassell Fox, Lady Holland (1771?–1845) was a famous political and literary hostess and friend of the historian Thomas Babington Macaulay, though he was often critical of her.

## **THUNDER AT WEMBLEY**

[Wembley ... and the Duke of Devonshire](#): the British Empire Exhibition of 1924–5, opened by George V on St George's Day (23 April) 1924, was then the largest exhibition ever staged. It cost £12 million to put on and attracted 27 million visitors. The main venues of the site were the Palace of Industry, the Palace of Engineering, the Palace of the Arts, an Amusement Park and Stadium, all linked together by a screw-driven 'Never-stop' railway. The British Empire Stadium became home to the England football team until 2002. The chairman of the Board of the British Empire Exhibition was Lord Stevenson; the Duke of Devonshire was one of five other Board members and Lieutenant-General Sir Travers Clarke was the Exhibition's chief administrator. For a very useful overview of the Exhibition, see Donald R. Knight and Alan D. Sabey, *The Lion Roars at Wembley: The British Empire Exhibition 60th Anniversary 1924–1925* (London: Barnard and Westwood, 1984).

[Earls Court and the White City](#): an entertainment ground, opened at Earls Court in 1887, closed in 1914; the Earls Court Exhibition Hall was opened on the same site in 1937. In 1908 a large area of land in west London was laid out for the Franco-British Exhibition. There were 40 acres of whitestuccoed buildings and the Exhibition attracted 8 million visitors.

They say ... there is a restaurant ... his dinner: this was almost certainly the Lucullus with its 'expensive ... à la grande carte menu' ('The Restaurants at Wembley', in *The Business Features of Wembley: An Investor's Tour of the Empire* (London: Fleetway Press, 1924), 129). Dinner actually cost 25 shillings, rather more than a guinea (21 shillings) (*Daily News Souvenir Guide to the British Empire Exhibition* (London: Daily News Ltd, 1924), 30; see also 29).



You look through an open door ... aligned in avenues: see the description of what the 'The Palace of Engineering' contained in *The Business Features of Wembley*, 27–82. 'One of the most noteworthy features of this palace is the building itself, the largest at Wembley ... It is claimed to be the biggest concrete building in the world, and would contain Trafalgar Square 6½ times'.

[mowing machines from Canada](#): shown by the Taylor Forbes Company: see *Business Features of Wembley*, 114. Canada (not the entire territory as it is constituted today) was ceded to Britain by the Treaty of Paris (1763) and has been a self-governing dominion since the British North America Act of 1867.

[Burma](#): see *ibid.* 109–10 and the *Daily News Souvenir Guide*, 48–9. Burma came under British rule in 1885. In 1937 it attained a measure of self-government and was separated from India.

the Jack and Jill: ‘Up the hill in basket chairs, and a chute to the bottom’,  
*Daily News Souvenir Guide*, 26.

[snowy Palestine](#): see *Business Features of Wembley*, 105–6 and *Daily News Souvenir Guide*, 69–70; Palestine was captured from the Turks by the British in 1918. For a photograph of the Palestine Pavilion, which suggests that ‘snowy’ refers to its predominantly white colour, see Knight and Sabey, *The Lion Roars at Wembley*, 66.

the Massed Bands of Empire ... pass in procession: 'May 24 is Empire Day, and there will be a Massed Band Concert. Other similar concerts will be given between Empire Day and the end of the month,' *Daily News Souvenir Guide*, 39. The Woolfs visited the Exhibition on 29 May.

[the Prince of Wales in butter](#): in its account of the Canada Pavilion, the *Daily News Souvenir Guide* mentions, ‘Here, too, is the Prince of Wales, with his horse, on his ranch. But the whole scene is carved in solid butter!’ (p. 51). There is a photograph of this sculpture in Knight and Sabey, *The Lion Roars at Wembley*, 49. Edward, Prince of Wales, reigned briefly in 1936 as Edward VIII.

## THE CINEMA

[That is the King ... the Grand National:](#) King George V shook hands with both the Bolton Wanderers and Manchester City football teams at the Football Association Challenge Cup Final at Wembley Stadium on 24 April 1926; the grocery magnate Sir Thomas Lipton (1850–1931) was a famously keen racing yachtsman. All his yachts were called ‘Shamrock’; ‘Jack Horner’, ridden by Willie Watkinson, won the Grand National horse race on 26 March 1926.



the Abbey: Westminster Abbey.

Mile End Road: see note to p. 45.

[Anna Karenina](#): see note to p. 72.

[Dr Caligari](#): *Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari* (1919), Expressionist horror film directed by Robert Wiene.

‘My luve’s like a red, red rose, that’s newly sprung in June’: from ‘A Red, Red Rose’ by Robert Burns.

**Vesuvius:** the only paroxysmal eruption of this famous volcano between the year of Woolf's birth (1882) and 1926 (the date of this essay) occurred in 1906.

grand pianos by Erard and Bechstein: Sebastian Erard (1752–1851), distinguished French piano maker; F. W. C. Bechstein (1826–1900), distinguished German piano maker.

## **STREET HAUNTING: A LONDON ADVENTURE**

**Mantua:** Woolf visited Italy in 1908, 1909, and on her honeymoon in 1912, but the precise date of her visit to Mantua, if indeed she did visit Mantua, is unknown.



Lloyd George ... Mr Cummings: for Lloyd George see note to p. 147; 'Mr Cummings' remains unidentified. Woolf possibly has in mind B. F. Cummings (1889–1919), who published *The Journal of a Disappointed Man* (1919) under the name 'W. N. P. Barbellion'.

**the aged Prime Minister:** the prime minister in 1927 was Stanley Baldwin, born in 1867, so hardly ‘aged’ even by the standards of the 1920s. It is probably not Baldwin, therefore, that Woolf has in mind.

a man who set out on horseback ... of the mind's inglenook: unidentified.

this little book of poems ... drowned untimely: Shelley was drowned in August 1822 off the coast of Italy.

[Euripides and Aeschylus](#): Euripides (c.485–406 BC), Greek tragedian; for Aeschylus see p. 38.

latest wire from Newmarket in the stop press news: communicating the results of horse races at Newmarket Racecourse in Suffolk.

**the Temple:** a reference to two of the four Inns of Court, the Inner Temple and the Middle Temple.

[Ben Jonson's](#): Ben Jonson (1572/3–1637), poet and dramatist.

## **THE SUN AND THE FISH**



**Segesta:** an abandoned city in north-west Sicily built by the ancient Elymians.

[the eclipse ... the strange spectacle again:](#) Leonard and Virginia Woolf travelled with a party of friends to Bardon Fell, North Yorkshire to witness the total eclipse of the sun on 29 June 1927. She described the event at length in her diary. See *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, iii. 1925–1930, ed. Anne Olivier Bell assisted by Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), 142–4.

the Zoological Gardens: see note to p. 64.

## **THE DOCKS OF LONDON**

‘Whither, O splendid ship’, the poet asked: the opening words of the first line of ‘A Passer-by’ by Robert Bridges (1844–1930).

[From a launch in midstream ... still on them:](#) Woolf toured the docks (with, among others, the Persian ambassador) on 20 March 1931 in a Port of London Authority launch. See *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, iv. 1931–1935, ed. Anne Olivier Bell assisted by Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1982), 15 n. 8.

**Greenwich Hospital:** founded in 1694 as the Royal Naval Hospital, it was designed by Sir Christopher Wren (1632–1723) assisted by Nicholas Hawksmoor (1661–1736); Wren was eventually succeeded by Sir John Vanbrugh (1664–1726). The Hospital closed in 1869 and between then and 1998 it accommodated the Royal Naval College. Since then, the University of Greenwich has been the principal occupant of the site.

the Blue Peter: presumably this flag was on the point of being lowered, as the Blue Peter is flown by a vessel in a port to indicate that it is about to sail.

## **OXFORD STREET TIDE**

**Marble Arch:** located on a traffic island at the north-east corner of Hyde Park and the west end of Oxford Street.



our modern aristocrats ... Cavendish and Percy: Cavendish is the family name of the Dukes of Devonshire and Percy is the family name of the Dukes of Northumberland. By 'modern aristocrats', Woolf has in mind wealthy entrepreneurs like the American Harry Gordon Selfridge (1856–1947), owner of Selfridge's store in Oxford Street, which he had opened in 1909.

Green dragons on the top of Corinthian columns may help: Selfridge's columns are Ionic not Corinthian and the ones above the front door are capped by gargoyles rather than green dragons, but it is possible that Woolf has in mind the main entrance to Selfridge's.

## **EVENING OVER SUSSEX: REFLECTIONS IN A MOTOR CAR**

**Sussex ... St Leonards:** Eastbourne, Bexhill, and St Leonards are all towns on the coast of this former southern English county. Since 1974 it has been divided into East Sussex and West Sussex (all three resorts are in East Sussex). The Woolfs spent a great deal of time at Monk's House, their home in the village of Rodmell, near Lewes, now the administrative centre of East Sussex.

William came over from France ten centuries ago: William, Duke of Normandy, became William I of England after his victory at the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

**Battle:** another East Sussex town, the site of the Battle of Hastings.

air balls: balloons.

## **FLYING OVER LONDON**

[the Moth](#): the de Havilland Gipsy Moth aeroplane was first produced in 1926 and heralded the modern era of high-performance light plane design.

that ship's company ... but not a soul on board: an allusion to the *Mary Celeste*, an American brigantine found deserted but with her sails set between the Azores and Portugal on 5 December 1872. None of the crew was ever found.



**Charon's:** in Greek myth, Charon is the ferryman who conveyed the dead across the river Styx to their final resting-place in the Underworld.

[Zeiss](#): proprietary name for field glasses or binoculars.

the poor quarters: that is, the East End of London, contiguous with the City.

## **WHY ART TODAY FOLLOWS POLITICS**

[Why Art Today Follows Politics](#): an Editorial Note at the head of this newspaper piece reads: ‘While very glad to print this article by Virginia Woolf in our pages, we must of course point out that it is not entirely our view that she expresses. We doubt whether artists in the past have been so peacefully immune from the conditions and issues of the society in which they live as she suggests, and we feel sure that we can learn quite a lot about “the political conditions of the age or the country” in which Titian, Velasquez, Mozart or Bach, lived by examining the works which they have left for us.’

[Artists International Association](#): the founders of the AIA hoped to ‘mobilise “the international unity of artists against Imperialist War on the Soviet Union, Fascism and Colonial oppression”’. By 1936, the AIA had over 600 members, including Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant (1885–1978). See Lynda Morris and Robert Radford, *The Story of the Artists International Association 1933–1953* (Oxford: The Museum of Art, 1983); quote from p. 2.

**Hitler and Mussolini:** Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) came to power as Chancellor of Germany in 1933; Benito Mussolini (1883–1945) had been in power in Italy since 1922.

Titian ... Figaro: *Bacchus and Ariadne*, a painting by Titian (c.1487/1490–1576) from 1521–3, is in the National Gallery in London; Velázquez (1599–1660); Mussolini launched his Conquest of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in October 1935; *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786) is an opera by Mozart.

## **THOUGHTS ON PEACE IN AN AIR RAID**

[The Germans ... Here they are again:](#) this article was written in the late summer of 1940 at Monk's House, Rodmell, Sussex, from where Woolf witnessed many planes, both British and German, pass overhead. She frequently heard the sound of aerial combat and anti-aircraft guns. RAF and enemy planes came down nearby.



The Times ... 'Women have not a word to say in politics' ... are men:

Nancy Witcher, Viscountess Astor (1879–1964) was the first woman Member of Parliament (1919–45). She probably made her comments in the House of Commons, but efforts to locate a report containing them in *The Times* have proved unsuccessful.

‘I will not cease from mental fight,’ Blake wrote: from the poem  
‘Jerusalem’ from the Preface to *Milton* (1804–8), by William Blake (1757–  
1827).

*'To fight against a real enemy ...' ... Englishman who fought in the last war: unidentified.*

Othello's occupation will be gone ... remain Othello: Shakespeare's Othello was a soldier; a play on 'Othello's occupation's gone' in Act III Scene iii.

‘The huntsmen are up in America. ...’: ‘The Huntsmen are up in *America*, and they are already past their first sleep in *Persia*. But who can be drowsie at that howr which freed us from everlasting sleep? or have slumbring thoughts at that time, when sleep it self must end, and as some conjecture all shall wake again?’ The concluding words of *The Garden of Cyrus* (1658) by Sir Thomas Browne (1605–82).

<sup>1</sup> Rachel Bowlby, Introduction to Virginia Woolf, *A Woman's Essays* (*Selected Essays*, vol. i) (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. xxiv.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew McNeillie, Introduction to Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader: First Series*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1984), n.p.

<sup>3</sup> See T. S. Eliot on the poet's need for 'a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality' in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919).

<sup>4</sup> Elena Gualtieri, *Virginia Woolf's Essays: Sketching the Past* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 2000), 3–4.

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 118, 61.

<sup>6</sup> *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell, assisted by Andrew McNeillie, iii. 1925–1930 (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), 139.

<sup>7</sup> Gualtieri, *Virginia Woolf's Essays*, 49.

<sup>8</sup> 'Life and the Novelist', a signed review of *A Deputy Was King* by G. B. Stern, *New York Herald Tribune* (7 Nov. 1926), 'Books' section, pp. 1, 6, repr. in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, iv: 1925–1928 (London: Hogarth Press, 1994), 400–6; Quote from p. 405.

<sup>9</sup> 'Life and the Novelist'; quote from p. 400.

<sup>10</sup> Deborah Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, The City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 27 and *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> The story is available in Virginia Woolf, *The Mark on the Wall and Other Short Fiction*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 18–29.

<sup>1</sup> How violent these are two quotations will show. ‘It [*Told by an Idiot*] should be read as *The Tempest* should be read, and as *Gulliver’s Travels* should be read, for if Miss Macaulay’s poetic gift happens to be less sublime than those of the author of *The Tempest*, and if her irony happens to be less tremendous than that of the author of *Gulliver’s Travels*, her justice and wisdom are no less noble than theirs.’—the *Daily News*.

The next day we read: ‘For the rest one can only say that if Mr Eliot had been pleased to write in demotic English *The Waste Land* might not have been, as it just is to all but anthropologists, and literati, so much waste-paper.’—the *Manchester Guardian*. [VW]