JACOB'S ROOM

27 October 1922

24. Lytton Strachey on the romantic element in *Jacob's Room*

1922

From a letter to Virginia Woolf, 9 October 1922, in *Letters*, ed. L.Woolf and J.Strachey (1956), 103–4.

Thoby Stephen, whom Strachey refers to in this letter, was Virginia Woolf's elder brother who died in 1906 at the age of twenty-six.

I finished Jacob last night–a most wonderful achievement–more like poetry, it seems to me, than anything else, and as such I prophesy immortal. 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. I occasionally almost screamed with joy at the writing. Of course you're very romantic–which alarms me slightly–I am such a Bonamy. Once or twice I thought you were in danger of becoming George-Meredithian in style–or was that a delusion? Something of the sort certainly seems to me *the* danger for your genre. But so far you're safe. You're a romantic in Sirius, I fancy–which after all is a good way off from Box Hill. The impression left on one as a whole is glorious. And then, as one remembers detail after detail–the pier at Scarborough, the rooks and the dinner-bell, the clergyman's wife on the moors, St Paul's, the British Museum at night, the Parthenon–one's head whirls round and round. Jacob himself I

think is very successful–in a most remarkable and original way. Of course I see something of Thoby in him, as I suppose was intended.

25. Virginia Woolf, reply to Lytton Strachey

9(10?) October 1922

In *Letters*, ed. L.Woolf and J.Strachey (1956), 104–5.

Virginia Woolf's Diary indicates that she was quite sincere in thinking Strachey's praise extravagant: a few days after writing this letter she recorded her feelings as publication day drew near:

> My sensations? they remain calm. Yet how could Lytton have praised me more highly? prophesies immortality for it as poetry; is afraid of my romance; but the beauty of the writing etc. Lytton praises me too highly for it to give me exquisite pleasure; or perhaps that nerve grows dulled. I want to be through the splash and swimming in calm water again. I want to be writing unobserved (*A Writer's Diary*, 52).

I breathe more freely now that I have your letter, though I think your praise is extravagant–I can't believe you really like a work so utterly devoid of so many virtues; but it gives me immense pleasure to dream that you do. Of course you put your infallible finger upon the spot–romanticism. How do I catch it? Not from my father. I think it must have been my Great Aunts. But some of it, I think, comes from the effort of breaking with complete representation. One flies into the air. Next time, I mean to stick closer to the facts. There are millions of things I want to get your opinion on–This is merely to heave a sigh of relief that you don't cast me off, for nobody else's praise ever gives me quite as much pleasure as yours.

26. Unsigned review, *Times Literary Supplement*

26 October 1922, 683

The editor of the *TLS* had earlier written to Virginia Woolf to ask if the publication date of *Jacob's Room* could be put forward so that it could be reviewed on the first day of publication. Presumably Virginia Woolf agreed, as this review appeared a day before the date given in Kirkpatrick's *Bibliography*.

The review was entitled 'The Enchantment of a Mirror' but the reviewer (A.S.McDowall) hinted that, so far as the characters were concerned, it was a surface enchantment: 'But it might be questioned whether her beings, while they intersect, really act upon each other, or whether her method does not condemn them to be external.' Virginia Woolf noted this criticism: 'There was *The Times* review on Thursday—long, a little tepid, I think—saying that one can't make characters in this way; flattering enough' (*A Writer's Diary*, 54).

One might describe Mrs Woolf's new novel as the opposite of *Night and Day*, her last; or one might say that it is rather like the method of *Monday or Tuesday* applied to a continuous story. But this novel is limpid and definite. It would be truer to say that it is different from any other—Mrs Woolf's or anyone else's—though the remark sounds both vague and sweeping. At first you may be drawn by resemblances. This bright and endless race of things and thoughts, small acts, incongruous sensations, impressions so brief and yet pervasive that you hardly separate the mental from the external, what is it but the new vision of life as practised by So-and-so or So-and-so? The vision may be as old, indeed, as Heracleitus; but could he, or Pater even, have guessed how far artists would carry the process of weaving and unweaving? Mrs Woolf, you will say, is in this movement. Possibly; but her fabric is

Majumdar, Robin (Editor); McLauren, Aden (Editor). Virginia Woolf.
London, GBR: Routledge, 1997. p 95.
http://site.ebrary.com/lib/princeton/Doc?id=10058122&ppg=112

woven with threads so entirely of her own that it becomes quite different.

First, however, for its unlikeness to the normal. Jacob Flanders, absorbed with the half-savage, half-winning absorption of youth, and lovable since his friends and several women love him, is in the brief career which we follow by glimpses the mutest of all heroes. He is a 'silent young man'; Mrs Woolf's method increases his silence. But there is his room, his behaviour, his impressions; there are the scenes, the numerous people who float into the story for a moment or eddy round its centre. There is Mrs Jarvis, for example:

[Quotes pp. 25–6 'Short, dark, with kindling eyes' to 'give it her.']

Is Mrs Jarvis, then, a vivid little excrescence? When we ask what she and others are doing to the story, and find possible but not very obvious, answers, we are getting nearer to the real interest of Mrs Woolf's novel. It is not Jacob's history simply, nor anyone else's, but the queer simultaneousness of life, with all those incongruous threads which now run parallel, now intersect, and then part as unaccountably. Jacob is in the middle like a waif or a little marching soldier. And these odd conjunctions and sequences of life, which are much too delicate to be called slices, have been brought to a focus in Mrs Woolf's mirror.

It is an amusingly clear and yet enchanted glass which she holds up to things; that is her quality. This stream of incidents, persons, and their momentary thoughts and feelings, which would be intolerable if it were just allowed to flow, is arrested and decanted, as it were, into little phials of crystal vividness. Mrs Woolf has the art of dividing the continuous and yet making one feel that the stream flows remorselessly. The definite Mrs Durrant, the romantic little light-of-love Florinda, shy and charming Clara, the people in the streets, the moors and the sea, London and Athens—they all rise into delicious moments of reality and light before they melt back into the shadow. And each of those moments has caught a gleam of wit from the surface of the mirror, or a musing thought from the reflective depths in it. Ought we to complain, then, because Mrs Woolf can make beauty and significance out of what we generally find insignificant, or because her own musings tinge those of her personages sometimes? We know the stream of life at first-hand already; what this novel adds, with the lightest strokes, and all the coolness of restraint, is a knowledge of the vision of the author.

And it is much to be taken as far as we are here into that subtle, slyly mocking, and yet poignant vision; for Mrs Woolf has seldom

expressed it more beguilingly than she does in this novel. It will even make us forget to treat the novel as a story. If, however, we come back to that, we should have to say that it does not create persons and characters as we secretly desire to know them. We do not know Jacob as an individual, though we promptly seize his type; perhaps we do not know anyone in the book otherwise than as a really intuitive person knows his acquaintances, filling in the blanks, if he is imaginative, by his imagination. And that, Mrs Woolf might say, is all we can know in life, or need to know in a book, if we forgo the psychology which she spares us. But it might still be questioned whether her beings, while they intersect, really act upon each other, or whether her method does not condemn them to be external. It is an ungrateful suspicion to have about a book which has embodied their passing thoughts so vividly. But what she has undoubtedly done is to give a quickened sense of the promise and pity in a single destiny, seen against those wilful, intersecting lines of chance and nature. And, with the pity of it, there is the delicious humour which infects every page, the charm of writing that seems as simple as talking but is always exquisite. It is a great deal to have brought back from an adventure; yet, after all, what we relish as much as anything in Mrs. Woolf's method is its adventurousness.

27. Lewis Bettany, review, *Daily News*

27 October 1922, 7

From a review headed 'Middle Aged Sensualists'. Arnold Bennett's *Lilian* was one of the books reviewed in the same article (see Introduction, p. 15).

In many of his stories of the 'Five Towns', Mr Bennett used to bore his greatest admirers by his tiresome trick of presenting a girl's naive interest in boarding a bus or taking a railway journey as a passion for romance. This sense of wonder, a wonder very different from that expressed by Browne and Traherne, is an irritating feature of Mrs Woolf's new story, which is so full of parentheses and suppressions, so tedious in its rediscoveries of the obvious, and so marred by its occasional lapses into indelicacy, that I found great difficulty in discovering what it was all about. Those who care to read about the adolescent ardours of a half-baked young Cambridge man in literature, love and travel, will find what they like in *Jacob's Room*. I thought most of the book very pretentious and very cheap; but some of the observations and impressions seemed to me quite happy.

Majumdar, Robin (Editor); McLauren, Aden (Editor). Virginia Woolf.
London, GBR: Routledge, 1997. p 98.
http://site.ebrary.com/lib/princeton/Doc?id=10058122&ppg=115

28. Unsigned review, *Pall Mall Gazette*

27 October 1922, 6

The impressionist element in *Jacob's Room* was emphasised by many reviewers, and this typical review was headed quite simply 'An Impressionist' (see Introduction, p. 15).

Mrs Woolf is a very clever writer, whose originality expends itself in ways that are only doubtfully worth while. She attempts in prose what so many have attempted in verse—the achievement of art while evading the problems of form—and we can see little sign of the product becoming of more than technical interest. Most deftly does she catch and convey the impression of a scene, an incident, a passing figure, or a relationship, but no true novel can be built out of a mere accumulation of these notebook entries. In *Jacob's Room* there is not only no story, but there is no perceptible development of any kind. We get an outline of the kind of young man that Jacob was and of the kind of woman that his mother was, and very subtly and admirably are some of the features touched in.

Majumdar, Robin (Editor); McLauren, Aden (Editor). Virginia Woolf.
London, GBR: Routledge, 1997. p 99.
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29. Rebecca West, review, *New Statesman*

4 November 1922, 142

Rebecca West (b. 1893). Novelist and critic. Like many reviewers, she saw Virginia Woolf 's books as something other than novels, and once again the comparison is with the pictorial arts: we should read *Jacob's Room* 'not as a novel but as a portfolio'.

There is an expression, one of those unused phrases that nest in the tall tree-top of the idiom book, 'I would rather have his room than his company.' One learned its French equivalent, which was not less excluded from common speech (strange and beautiful it is, like one of Swinburne's nature poems, this mating of unuttered phrases with their alien fellow-outcast over frontier seas and mountains, through the kind ponderous idiom-book), and it was forgotten, till it should be recalled by Mrs Woolf's last book. Very strongly has Mrs Woolf preferred Jacob's room to his company. Jacob lives, but that is hearsay. Jacob dies; there could be nothing more negative than the death of one who never (that we could learn for certain) lived, reported by a mouth that makes every human event she speaks of seem as if it had not happened. But his room we know. 'The eighteenth century has its distinction. These houses were built, say, a hundred and fifty years ago. The rooms are shapely, the ceilings high; over the doorways a rose or a ram's skull is carved in wood. Even the panels, painted in raspberrycoloured paint, have their distinction.' We know so much about it; how his mother's letter, in its pale blue envelope, lay waiting for him by the biscuit-box; how the *Globe* looked pinkish under the lamplight and was stared at, but not read, one cold night; how the room heard, at hours when the elderly lie abed, young men disputing on whether this or that line came in Virgil or Lucretius; and how, Jacob dead in the war, it felt his absence. 'Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker armchair creaks, though no one sits there...'

Majumdar, Robin (Editor); McLauren, Aden (Editor). Virginia Woolf.
London, GBR: Routledge, 1997. p 100.
http://site.ebrary.com/lib/princeton/Doc?id=10058122&ppg=117

Mrs Woolf has again provided us with a demonstration that she is at once a negligible novelist and a supremely important writer. The novel may be exactly what it likes. It may be fifteen thousand words, or five hundred thousand; it may be written as simply as a melody in one part or as elaborately as a symphony. But it must, surely, submit to one limitation. It must primarily concern itself with humanity. Only the long drive of the human will can be fully commemorated in the long drive of the novel form. Now from that point of view *Jacob's Room* is a failure. The fault of it is not that it is about commonplace people—that, indeed, is never a fault—but that it is not about individuals at all but about types as seen through the refractions of commonplace observers' eyes. Jacob's mother, Betty Flanders, is based on the conventional exclamations that such a figure of bluff maternity would evoke from a commonplace observer; so, too, Florinda the whore, so, too, Mother Stuart, her *entrepreneuse;* so, too, Clara Durrant, the nice girl; and Sandra Wentworth Williams, humorous but wholly a reported thing, dredged up from the talk of some cosmopolitan tea-party.

But take the book not as a novel but as a portfolio, and it is indubitably precious. A portfolio is indeed an appropriate image, for not only are Mrs Woolf's contributions to her age loose leaves, but they are also connected closely with the pictorial arts. Though she may have read Jane Austen and the Russians and James Joyce with more than common delight and intelligence, it is nothing in literature that has made her. She can write supremely well only of what can be painted; best of all, perhaps, of what has been painted. Take, for example, one of the rare occasions when the people in the book evoke emotion, the short and subtle and extremely funny conversation between Miss Edwards and Mr Calthorp at the Durrants' party. The temptation is to ascribe it (since it plainly hardly came of itself) to the influence of Jane Austen. But if that had been the source the conversation would have had some high lights of verbal amusingness on it instead of being simply a success in suggestion, in the evocation of a prim social atmosphere. The derivation is surely a drawing in *Punch*, a pre-Du Maurier drawing of discreet ladies in spread skirts and young men with peg-top trousers and curling beards, sitting at parties glorious with the innocent pretentiousness of hired pineapples and *ad hoc* waiters from the pastrycook's.

There is dull stuff near the beginning about the Scilly Isles; none of the old people whose hints Mrs Woolf can take, painted those parts. There is a good outing with the foxhounds in Essex, to which Morland

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and the old hunting prints have given their jollity. But best of all are Mrs Woolf's London series. There was a gentleman who lived in the prime of the nineteenth century, when it was at once prim and fresh and artificial like a newly-plucked gardenia, named Mr Boys, who made many lithographs of London. It was all as lovely then as Nash's Quadrant when we were young. Exquisitely did the industrious Mr Boys capture its beauty, looking through an eye clear and bright as a dewdrop, wielding a neat hand as neatly as any old maid at her embroidery, to record the near-classicism of those stately streets, the pediments which were usually mitigated in their Latinity by emblems of Britannia and sculptural allusions to the Royal Family, the proud pillars that were painted the colour of pale soup and marbled, as likely as not, with pink veinings. Taste was his absolutely. He was, one remembers, not so good with his people, save with such oddities as sweeps and hurdy-gurdy men. Yet it was not all masonry. He knew God as well as Nash. Above his streets there were limitless skies (by them alone you may know whether your copy is coloured by his hand or a hireling's) full of light, full of real sailing clouds.

His talent was blood-brother to that of Mrs Woolf. Always and whimsically enough, since her tale is of this day, she suggests that young virgin-spirited London of his time. Her eye, too, is clear and bright as a dewdrop, her industry immense and humble, her taste as final. She can tell how dawn comes to London,

[Quotes pp. 162–3 'The Bank of England emerges' to 'chairs standing askew.']

She tells how Rotten Row looks on a sweet afternoon; how the leather curtain flaps at the door of St Paul's; how the morning army looks pouring over Waterloo Bridge. She is less successful with her considered characters than with her odd vignettes, less successful with Jacob than with Mrs Grandage. Yet this is no brick-counting, no extension of the careful cataloguing 'Nature Notes' method to the phenomena of town. It is authentic poetry, cognisant of the soul.

30. W.L.Courtney, review, *Daily Telegraph*

10 November 1922, 4

W.L.Courtney (1850–1928), English philosopher and journalist, taught for some time at New College, Oxford. In his long journalistic career, Courtney worked for the *Fortnightly Review*, the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Daily Telegraph*, of which he became the chief dramatic and literary editor.

In estimating the tendencies of a particular era in literature it is well to take extreme cases. We recognise that there are certain distinctive peculiarities about modern novels. But in order to make sure of the fact we need only take up a book like *Jacob's Room*, by Mrs Virginia Woolf. Even so, we shall be a little perplexed, for sometimes—perhaps oftener than not—we do not quite understand what the authoress is driving at, nor are we in a position to feel certain that she achieves the results at which she aims. One thing is clear. Instead of a straightforward narrative dealing with certain characters, with the interactions of those characters on one another, and with the destiny which carries them to their appointed end, we have a perfectly different art form. There is no particular story to tell, unless, indeed, you can gather some kind of story out of the piecemeal references to personages and things. But what does emerge is the constant activity, the perpetual reaction of a sensitive mind upon the impressions which come through the senses—so that an event or a character is not viewed as it is, but only as steeped in the consciousness of the author. That is the great and decisive difference between an older art-method and a later, and sometimes the contrast is a little embarrassing. The old craving for a plot still remains in our unregenerate breasts, and when all that we receive in compensation for what we have lost is the attitude of Mrs Virginia Woolf towards her creations—or rather, perhaps, a theory of life as interpreted by a clever observer—there must inevitably be some confusion and a mixture of mere narration with the intrusions and

Majumdar, Robin (Editor); McLauren, Aden (Editor). Virginia Woolf.
London, GBR: Routledge, 1997. p 103.
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philosophisings of a superior mind. Anything like an objective creation becomes impossible. By an objective creation I mean the portrayal of a particular thing, person, or incident as it exists in itself. Flaubert thought that that was the only right way of writing a novel, and hence his theory—driven hard by a man who consciously lived his life apart from others—was the absolute exclusion of the author's personality from the written page. Mrs Woolf confidently chatters as though she were seated in an armchair playing with her puppets. It is she who gives them life. It is she who imparts to them such character as they are allowed to possess. They talk well because the author of their being talks well. They say clever things, not as from their own mouths, but as prompted by their creator. And if their creator appears to be a clever and original woman, her creations have the stamp of real life. But does she really care for them? Is she enamoured of her puppets? I wonder.

We begin merrily enough with something that looks as if it might be interesting narrative. Here is Mrs Flanders, anxious about her children, of whom Jacob is the prominent one, and Archer and John are allowed to fall into the background. Jacob is obviously to be the hero. He has his own definite views, young as he is. He is not made for obedience. He clearly determines to live his life in his own way. And he is very handsome. Most women admire him, though they concede that he is very shy and awkward, a youth who often prefers silence to speech. Mrs Flanders has her own little romance to think of, but that does not interfere with her duty towards her children. And so, somehow or other, money is got together to send Jacob to college, and to enable him to make his big plunge into life. Then, of course, the usual incidents happen. We pass through a number of scenes of revelry and boredom, and such names are tossed up on the surface of the story as Florinda—who is not much better than she should be—Clara Durrant, Sandra, and others. His male friends also flit hither and thither—Timothy Durrant, Clara's brother, and Bonamy, and Mr Benson. But the way in which these personages are treated is, of course, the chief point in *Jacob's Room*. Although Mrs Woolf abjures realism, yet she is realistic enough when it comes to the treatment of ordinary episodes. No one is more happily inspired than she when it comes to dialogue and conversation. She will give us the impression of a conversation by making several people talk, as it were, at once, each with his or her own particular interest, so that you get voices coming from left and right, voices up by the window or by the fireplace, voices bidding farewell or saying good-day—all the mixture of different interests which a crowded

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drawing room can contain. The result to an old-fashioned reader is sufficiently curious. For example, thus:

[Quotes pp. 56–7 'Did you quarrel' to 'one coin on to the table.']

In similar fashion Mrs Woolf achieves her backgrounds with a great deal of skill. Whether we find ourselves at Cambridge or on Hampstead Heath, in the suburbs of London or on board a yacht, or in Athens, we find the same graphic and picturesque touch, and the picture is drawn, arresting, vivid, intriguing, just as this point or that point in the mise en scène is brought out for a moment in high light. She gets atmosphere in her own fashion without aiming at any special exercise of cleverness; she uses similes and strange locutions, often bizarre, but undoubtedly adding to the effect. Take, for example, the following picture, very suggestive of Mrs Woolf's style:

[Quotes p. 54 'The rooks settled' to 'white as china.']

Yes, the author knows how to give us atmosphere, and perhaps that is a sufficient justification of her method. She is very unlike other writers, except that now and again she reminds us of Dorothy Richardson. But in her instinct for the nuances of character, in the keen discernment of those small, unessential things which go to the making of life, she scores again and again. Her theory of art ought, I suppose, to be called 'impressionist'. She does not describe; she merely indicates; throughout there is always the pervasive character and spirit of Virginia Woolf. It is she who makes the vital difference. Without her names are merely names, and do not represent anything alive. For some readers it is a drawback, though others will perhaps consider it a fortunate circumstance, that there is so little sense of unity, so striking a want of connection and harmony between the different stages of her history. To be impressionist is often to be incoherent, inconsequent, lacking all design and construction. But if you want to know what a modern novel is like, you have only to read *Jacob's Room*, by Virginia Woolf. In its tense, syncopated movements, its staccato impulsiveness, do you not discern the influence of Jazz?

31. Gerald Gould, review, *Saturday Review*

11 November 1922, 726

Gould's comparison in the first sentence of this extract is with Evelyn Scott's *Bewilderment* which he reviewed in the same article.

Mrs Woolf's *Jacob's Room* is a very different matter: for, though the technique is similar, and the theme not much more satisfying, a far finer and bigger intelligence is at work on them. Mrs Woolf can give us beauty. She has lyrical passages—one, in particular, about crossing Waterloo Bridge in a wind: she can make us feel what she calls 'the ecstasy and hubbub of the soul'. But still, the dot-and-dash method leaves much to be desired. One wonders that so clever a writer should attach so much importance to cleverness. Almost everybody is clever: but to stress one's own cleverness by a sort of humorous indulgence towards one's creations, and to leave the simple-minded reader guessing at connexions which might just as well be made clear for him, is a positive injury to art. It distracts from the solid object of the imagination. It destroys concentration. And it throws into violent contrast the lapses from the entirely unnecessary 'intellectual' standard—such, for instance, as the crude caricature of the feminist in the British Museum, 'wetting her pen in bitterness, and leaving her shoe laces untied'.

Jacob is loved by an inarticulate girl, and drifts away from her. He has some rather sordid sexual experiences of the transitory kind. He goes to Greece and falls in love with an unpleasant married woman. He is killed in the war. That is all, but out of that Mrs Woolf has made something wholly interesting and partly beautiful. It is at once irritating and encouraging to reflect how much better she would do if her art were less self-conscious.

Majumdar, Robin (Editor); McLauren, Aden (Editor). Virginia Woolf.
London, GBR: Routledge, 1997. p 106.
http://site.ebrary.com/lib/princeton/Doc?id=10058122&ppg=123

32. Unsigned review, 'Dissolving Views', *Yorkshire Post*

29 November 1922, 4

Those who, like the present writer, thought, after reading *Night and Day*, that Mrs Woolf's next novel would be something of an event, must be prepared to find that *Jacob's Room* bears hardly any resemblance to its predecessor. Mrs Woolf has, indeed, discovered a somewhat new way of writing a novel—a way that is just a little like that developed by Mr James Joyce, but far more detached and far more selective. The method, briefly, is snapshot photography, with a highly sensitive, perfected camera handled by an artist. The result is a crowded album of little pictures—of Jacob as a boy; of Jacob's mother and home at Scarborough; of Jacob at Cambridge (an admirable one, this, full of compressed but very significant and satisfying detail); of Jacob in London, and the women who fall in love with him there; of Jacob travelling in Greece, half in love himself now with the vaguely emotional Mrs Sandra Wentworth Williams; of Jacob's room, empty, being tidied by his friend Bonamy, after Jacob (we gather) has been killed in the war.

No one could question Mrs Woolf's great abilities as a writer. There are passages in this book, such as that describing Jacob and a Cambridge friend approaching the Scilly Isles in a little sailing yacht, which contain nothing resembling a 'purple patch', and yet achieve a remarkably pure, lyrical beauty; there are many passages in which some impression—of London in summer, of a drawing-room conversation, of a character or a landscape—is seized and presented with admirable economy and truth. But all this seems to us no more than the material for a novel, and Mrs Woolf has done hardly anything to put it together. *Jacob's Room* has no narrative, no design, above all, no perspective: its dissolving views come before us one by one, each taking the full light for a moment, then vanishing completely. One remembers with regret the strong, harmonious structure of *Night and Day;* beside that *Jacob's Room*, beautiful as much of it is, seems flickering,

Majumdar, Robin (Editor); McLauren, Aden (Editor). Virginia Woolf.
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impermanent. Nevertheless, if, as we think probable, Mrs Woolf has experienced a strong impulse to adopt this form, and no other, for her new novel, she is certainly doing right to obey: for she is, unlike most of her contemporaries, a genuine artist.

33. Unsigned review, *New Age*

21 December 1922, 123

When Browning's Pippa passed and sung her song she effected, unknown to herself, profound changes in the lives of others. Mrs Woolf's attempts at a new technique have puzzled us for some time; but this lengthy series reveals the method. She is Pippa, not singing, but eavesdropping; not effecting changes, but snapshotting things with and without meaning. The result is that we never know what she is talking about, except that life presents itself to her as a phantasmagoria. 'There is but one art—to omit!' cried Stevenson, but Mrs Woolf has not learned it. Where these people come from, who they are, what they do or suffer, what they think or feel, we cannot learn from Mrs Woolf; she transcribes faithfully the fragments she overhears in tube, tram, or train, in the Express Dairy restaurant and the Reading Room of the British Museum, anywhere where people are saying things that have no meaning for anyone else. The little flurries of prose poetry do not make art of this rag-bag of impressions.

34. Middleton Murry on the impasse of prose fiction

1923

John Middleton Murry (1889–1957). Man of letters, editor, literary critic. Married to Katherine Mansfield (see No. 18).

From 'Romance', *Nation and Athenaeum*, 10 March 1923, 882.

This aside, in a review, not of Virginia Woolf, but of L.H. Myers's *The Orissers* and Michael Sadleir's *Desolate Splendour*, was to worry Virginia Woolf: perhaps her experiments were leading to a dead end (see Introduction, p. 15).

The most original minds among those of the younger generation who have chosen prose-fiction for their medium have seemed to care less and less for plot. Not even a desultory story attracts them. Character, atmosphere, an attitude to life, a quality of perception—these things have interested a D.H.Lawrence, a Katherine Mansfield, a Virginia Woolf; but the old mechanism of story not at all. They represent a logical and necessary development of the realism of twenty years ago. Not one of them has solved the problem of the *novel*; neither did Marcel Proust, nor has Mr Joyce or Miss Richardson solved it. None of them has really any use for a story. It is a kind of nursery-game for them—at the best a trick; and they have more important things to do than waste time playing tricks or learning how to play them.

The consequence is that the novel has reached a kind of *impasse*. The artists have, to a very large extent, outrun their audience. Perhaps they have outrun themselves a little, too. At any rate, it seems to be true that they have as yet achieved creative perfection only in the short story. 'Prelude', 'Wintry Peacock', 'The Daughters of the Late Colonel', are things which will pass to immortality entire; of the novels, probably no more than scraps. They lack constructive solidity, they are fluid and fragmentary, brilliant and incoherent. And the public still likes a story.

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35. Maxwell Bodenheim, 'Underneath the Paint in Jacob's Room', *Nation* (New York)

28 March 1923, 368–9

Maxwell Bodenheim (1893–1954), American poet and novelist. He reviewed *Paint* by Thomas Craven in the same article.

The art of painting, on the whole, seems to be animated by a swifter boldness than that of literature, and is less inclined to consolidate its victories and to remain timidly within the conquered realm of blended content and expression. The impressionists, headed by Monet, flourished in painting many decades ago, but the impressionists in English literature have only arrived during the past four or five years. The recent revolts in literature—the Dadaists and expressionists—have attained more intensity and publicity than numbers and influence, and have, after all, dominated only one-hundredth of the output in contemporary literature, while the rebellions in painting have gained a larger and more commanding position. In addition, the work of cubist painters has been far more important than that of the literary Dadaists and has attained a greater precision and sureness. On the whole, the art of painting has been sturdier and less uncertain than its rival, the belated impressionist school in literature.

Ironically enough, the founder of this method, Dorothy Richardson, has been practically ignored, while her lesser imitators are reveling in the praise of myopic critics, and among these imitators Virginia Woolf flourishes. Her novel, *Jacob's Room*, is a rambling, redundant affair, in which the commonplace details and motives of ordinary people are divided and subdivided until they form a series of atoms, and the author's speculations upon these atoms have the volubility of conversation in a drawing-room. Mrs Woolf does not seem to believe that anything should be omitted, and lingers over the little, everyday motives and waking impulses of her undistinguished people, and the

Majumdar, Robin (Editor); McLauren, Aden (Editor). Virginia Woolf.
London, GBR: Routledge, 1997. p 110.
http://site.ebrary.com/lib/princeton/Doc?id=10058122&ppg=127

significance held by the hosts of inanimate objects which these people touch and see. The result is frequently an endless parade of details that grow more and more uninteresting, proceeding in an impulsive fashion and darting here and there with indefatigable minuteness. The following passage is an apt illustration:

[Quotes p. 91 'Let us consider letters' to 'or the scowl.']

So far the analysis has been diverting, although the author might have realized that I would be well acquainted with the customary times of arrival and the color of the stamps, but, alas, the subject has only commenced! For another eight hundred words or more I am to read all about letters and every possible shade of meaning attached to them. 'This is just like life', as one critic wrote in praise of *Jacob's Room*, but I do not approach the novel for a verbatim account of life and I am more intrigued by a condensation that displays only the salient items. There are too many moderately subtle stenographers in literature at present. *Jacob's Room* revolves jerkily around the figure of Jacob Flanders, from his boyhood to his death in the late World War, while still a young man. His groping for thoughts, emotions, and prejudices, and his occasional affairs with blithely shallow women, reveal him as an average young man, half pathetic and half ludicrous, but he is advanced with such a microscopical effusiveness and with so many irrelevant details that one is tempted to mutter: 'I see and meet at least fifty Jacob Flanders every month of my life, and if the introduction must be repeated it should hold a brevity and suggestiveness which these actual men do not possess.'

[There follows a discussion of Thomas Craven's *Paint*, and the review ends]:

This novel is crudely written in parts, and hastily molded in others, but it holds a vicious strength and concentration that is far removed from the deftly garrulous, thinly sad descriptions and meditations of *Jacob's Room*. Those who like *Jacob's Room* will not be overresponsive to Mr Craven's novel, and the reason is that few people care to see life struck by an accurate and unpitying sledgehammer. The result is somewhat injurious to their various complacencies.