JACOB'S ROOM: WOOLF'S SATIRIC ELEGY

BY ALEX ZWERDLING

Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* appeared in 1922, the *annus mirabilis* of modern literature that also produced *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*. Perhaps for that reason, and because the novel was the first of Woolf's longer fictions to break with conventional narrative technique, it is often interpreted as a paradigmatic modernist text rather than as a unique work. Its peculiarities are treated as illustrative of the revolution in twentieth-century literature, though in fact some of them are idiosyncratic. The book was certainly Woolf's first consciously experimental novel; and it has remained her most baffling one: its narrative techniques are so innovative that they call attention to themselves; its central character, Jacob Flanders, seems to be a classic instance of psychological inscrutability in fiction; and its rapidly shifting tone, now somber, now mocking, deprives Woolf's audience of a stable sense of her own attitude toward the world she describes. These problems of narrative method, characterization, and tone are interrelated, as I hope to show, but they can be illuminated only by an attempt to understand Woolf's fundamental aims in writing the particular novel *Jacob's Room*, rather than by assuming she was interested in fictional innovation for its own sake.

Jacob's Room is often taken to be simply a technical exercise. David Daiches, for example, suggests that it was written "one might say, for the sake of style."[1] And indeed Woolf's first thoughts about the book in her diary are concerned with method rather than matter: "Suppose one thing should open out of another—as in *An Unwritten Novel*—only not for 10 pages but 200 or so—doesn't that give the looseness and lightness I want; doesn't that get closer and yet keep form and speed, and enclose everything, everything?"[2] Her diary entries as she works on the book continue to deal more with narrative strategy than with defining the "everything, everything" the novel is designed to present. Essentially, Woolf was trying to work free of the conventions of realism she attacked with such devastating wit in her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," that style of fiction in which the character is kept waiting in the wings until his entire environment and life history have been

ELH Vol. 48 Pp. 894-913
0013-8304/81/0484-894 $01.00

exhaustively described. She thought the machinery too ponderous for the quick-witted reader and was determined to perfect a vehicle that would move faster.

The style of *Jacob's Room* is that of the sketchbook artist rather than the academic painter. Scenes are swiftly and allusively outlined, not filled in, the essential relationships between characters intimated in brief but typical vignettes chosen seemingly at random from their daily lives: a don's luncheon party at Cambridge, a day spent reading in the British Museum, a walk with a friend. No incident is decisive or fully developed. Nothing is explained or given special significance. The narrative unit is generally two or three pages long and not obviously connected to the one before or after. The effect is extremely economical and suggestive but at the same time frustrating for an audience trained to read in larger units and look for meaning and coherence. All of this was clearly innovative, as Woolf's first readers saw. Lytton Strachey writes her: "The technique of the narrative is astonishing—how you manage to leave out everything that's dreary, and yet retain enough string for your pearls I can hardly understand."[3] And E. M. Forster is similarly baffled; he wonders how Woolf keeps the reader interested in Jacob when almost everything that would have defined his character has been eliminated: "I don't yet understand how, with your method, you managed it," he writes, but he is certain that this is the book's greatest achievement.[4]

Not all of Woolf's readers have been convinced that the narrative technique, interesting as it is, *was* successful, however. The book is often attacked on the grounds that it has no unity and that Jacob himself remains unknowable. Joan Bennett, for example, insists that the novel's vividly realized episodes "build up no whole that can be held in the mind" and that "Jacob remains a nebulous young man, indeed almost any young man."[5] J. K. Johnstone complains that the very vividness of the incidents "detracts from the unity of the novel," while "the character who might unite all its various scenes, is—not there; his effects upon others are there; but he himself is absent."[6] Such dismissive judgments seem to me based on an unwillingness to think about Woolf's technique in relation to purpose. Both the obvious fragmentation of the novel and the inscrutability of its central character are, I think, deliberate. But in order to understand why Woolf chose to write a novel that can be characterized in these ways, one has to move beyond speculation about narrative technique as such to an understanding of why she needed

these particular techniques in the particular book she was writing. For despite her obvious interest in technical experiment, she always thought of narrative style as purposive—a means to an end. Since the ends of her individual novels were never the same, her technical choices ought to be looked at not as attempts to "revolutionize modern fiction" but as individual solutions to the problem at hand. And the problem at hand can not be intelligently discussed without considering the book's subject matter.[7]

Jacob's Room is about a young man who is killed in the First World War. By naming her hero Jacob Flanders, Woolf immediately predicts his fate. As her first readers in 1922 would certainly have known, Flanders was a synonym for death in battle. The words of John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields"— "the most popular poem of the war"[8]—were common property:

> In Flanders fields, the poppies blow
> Between the crosses, row on row. . . .
> We are the Dead. Short days ago
> We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
> Loved and were loved, and now we lie
> In Flanders fields.[9]

According to official sources, nearly a third of the million British soldiers killed in World War I lost their lives in the Flanders mud. And the heaviest losses were among the young officers of Jacob's class. In the words of A. J. P. Taylor, "The roll of honour in every school and college bore witness to the talents which had perished—the men of promise born during the eighteen-nineties whose promise was not fulfilled."[10]

Although *Jacob's Room* is not in any direct sense a war novel, the references to the coming conflict are carefully embedded in the narrative, so that Woolf's first readers would have been constantly reminded of the imminent catastrophe. Jacob goes up to Cambridge in 1906. His growth from adolescence to young manhood takes place against the relentless ticking of a time bomb. We may be reading about his intellectual and amorous adventures, but we are also witnessing the preparation of cannon fodder. Woolf keeps us aware of Jacob's impending fate by moving back and forth in time, for example when she rounds off the story of a young couple in Jacob's set with the words "And now Jimmy feeds crows in Flanders and Helen visits hospitals."[11] Her novel alludes to certain well-known public events of the years just before the war—the Irish Home Rule Bill (p. 97), the transformation of the House of

Lords (p. 129)—in a way that indirectly would have reminded her original audience of dates—1911, 1912, 1913.[12] Toward the end of the book, the preparations for war become direct. The ministers in Whitehall lift their pens and alter the course of history (p. 172); and the young men die. Woolf's only description of the fighting is remarkable for its contained rage, its parody of reportorial detachment: "Like blocks of tin soldiers the army covers the cornfield, moves up the hillside, stops, reels slightly this way and that, and falls flat, save that, through field-glasses, it can be seen that one or two pieces still agitate up and down like fragments of broken match-stick" (p. 155).

Many readers have seen that such references to the war are significant and that *Jacob's Room* is a response to that event even though it records the years before it begins. Winifred Holtby, in the first book-length study of Virginia Woolf, suggested that Woolf was less interested in trench warfare (about which she knew nothing) than in the group identity of its victims: "When such a young man was killed, she seems to ask, what was lost then? What lost by him? What was lost by his friends? What exactly was it that had disappeared?"[13] These still seem to me the essential questions to ask in reading *Jacob's Room,* and I hope to show that they also illuminate the book's technical innovations and experiments in portraiture as well as Woolf's puzzling shifts in tone.

The question of what might have become of the Jacobs is asked by Woolf herself in a review of a book on Rupert Brooke, that classic symbol of the gifted young man killed before his time: "One turns from the thought of him not with a sense of completeness and finality, but rather to wonder and to question still: what would he have been, what would he have done?"[14] As her questions suggest, the image of such men provokes doubt rather than certainty. "Promising" they surely were. But their early deaths only magnified the absence of achieved identity and real accomplishment. As she puts it in another review about a different young casualty, "What the finished work, the final aim, would have been we can only guess."[15] Such questions are unanswerable, and Woolf does not really deal with them in *Jacob's Room.* Rather, she writes the book largely to give us a sense of what this particular stage in a young man's life—the promising stage—is like.

The major obstacle in her way was the almost universal impulse to sentimentalize the subject. Obituaries for the war dead are not notable for their realism, and she was determined to write an hon-

est account rather than a heroic one. She does not avoid the possibility that such young men, for all their native gifts and youthful promise, were likely to be confused and immature. Her novel emphasizes the image of Jacob *adrift,* moving rapidly but lightly from one social set to another, from one romantic attachment to another, without either the intention or the ability to "settle." In his own rather despairing words, "One must apply oneself to something or other—God knows what" (p. 71).

Woolf's fragmented narrative creates a kaleidoscopic picture of the range of Jacob's opportunities. Particularly in the London chapters, she gives us the sense that the world is all before him. His family connections, his education and his good looks provide him with an entry into many different social circles—bohemian, professional, aristocratic. And his romantic experiments suggest a similar smorgasbord: the amiable, promiscuous Florinda, the romantically unstable Fanny Elmer, the steady but frozen young heiress Clara Durrant, the "sophisticated" older married woman Sandra Wentworth Williams. These opportunities and experiences are deliberately presented in an incoherent way because for Jacob they do not add up, they cannot be thought of as sequential steps leading to his definition as an adult human being. Unlike the classic *Bildungsroman, Jacob's Room* lacks a teleology. Woolf's hero remains an essentially molten personality interrupted by death at the stage of experimenting upon himself, a young man by turns brashly self-confident and utterly confused. The novel treats this situation as an inevitable but early stage of growing up. Woolf's perspective is that of an older person who can describe "the obstinate irrepressible conviction which makes youth so intolerably disagreeable—'I am what I am, and intend to be it,' for which there will be no form in the world unless Jacob makes one for himself" (p. 34). But as the last part of her sentence suggests, it is by no means certain that such attempts to define onself will be successful, no matter how long we are given. There is always the possibility, perhaps even the likelihood, that our rebellious adolescence will give way not to strong adult individuality but to a stale despairing conformity.

No one has written about this stage of life better than Erik Erikson, and though Woolf could not, of course, have read him, certain passages in his work illuminate Jacob's situation because both writers focus on the same phenomenon. In *Childhood and Society* (1950) and more fully in *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968), Erikson defines a stage of deliberately prolonged adolescence which he

calls a "*psychosocial moratorium,*" a period in which "the young adult through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society, a niche which is firmly defined and yet seems to be uniquely made for him." Before he is expected to take on any of his life commitments—in love, in work—the young man is offered a legitimate period of delay "often characterized by a combination of prolonged immaturity and provoked precocity."[16] His reluctance to bind himself vocationally or to choose a mate is honored or at least tolerated for a period of years because his society accepts his need for self-exploration and social mobility before demanding that the ultimate choices be made.

By its very nature, such a stage cannot be a record of triumphs, and those who are going through it often seem simply confused and self-indulgent to their elders, particularly those with short memories. Furthermore, a person in this position remains in some sense a blank, undefinable, unknowable—and therefore not an easy subject for fiction. A novel is expected to give us characters who have an identity or whose progressive change we can follow sequentially—as in the *Bildungsroman.* In *Jacob's Room,* however, Woolf was faced with the problem that this fictional convention does not hold good for all human beings at all stages of life. She had tried to deal with a similarly inchoate personality in her first novel, *The Voyage Out,* and would do so again in *The Waves.* All three of these characters (Rachel, Jacob, Percival) die young, before they have been fully defined. But it is notable that in trying to depict such people, Woolf's technique becomes more and more stylized, until in Percival she creates a mythical rather than a realistically conceived character.

Why did she move in this direction? Why did she deliberately avoid the technique of interior monologue that might have given her readers a vivid sense of the inner turmoil in which such people find themselves? In certain obvious ways, the record of a fictional character's thoughts is ideally suited to depicting identity confusion, yet in *Jacob's Room* (and even more in *The Waves*) the characters who might have been illuminated by it are never presented in this way. Their inner lives remain a mystery. In *The Waves,* this is clearly a deliberate choice, since the six major characters surrounding Percival all soliloquize at length. Only Percival has no voice. It is sometimes assumed that Woolf depicts Jacob without recording his inner life in detail because when she was writing *Jacob's Room* she had not yet perfected the techniques

of rendering consciousness she learned to use so brilliantly in her later fiction. But the explanation is unconvincing, since in the first place the thoughts of many minor characters in the novel *are* consistently recorded, even if not in the elaborate form found in *Mrs. Dalloway* or *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf deliberately minimized the reader's access to Jacob's thoughts. This is evident if one reads the holograph draft of the novel alongside the revised, final version. Again and again, Woolf eliminates the vestiges of Jacob's inner life. For example, in the potentially romantic scene in which he helps Clara pick grapes while the younger children scamper about, Woolf excises the hints of Jacob's attachment from the first version:

> "Little demons!" she cried.
> ~~"I haven't said it"~~ Jacob thought to himself.
> ~~"I want to say it. I cant say it. Clara! Clara! Clara!"~~
> They're throwing the onions," said Jacob.
> (holograph version, with Woolf's deletions)[17]

> "Little demons!" she cried. "What have they got?" she asked Jacob.
> "Onions, I think," said Jacob. He looked at them without moving.
> (published version, p. 61)

As a result of such excisions, we never know exactly what Jacob feels about Clara, nor about most of the other people whose lives touch his.

There is obviously something artificial and deliberate in such narrative reticence. Any attempt to account for it must be speculative, but two reasons suggest themselves for Woolf's peculiar strategy. It is possible that she wants to give us the sense of a character still so unformed that even the relatively chaotic record of interior monologue seems too defining. The flux of feelings must be recorded in words, and words give shape. Even Jacob's conflicted "I want to say it. I cant say it. Clara! Clara! Clara!" clearly suggests romantic attachment, when it is possible that what he feels about her is less easily describable. By their very nature, words articulate confusion too neatly to be true to the extremes of the state. This is why Jacob's letters home communicate so little: "Jacob had nothing to hide from his mother. It was only that he could make no sense himself of his extraordinary excitement, and as for writing it down——" (p. 130). It is possible that Woolf refused to record Jacob's deepest feelings because such a transcript comes too close to presenting a finished product rather than a consciousness in process. She wanted to give the sense of someone who remains a per-

manently unknown quantity. And so she concentrates on the conflicting impressions of Jacob among all the people he meets, and our point of view shifts abruptly every few pages as we move from one unreliable observer to another, none of them managing to fathom this young man because, as Woolf concludes, "nobody sees any one as he is. . . . They see a whole—they see all sorts of things—they see themselves" (pp. 28-29).

But to pose the problem in this epistemological way does not fully explain the absence of anything resembling stream of consciousness. Mrs. Ramsay is similarly unknowable, Lily Briscoe tells us in *To the Lighthouse* ("One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with, she reflected. Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with, she thought.")[18] and yet this fact does not prevent Woolf from recording her character's inner life in detail. For a better explanation, we must go back to the problematic tone of *Jacob's Room*. Uninterrupted stream of consciousness tends to create sympathy and to work against satiric intent in fiction. And there are many indications in *Jacob's Room* that Woolf wanted to maintain an ironic distance between her reader and her main character. Her tone in describing him and his friends is often patronizing. For example, when Jacob first becomes involved with the brainless Florinda, Woolf describes his feelings with obvious mockery:

> Jacob took her word for it that she was chaste. She prattled, sitting by the fireside, of famous painters. The tomb of her father was mentioned. Wild and frail and beautiful she looked, and thus the women of the Greeks were, Jacob thought; and this was life: and himself a man and Florinda chaste.
>
> She left with one of Shelley's poems beneath her arm. Mrs. Stuart, she said, often talked of him.
>
> Marvellous are the innocent.
>
> (p. 77)

Such ironic detachment is evident not only in the narrator's attitude toward Jacob but in her treatment of most of the young characters in the book. The narrative voice is that of an older, more experienced, highly skeptical consciousness, determined to puncture youthful illusion and undercut intense feeling of any kind. This satiric narrator often steps in to correct romantic excess, for example when describing Richard Bonamy's passion for Jacob:

> "Urbane" on the lips of Jacob had mysteriously all the shapeliness of a character which Bonamy thought daily more sublime, devastating, terrific than ever, though he was still, and perhaps would be for ever, barbaric, obscure.
>
> What superlatives! What adjectives! How acquit Bonamy of

> sentimentality of the grossest sort; of being tossed like a cork on the waves; of having no steady insight into character; of being unsupported by reason, and of drawing no comfort whatever from the works of the classics?
>
> (p. 164)

The cumulative effect of such passages is to make it impossible for the reader to sympathize fully with the character. We are, in effect, told to keep our distance. And in one way or another, the narrative techniques of the novel reinforce this sense of a wide gap. Woolf frequently pretends ignorance: she is pictured as so far away from the action that she literally can't hear the words of the characters. In one of the Cambridge scenes, for instance, the perspective suddenly lengthens, like an aerial shot in film:

> The laughter died in the air. The sound of it could scarcely have reached any one standing by the Chapel, which stretched along the opposite side of the court. The laughter died out, and only gestures of arms, movements of bodies, could be seen shaping something in the room. Was it an argument? A bet on the boat races? Was it nothing of the sort? What was shaped by the arms and bodies moving in the twilight room?
>
> (pp. 42-43)

In such passages the omniscient narrator suddenly and rather disturbingly pleads ignorance, becomes at best "semiscient." There are also many instances in the book in which our involvement with and understanding of the characters is made more difficult because our view is filtered through an alien consciousness, for example that of Richard Bonamy's charwoman, who gives us an obviously garbled version of what she overhears the young friends saying in the next room as she washes up in the scullery: " 'Objective something,' said Bonamy; and 'common ground' and something else—all very long words, she noted. 'Book learning does it,' she thought to herself" (p. 101). The effect is to deflate the intellectual pretensions of these budding philosophers and bring them down to earth.

Is this any way to treat a young man whose life is about to be snuffed out? Why does Woolf challenge the ancient wisdom that dictates "*de mortuis nil nisi bonum*"? Is there some meanness of spirit evident in the games she plays with her characters? Such irreverence might well have seemed offensive to a generation of readers trained to think about the dead soldiers by the literature World War I produced. Those works, written during and immediately after the conflict, convey a sense of high idealism or heroic

indignation or romantic intensity. One has only to recall some of the classic passages:

> If I should die, think only this of me:
> That there's some corner of a foreign field
> That is for ever England.
> (Rupert Brooke, "The Soldier")

> What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
> Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
> Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
> Can patter out their hasty orisons.
> (Wilfred Owen, "Anthem for Doomed Youth")

> *Have you forgotten yet? . . .*
> *Look down, and swear by the slain of the War that*
> *you'll never forget.*
> (Siegfried Sassoon, "Aftermath")

> *Massacres of boys! That indeed is the essence of modern war. The killing off of the young. It is the destruction of the human inheritance, it is the spending of all the life and material of the future upon present-day hate and greed.*
> (H. G. Wells, *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*)[19]

Whether the sentiment is patriotic or bitterly disillusioned, such passages treat the war dead with absolute seriousness, in a style that is characteristically intense and even reverent and that works at a high level of generalization.

By contrast, Woolf's elegiac novel is persistently small-scaled, mischievous and ironic.[20] She had an instinctive distrust for reverence of any kind, feeling it was a fundamentally dishonest mental habit that turned flesh-and-blood human beings into symbolic creatures. She was no more interested in a cult of war heroes than she had been in a religion of eminent Victorians. For one thing, such attitudes indirectly glorified war, even if the writer was, like Wilfred Owen, consciously working against the martial myth. Woolf's elegy for the young men who died in the war is revisionist: there is nothing grand about Jacob; the sacrifice of his life seems perfectly pointless, not even a cautionary tale. *Jacob's Room* is a covert critique of the romantic posturing so common in the anthems for doomed youth. Its author's attitude anticipates Dylan Thomas' World War II poem, "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London":

> I shall not murder
> The mankind of her going with a grave truth
> Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath

With any further
Elegy of innocence and youth.[21]

Woolf's bedrock pacifism, then, helps to account for her ironic distance from Jacob and his contemporaries. But she would probably have felt much the same about the milieu that produced him if he had never fought in the war at all, since there was something about his whole life pattern that she disliked intensely. Jacob Flanders is a paradigmatic young man of his class. Handsome, clever, and well-connected if not rich, his credentials are impeccable and his future course apparently secure. Rugby; Trinity College, Cambridge; a London flat; a couple of mistresses; the Grand Tour: everything in his life is a traditional step on the road to establishment success. The class was Woolf's own, but the sex was not; and between the training and expectations of its young men and young women, there was a great gulf. Woolf's satiric detachment is in part attributable to her feeling that Jacob's world was created by men for men, and essentially excluded her. She reacted with a characteristic mixture of condescension and apprehension. As she says in describing her own attitude toward him, "Granted ten years' seniority and a difference of sex, fear of him comes first" (p. 93).

The fear is not so much of Jacob himself but of the "patriarchal machinery" that guaranteed him a powerful position in his society. Woolf describes the rites of passage for such young men in an illuminating autobiographical essay written shortly before her death. She considers the career of her illustrious cousin, H. A. L. Fisher: "What, I asked myself the other day, would Herbert Fisher have been without Winchester, New College, and the Cabinet? What would have been his shape had he not been stamped and moulded by the patriarchal machinery? Every one of our male relations was shot into that machine and came out at the other end, at the age of sixty or so, a Headmaster, an Admiral, a Cabinet Minister, a Judge."[22] Jacob too appears to be on such a trajectory. Woolf's feelings about her exclusion from this world are quite complex. She envies the men their guaranteed success (assuming they follow the rules) while pitying them their lack of freedom. The whole exploratory stage of life through which Jacob is passing is subtly undermined by the preordained, mechanical program he is acting out; and the machinery that would have assured him a place in *Who's Who* sends him off to war instead. In *Jacob's Room,* Woolf describes a "dozen young men in the prime of life" whose battleship has been hit "descend with composed faces into the depths of the sea;

and there impassively (though with perfect mastery of machinery) suffocate uncomplainingly together" (p. 155).

The public schools and ancient universities were the training grounds for such complaisant attitudes, and Woolf's feelings about these institutions differed sharply from those of the Bloomsbury males. When people like Lytton Strachey and Leonard Woolf looked back on their undergraduate years, they saw paradise lost. Strachey wrote in an ecstatic letter to Leonard about a visit to Cambridge: "Good God! The Great Court is the most thrilling place in the world, it's no good trying to get over it; whenever I come in through the great gate my heart thumps, and I fall into a million visions."[23] By contrast, Virginia Woolf's picture of Cambridge in *Jacob's Room* stresses its pretension and provinciality: "It is not simple, or pure, or wholly splendid, the lamp of learning. . . . How like a suburb where you go to see a view and eat a special cake! 'We are the sole purveyors of this cake' " (p. 38).

Her critical distance was a response to feeling shut out, a reaction she would examine at length in the first of her feminist books, *A Room of One's Own*. The Cambridge suburb admitted women only on sufferance, and it taught its male products to patronize them. So Jacob fails to understand why women are allowed to attend service at King's College Chapel: "No one would think of bringing a dog into church," he reflects, "a dog destroys the service completely. So do these women" (p. 31). It is interesting that Woolf's first draft version of the novel included a chapter about a young woman student at Cambridge which in some ways parallels the Jacob portions of the narrative. But the chapter was excised from the final version, probably to underline the fact that the university was still a young man's world, despite the presence of a few female interlopers.[24]

From Woolf's point of view, Jacob fits all too easily into this world. His rebellious gestures are relatively superficial, and the picture of him at Cambridge stresses his confident appropriation of his position: "He looked satisfied; indeed masterly; which expression changed slightly as he stood there, the sound of the clock conveying to him (it may be) a sense of old buildings and time; and himself the inheritor; and then to-morrow; and friends; at the thought of whom, in sheer confidence and pleasure, it seemed, he yawned and stretched himself" (p. 43). His Cambridge training reinforces the sense of membership in an elite, and there is more than a hint of arrogance in his makeup. The attitude provokes Woolf's sarcasm, though the tone remains good-humored: "The

flesh and blood of the future depends entirely upon six young men. And as Jacob was one of them, no doubt he looked a little regal and pompous as he turned his page" (p. 106).

There are many indications that Jacob is far from extraordinary, despite his membership in this exclusive fraternity. The novel records the classic events in the life of a presentable young man. Jacob's thoughts and experiences are treated as typical rather than unique, and his individual identity is made to merge with that of a group. Woolf's descriptions of him at Cambridge, in London, and on the Continent often seem to efface his defining characteristics and turn him into a representative figure, as in this passage:

> But Jacob moved. He murmured good-night. He went out into the court. He buttoned his jacket across his chest. He went back to his rooms, and being the only man who walked at that moment back to his rooms, his footsteps rang out, his figure loomed large. Back from the Chapel, back from the Hall, back from the Library, came the sound of his footsteps, as if the old stone echoed with magisterial authority: "The young man—the young man—the young man—back to his rooms."
>
> (p. 45)

They move in packs, these young men, and their most antisocial ideas are quickly ratified by their fellows. For Jacob's friend Richard Bonamy, life is "damnably difficult" because he feels the world neglects its gifted youth; "but"—the narrator comments—"not so difficult if on the next staircase, in the large room, there are two, three, five young men all convinced of this—of brutality, that is, and the clear division between right and wrong" (p. 42).

In such ways, the unexamined idea of the promising young man is challenged by Woolf's vision of incipient conventionality. It is instructive to contrast Jacob's rather banal and predictable effusions on Greece with Woolf's own first vision of that country. His thoughts are not individualized but reflect the familiar romantic Hellenism of his society and set: "He could live on bread and wine—the wine in straw bottles—for after doing Greece he was going to knock off Rome. The Roman civilization was a very inferior affair, no doubt. But Bonamy talked a lot of rot, all the same. 'You ought to have been in Athens,' he would say to Bonamy when he got back" (p. 134). Contrast this with a passage from a diary Woolf kept on her first trip to Greece in 1906, when she was, like Jacob, in her mid-twenties. Her description of the Acropolis is clearly the

product of a keen observer who does not rely on potted history or Baedeker's sense of the sublime:

> No place seems more lusty and alive than this platform of ancient dead stone. The fat Maidens who bear the weight of the Erectheum on their heads, stand smiling tranquil ease, for their border is just meet for their strength. They glory in it; one foot just advanced, their hands, one conceives, loosely curled at their sides. And the warm blue sky flows into all the crevices of the marble; yet they detach themselves, and spring into the air, with edges, unblunted, and still virile and young.[25]

A description like this, though it has a self-conscious air and is clearly an attempt at fine writing, stands out as genuinely "promising" because it suggests freshness of observation and expression. It makes us aware how far Jacob still was from finding his own voice.

What would have happened to such young men had they been permitted to live out their term? It is a question the novel constantly raises but can never, of course, answer. Woolf's attempts at prediction are cut short by her sense of their group fate, which makes her hastily withdraw the question: "Behind the grey walls sat so many young men, some undoubtedly reading, magazines, shilling shockers, no doubt; legs, perhaps, over the arms of chairs; smoking; sprawling over tables, and writing while their heads went round in a circle as the pen moved—simple young men, these, who would—but there is no need to think of them grown old" (p. 41). There are, however, a few passages in the novel in which Woolf allows herself to imagine a future life for Jacob and some of his companions, and the picture is seldom radiant with hope. Respectability, responsibility, establishment success: that is the image in the crystal ball. As Jacob rails against women in youthful fervor, the narrator comments drily in a parenthesis: "This violent disillusionment is generally to be expected in young men in the prime of life, sound of wind and limb, who will soon become fathers of families and directors of banks" (p. 150). And after giving us a sense of his "desperate" infatuation with Sandra Wentworth Williams, Woolf notes that Jacob "had in him the seeds of extreme disillusionment, which would come to him from women in middle life" (p. 158).

Such passages make it clear that *Jacob's Room* is much more a novel about a stage of life than a particular person. The fate that lies ahead for her young man is extinction in the war. But the fate from which he is saved is not presented as much more attractive: middle

age, in the novel, is a kind of slow death or betrayal of youthful promise. The book is filled with poignant images of the brevity of youth: "And for ever the beauty of young men seems to be set in smoke, however lustily they chase footballs, or drive cricket balls, dance, run, or stride along roads. Possibly they are soon to lose it" (p. 116). The very intensity of the experimental stage is too violent to be sustained, as Woolf suggests in a vivid metaphor: "Why, from the very windows, even in the dusk, you see a swelling run through the street, an aspiration, as with arms outstretched, eyes desiring, mouth agape. And then we peaceably subside. For if the exaltation lasted we should be blown like foam into the air" (p. 119). And even those who do not agree to fit themselves into the comfortable niches society has prepared when the season of youth is over are not presented as heroic rebels. In one of her predictive passages, Woolf draws a bleak picture of what lies ahead for a young bohemian painter whose work so excites Jacob in Paris:

> . . . and as for Cruttendon and Jinny, he thought them the most remarkable people he had ever met—being of course unable to foresee how it fell out in the course of time that Cruttendon took to painting orchards; had therefore to live in Kent; and must, one would think, see through apple blossom by this time, since his wife, for whose sake he did it, eloped with a novelist; but no; Cruttendon still paints orchards, savagely, in solitude.
>
> (p. 130)

An elegy is a work of consolation as well as desolation. If anything in Jacob's early death can be thought of as consoling, it is the fact that he is spared the disillusionment that awaits him. Never to be defined means never to be bounded. Middle age in Woolf's work is regularly seen as a diminution. In *The Waves,* the novel in which she follows her characters through all their life stages from childhood to old age, one of them sums up the difference between youth and "maturity" in this bleak way: "Change is no longer possible. We are committed. Before, when we met in a restaurant in London with Percival, all simmered and shook; we could have been anything. We have chosen now, or sometimes it seems the choice was made for us—a pair of tongs pinched us between the shoulders."[26] Jacob's life does not reach the treadmill stage, and he seems fixed forever at the moment of infinite possibility, before the seeds of conventionality Woolf notices in him have sprouted. In her preliminary notes for the novel, there is a cryptic notation: "Intensity of life compared with immobility."[27] She never explains what this means; but it is possible that her terms define the two life

stages her book consistently contrasts: the experimental intensity of youth, the fixity of what follows. Jacob dies young, but he never dwindles into the banal life he sees ahead of him, that of "settling down in a lawyer's office, and wearing spats" (p. 49).

Woolf's sharp sense of the brevity of life, of the universality of death, puts Jacob's "tragic" fate in longer perspective. To die young, to die later: the book seems to say that the distinction borders on the trivial. From the first page of her novel, we hear the note of mortality. Mrs. Flanders weeps for her husband, long since dead. Though Seabrook Flanders was no war victim, he too died young, before the world knew what to call him. And Woolf comments, "Had he, then, been nothing? An unanswerable question, since even if it weren't the habit of the undertaker to close the eyes, the light so soon goes out of them" (p. 14). The book's focus on the present moment constantly blurs to give us a sense of time past and time future. For Julia Eliot, walking down Piccadilly, "the tumult of the present seems like an elegy for past youth and past summers, and there rose in her mind a curious sadness, as if time and eternity showed through skirts and waistcoats, and she saw people passing tragically to destruction" (p. 168). This elegiac note is not connected exclusively to the carnage of the war but seems rather a response to the inescapable fact of mortality. It is, Woolf says, a sorrow "brewed by the earth itself. . . . We start transparent, and then the cloud thickens. All history backs our pane of glass. To escape is vain" (p. 47). The sense of death broods over the novel, and Woolf's images constantly reinforce it: Jacob finding the sheep's skull on the beach; the momentary illumination of faces on Guy Fawkes night, before the fire is extinguished "and all the faces went out" (p. 73); a mason's van passing "with newly lettered tombstones recording how some one loved some one who is buried at Putney" (p. 111); Mrs. Jarvis walking through the cemetery or telling her friend, "I never pity the dead" (p. 130).

This atemporal awareness of mortality Woolf carried with her always. She asks herself in her diary as she works on *Jacob's Room*, "Why is life so tragic; so like a strip of pavement over an abyss. I look down; I feel giddy; I wonder how I am ever to walk to the end" (*AWD*, 29). Though she says later in the same entry that this tragic sense is pervasive "for us in our generation," her novel's repeated stretching of time and space suggests a fundamentally religious perception of the issue, though without a religious consolation. Her vision recalls the "Ithaca" chapter in *Ulysses*, in which Joyce's

sense of cosmic time nearly obliterates his characters. He sees the "socalled fixed stars, in reality evermoving from immeasurably remote eons to infinitely remote futures in comparison with which the years, threescore and ten, of allotted human life formed a parenthesis of infinitesimal brevity."[28] Similarly, in *Jacob's Room,* one of the guests at the Durrants' evening party examines the constellations through the telescope only to find herself suddenly deserted by all her companions: " 'Where are you all?' she asked, taking her eye away from the telescope. 'How dark it is!' " (p. 59).

This sense of the universal darkness surrounding us both elevates and trivializes Jacob's death. From the aspect of eternity, individual death is meaningless, and even the annihilation of a million young men in battle is a fact that history will swallow without special effort. But at the same time, the extinction of any life inevitably recalls the fate that awaits us all and is invested with that resonance. This is why the lament for Jacob becomes, for all the novel's irony, so moving: "Ja-cob! Ja-cob!" his brother calls in the novel's first scene; and Woolf comments: "The voice had an extraordinary sadness. Pure from all body, pure from all passion, going out into the world, solitary, unanswered, breaking against rocks—so it sounded" (p. 7). "Jacob! Jacob!": it is a refrain that will be heard again and again in the book, from Mrs. Flanders, from Clara Durrant, from Richard Bonamy, from all those fellow mortals who make the mistake of attaching their deepest feelings to someone who precedes them into the earth. For all Woolf's ironic distance and critical awareness of Jacob's limitations, she knows that such composure dissolves when our emotions are engaged. Her complex attitude is conveyed in an important reflective passage in the book:

> In any case life is but a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows. And why, if this and much more than this is true, why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us—why indeed? For the moment after we know nothing about him.
>
> Such is the manner of our seeing. Such the conditions of our love.
>
> (pp. 70-71)

This double awareness of the sharpness of grief and its absurdity gives Woolf's satiric elegy its special edge and accounts for the novel's rapid shifts in tone. She worked hard to avoid sentimen-

talizing her subject and casting her book in the romantic mold. As Strachey wrote her after reading *Jacob's Room*, romanticism was "*the* danger for your genre"; and she agrees that he has put his "infallible finger upon the spot."[29] But Strachey was hardly the standard of feeling in such matters, as some of his own letters attest. When Thoby Stephen, Virginia's brother and Strachey's intimate friend, died of typhoid fever at the age of 26, Strachey's letter to Leonard Woolf exemplifies the uninhibited and unreflecting expression of grief Virginia Woolf came to distrust: "I don't understand what crowning pleasure there can be for us without him, and our lives seem deadly blank. There is nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon. It is idle to talk; but it is only to you that I can say anything, that he was the best, the noblest, the best—oh god! I am tired out with too much anguish. Oh god!"[30]

Such threnodies, Woolf came to feel, were finally self-serving and insincere, a rhetorical exercise in pulling out all the stops. The literary allusions, the exaggerated sense of Thoby's qualities, the indulgence of intense emotion would have struck her as more like a public performance than a private expression of loss. Her own very different style of lament deliberately understates or withholds such sentiment. In the book's last scene, Bonamy can say no more than "Jacob! Jacob!" and Mrs. Flanders unpredictably focuses on a pair of her son's old shoes, as though their emptiness conveyed everything: "What am I to do with these, Mr. Bonamy?" (p. 176). The significance of the scene is clarified by an anecdote about Woolf recalled by one of her friends: "The only other remark I remember from that afternoon was when she was talking about the mystery of 'missing' someone. When Leonard went away, she said, she didn't miss him *at all.* Then suddenly she caught sight of a pair of his empty shoes, which had kept the position and shape of his feet—and was ready to dissolve into tears instantly."[31]

"Such is the manner of our seeing. Such the conditions of our love." Jacob's death, like his life, has no intrinsic significance. He is not clearly "the best, the noblest, the best." Rather, he is an engaging young man, in many ways typical of his class and training, who has unintentionally managed to secure the love of a few human beings. His absence, like his presence, is not likely to alter the world significantly. His youthful promise might well have been betrayed, his eager ambition have turned into the ordinary life choices. It is only on the small canvas appropriate to such a view, rather than the grand frescoes of the heroic imagination, that Woolf could allow herself to sketch—in a deliberately halting and frag-

mented style and in a tone that is conspicuously impure—her vision of a permanently inscrutable young man.

University of California, Berkeley

FOOTNOTES

[1] David Daiches, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 61.

[2] Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth, 1972), p. 23; hereafter cited as *AWD*.

[3] Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey, *Letters*, ed. Leonard Woolf and James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and Chatto and Windus, 1969), p. 103.

[4] E. M. Forster, letter to Virginia Woolf, 24 October 1922, Berg Collection, New York Public Library. Quotations from the materials in the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature (Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations) are published with the permission of the Collection and of the relevant copyright holders. I am grateful to King's College, Cambridge and The Society of Authors for allowing me to quote Forster's letter.

[5] Joan Bennett, *Virginia Woolf: Her Art as a Novelist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), pp. 95, 96.

[6] J. K. Johnstone, *The Bloomsbury Group: A Study of E. M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, and Their Circle* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954), pp. 332, 334.

[7] Woolf's most interesting comment on her own experimental methods in fiction was a direct response to critics who treated her next novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, as a conscious methodological experiment. Her insistence on the inaccuracy of this view is equally pertinent to an understanding of *Jacob's Room* and is worth quoting at some length: "The book, it was said, was the deliberate offspring of a method. The author, it was said, dissatisfied with the form of fiction then in vogue, was determined to beg, borrow, steal or even create another of her own. But, as far as it is possible to be honest about the mysterious process of the mind, the facts are otherwise. Dissatisfied the writer may have been; but her dissatisfaction was primarily with nature for giving an idea, without providing a house for it to live in. . . . The novel was the obvious lodging, but the novel it seemed was built on the wrong plan. Thus rebuked the idea started as the oyster starts or the snail to secrete a house for itself. And this it did without any conscious direction. . . . It was necessary to write the book first and to invent a theory afterwards" (Virginia Woolf, "Introduction" to her *Mrs. Dalloway* [New York: Modern Library, 1928], pp. vii-viii). It is evident from this description that Woolf begins with a subject rather than with a method; and that the subject seems to have a will of its own rather than allowing the novelist to shape it according to a preconceived theory of narration or a pre-existing form.

[8] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 248.

[9] John McCrae, *In Flanders Fields and Other Poems* (New York: Putnam's, 1919), p. 3.

[10] A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 126n, 165-66.

[11] Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room* (London: Hogarth, 1971), pp. 95-96. Other page references to this volume in the Hogarth Press Uniform Edition are incorporated in the text.

[12] For a detailed chronology, see Avrom Fleishman, *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1975), pp. 49-50.

[13] Winifred Holtby, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Wishart, 1932), p. 116. More recent critics who have commented on the significance of the war in the book include Josephine O'Brien Schaefer, *The Three-Fold Nature of Reality in the Novels of*

Virginia Woolf (The Hague: Mouton, 1965), pp. 70-71; Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Towards Androgyny: Aspects of Male and Female in Literature* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1973), p. 164; Nancy Topping Bazin, *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1973), pp. 92-93; and Fleishman, p. 54. See also the excellent essay on Woolf's critical depiction of prewar British culture by Carol Ohmann, "Culture and Anarchy in *Jacob's Room*," *Contemporary Literature* 18 (1977), 160-72.

[14] Virginia Woolf, "Rubert Brooke," *Books and Portraits: Some Further Selections from the Literary and Biographical Writings of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Mary Lyon (London: Hogarth, 1977), p. 89.

[15] "These Are the Plans," *Books and Portraits*, p. 96.

[16] Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), p. 156.

[17] Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, holograph dated April 15, 1920-March 12, 1922, Berg Collection, New York Public Library, pt. I, p. 123. I am grateful to Professor Quentin Bell and to the Berg Collection for permission to quote from Virginia Woolf's manuscripts.

[18] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Hogarth, 1967), p. 303.

[19] *The Poetical Works of Rupert Brooke*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Faber and Faber, 1946), p. 23; *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. C. Day Lewis (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1964), p. 44; Siegfried Sassoon, *Collected Poems 1908-1956* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 119; H. G. Wells, *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), pp. 431-32.

[20] Carol Ohmann's finely judged description of Woolf's tone in *Jacob's Room* is worth quoting: "Neither is the novel an angry one. It is elegiac, rather, in its treatment of Jacob, and serenely so, mourning in tranquillity its hero's death and the end of what appeared to be his promise" (Ohmann, p. 171).

[21] *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas* (New York: New Directions, 1953), p. 112.

[22] Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (Sussex: The University Press, 1976), p. 132.

[23] Lytton Strachey, letter to Leonard Woolf, 17 September 1908, Berg Collection, New York Public Library. I am grateful to The Society of Authors as Agents for the Strachey Trust and to the Berg Collection for permission to quote from Strachey's letters, copyright 1981 Lytton Strachey.

[24] See chapter X of the *Jacob's Room* holograph version (pt. I, pp. 85-91), Berg Collection, New York Public Library. The chapter was later revised for publication as a short story, "A Woman's College from Outside," in *Atalanta's Garland: Being the Book of the Edinburgh University Women's Union 1926* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1926), pp. 11-16, and is reprinted in *Books and Portraits*, pp. 6-9. On Woolf's irreverent attitude toward Cambridge, see Irma Rantavaara, *Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury* (Helsinki: Annales Academiae Fennicae, 1953), p. 102.

[25] Virginia Woolf, Diary Typescript, Sept. 14 (1906)-April 25, 1909, Berg Collection, New York Public Library, p. 9. The forthcoming edition of Woolf's early diaries by Mitchell Leaska and Louis DeSalvo may correct some of the obvious errors of transcription in the Berg Collection typescript.

[26] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Hogarth, 1972), p. 151.

[27] Virginia Woolf, "Reflections upon beginning a work of fiction to be called, perhaps, Jacobs Room," *Jacob's Room* holograph, Berg Collection, New York Public Library, pt. I, p. 1.

[28] James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Random House, 1946), p. 683.

[29] Woolf and Strachey, *Letters*, pp. 103, 104.

[30] Lytton Strachey, letter to Leonard Woolf, 21 November 1906, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

[31] Frances Marshall, in *Recollections of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Joan Russell Noble (London: Peter Owen, 1972), p. 76.