who wrote to her often, especially after his wife's death, and came at intervals to Grosvenor Place for a long *tête-à-tête*, his ear-trumpet between them . . .'

12–Mrs Ward had opposed women's suffrage 'from her earliest days at Oxford, ever since the time when the first Women's Petition for the vote was brought to the House of Commons by Miss Garrett and Miss Emily Davies in 1866, and John Stuart Mill moved his amendment to the Reform Bill of 1867' (*ibid.*, ch. xii, p. 224), and was to campaign against it, through the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League, of which she was founder, until the cause was lost in 1918. Her unwillingness to play an active role in the campaign was based on practical rather than ideological grounds.

13–Trevelyan, ch. xiii, p. 256.

14–*Ibid.*, ch. viii, p. 151, quoting a letter to Bishop Creighton, 9 August 1898.

15–*Ibid.*, ch. ii, p. 22; the ellipsis marks the omission of: '; let not the young man reading for his pass, the London copyist, or the British Museum illuminator, hope to enter within the enchanted ring of her benignant influences;' – see n6 above.

16–For Mrs Humphry Ward's childhood daydreams, *ibid.*, ch. i, pp. 11–12.

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'.[2] 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,'[3] 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.[4] 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,[5] 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*[6] 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*[7] – 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;[8] 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*.[9] 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[10] 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*,[11] 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'),[12] 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?[13] 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,[14] 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 epoch-making of them all.[15]

1–A signed essay in the 'Literary Review' of the *New York Evening Post*, 17 November 1923, (Kp C240) reprinted in *N&A*, 1 December 1923, and *Living Age* (Boston), 2 February 1924. VW had broached the subject of this essay in her diary, as early as 19 June, at a time when she was busy writing *Mrs Dalloway* (1925): 'People, like Arnold Bennett, say I cant create, or didn't in J[acob]'s R[oom], characters that survive. My answer is – but I leave that to the Nation: its only the old argument that character is dissipated into shreds now: the old post-Dostoevsky argument. I daresay its true, however, that I haven't that "reality" gift. I insubstantise, wilfully to some extent, distrusting reality – its cheapness. But to go further. Have I the power of conveying the true reality? Or do I write essays about myself? Answer these questions as I may, in the uncomplimentary sense, & still there remains this excitement'. See also 'Character in Fiction' below; 'Books and Persons', 'Mr Galsworthy's Novel', 'The Rights of Youth', *II VW Essays*; 'What is a Novel?', *IV VW Essays*.

2–Arnold Bennett (1867–1931), 'Is the Novel Decaying?', *Cassell's Weekly*, 28 March 1923 (reprinted in *M&M*, pp. 112–14): 'I have seldom read a cleverer book than Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, a novel which has made a great stir in a small world. It is packed and bursting with originality, and it is exquisitely written. But the characters do not vitally survive in the mind because the author has been obsessed by details of originality and cleverness. I regard this book as characteristic of the new novelists who have recently gained the attention of the alert and the curious, and I admit that for myself I cannot yet descry any coming big novelists.'

3–*Ibid.*: 'To render secure the importance of a novel it is necessary, further, that the characters should clash one with another so as to produce strong emotion, first in the author himself and second in the reader. This strong emotion cannot be produced unless the characters are *kept* true throughout. You cannot get strength out of falsity. The moment the still small voice whispers to the reader about a character, "He wouldn't have acted like that," the book is imperilled. The reader may say: "This is charming. This is amusing. This is original. This is clever. This is exciting."

But if he also has to say, "It's not true," the success of the book cannot be permanent. | The foundation of good fiction is character creating, nothing else. The characters must be so fully true that they possess even their own creator. Every deviation from the truth, every omission of truth, necessarily impairs the emotional power and therefore weakens the interest. | I think that we have today a number of young novelists who display all manner of good qualities – originality of view, ingenuity of presentment, sound common sense, and even style. But they appear to me to be interested more in details than in the full creation of their individual characters. They are so busy with states of society as to half forget that any society consists of individuals, and they attach too much weight to cleverness, which is perhaps the lowest of all artistic qualities.'

4–Edward VII (1841–1910), reigned from 1901.

5–H. G. Wells (1866–1946); John Galsworthy (1867–1933).

6–Arthur Kipps, hero of Wells's *Kipps* (1905); Constance and Sophia Baines are the sisters in Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908).

7–W. M. Thackeray (1811–63), *The History of Pendennis* (1848–50).

8–Characters in *Pendennis*; Captain Shandon, first editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* (the evening paper of that name was not founded until 1865; it was owned by George Smith and first edited by Frederick Greenwood); Laura Bell, illegitimate child adopted by Helen Pendennis; Blanche Amory, daughter of Lady Clavering and of the convict 'Col.Altamont'; Harry Foker, heir to 'Foker's Entire'.

9–Samuel Butler (1835–1902), *The Way of All Flesh* (1903) – see '*The Way of All Flesh*' above.

10–George Edgar Lewisham, in Wells's *Love and Mr Lewisham* (1900).

11–Constance Garnett (1862–1946) translated the whole *oeuvre* of Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–81), whose *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot* were first published in 1866 and 1879–80 respectively.

12–For Mr Dick and King Charles's head, see *David Copperfield* (1849–50), ch. xiv, etc; for Mr Brooke, see George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871–2), ch. ii; and for Mrs Micawber's pledge of loyalty, *David Copperfield*, ch. 12 (Penguin, 1966, pp. 227–8).

13–Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, hero of *Crime and Punishment*; Prince Lev Nicolaevich Mishkin, hero of *The Idiot*; Nikolay Vsevolodovich Stavrogin, hero of Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* (1872); Alyosha (Alexey Fyodorovich Karamazov), in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1872–80).

14–George V (1865–1936), reigned from 1910.

15–VW's essay prompted a series of responses in the N&A, though none from Arnold Bennett. See 'The Successors of Charles Dickens' by J. D. Beresford (1873–1947, novelist), *N&A*, 29 December 1923; 'First Catch Your Hare' by Logan Pearsall Smith (1865–1946, man of letters), *N&A*, 2 February 1924; and 'Why Only Dickens?' by Michael Sadleir (1888–1957, novelist and bibliographer), *N&A*, 9 February 1924. (The articles by Beresford and by Smith are reproduced in *M&M*, nos. 38 and 39.)