

**R. Mayne, 'When Dance Disrupts: Abel Pargiter and Refiguring Panoramic Vision in *The Years*'**

This article offers a fresh reading of Abel Pargiter in *The Years*, tracing a three-stage arc from patriarchal panoramic mastery, through obscured vision, to an emergent mode of participatory vision prompted by Sara and Maggie's garden dance.<sup>1</sup> In dialogue with the 2025 International Virginia Woolf Conference panel 'Woolf's Panoramic Writing as a Form of Dissidence' (Chair: Marie Allègre), the essay situates Abel's gaze within Stephan Oettermann and Bernard Comment's accounts of panoramic vision and mastery, which reveal the panorama as an immersive spectacle designed to consolidate social and gender hierarchies.<sup>2</sup>

In the first stage, Abel assumes the posture of panoramic mastery: 'He walked to the window and looked out.'<sup>3</sup> The phrasing is spare yet assertive, evoking a man who expects to see and to know from a position of height and detachment — a figure seeking control through the totalising sweep of vision. The second stage traces his obscured vision: smoke from the garden clouds his eyes, forcing him to retreat to the drawing-room.<sup>4</sup> This withdrawal interrupts the panoramic field, collapsing the illusion of mastery. Crucially, this collapse is interwoven with the unfolding garden dance; the dancers' rhythmic gestures and temporal layering expose the limits of detached, patriarchal oversight, in line with scholarship noting Woolf's persistent subversion of patriarchal authority, which destabilizes masculinist conventions in her fiction.<sup>5</sup>

Stage three, precipitated by the continued dance, sees Abel return to the window. His watching, clapping, and exclamation of "'Bravo!'" mark a participatory, responsive engagement with the scene.<sup>6</sup> In line with Markman Ellis's observation of the panorama as 'a spectacle of illusion clarified,' Abel's altered response enacts an embodied recognition of the limits of panoramic mastery, his enthusiasm signalling not control but participation.<sup>7</sup>

Woolf reworks the panoramic gaze through feminine embodiment and rhythmic multiplicity, transforming a desire for mastery into a mode of perception that is partial, textured, and relational. Abel's transformation becomes emblematic of Woolf's modernist experiment: a movement from possession to participation, and of visual mastery to shared, sensorially responsive perception.

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999 [1937]), pp. 114–120; cited hereafter as *TY*.

<sup>2</sup> See Stephan Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium* (New York: Zone Books, 1997); Bernard Comment, *The Panorama* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Virginia Woolf, *TY*, p. 114.

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Woolf, *TY*, p. 114.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Catherine Nelson-McDermott, 'Disorderly Conduct: Parody and Coded Humor in *Jacob's Room* and *The Years*', *Woolf Studies Annual*, 5 (1999), pp. 79–95 (pp. 82–83).

<sup>6</sup> Virginia Woolf, *TY*, p. 119.

<sup>7</sup> Markman Ellis, "'Spectacles within doors': Panoramas of London in the 1790s,' *Romanticism*, 14.2 (July 2008), pp. 133–148 (p. 144).