38. J.D.Beresford, 'The Successors of Charles Dickens', *Nation and Athenaeum*

29 December 1923, 487–8

J.D.Beresford (1873–1947). Publishers' reader, reviewer, and prolific novelist.

Virginia Woolf reviewed Beresford's novel *An Imperfect Mother* in an anonymous article entitled 'Freudian Fiction' (TLS, 25 March 1920, 199). In this article Beresford emphasises the 'change in human nature' which Virginia Woolf only hints at in the first 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', but which was an important part of the second version.

In a recent article, Mrs Woolf suggested, pertinently and convincingly, that the chief failing of those three important novelists, Wells, Galsworthy, and Bennett, has been their inability to create character in the manner of, say, Dickens and Thackeray; and she quotes Bennett himself to uphold her criticism, in the statement: 'The foundation of good fiction is character-creating and nothing else.'

This suggestion is of peculiar interest inasmuch as it does not seem possible to confute it in the sense—a perfectly justifiable one—intended. But before we condemn our selected trio by this single criterion, it may be worth while to extend our examination and consider whether or not there may be a valid psychological explanation for this apparent weakness. Can we not, for example, find some reason why the figures of Edward Ponderevo, Arthur Kipps, Soames or Jolyon Forsyte, Edwin Clayhanger or Constance Povey do not leave quite the same definite impression on the mind as the more outstanding portraits drawn by Dickens and Thackeray?

The first and most obvious explanation is that which Mrs Woolf lightly sports with at the end of her article. When we had turned the century with Hardy, Meredith, and Kipling as our three leading writers

Majumdar, Robin (Editor); McLauren, Aden (Editor). Virginia Woolf.
London, GBR: Routledge, 1997. p 120.
http://site.ebrary.com/lib/princeton/Doc?id=10058122&ppg=137

of fiction, we witnessed a quite definite movement in the development of actualism. Whether or not Wells, Galsworthy, and Bennett consciously tried to approach their art from a new angle, is a question that we need not consider for our present purposes. What is of importance is that we find in their novels a presentation of human beings that satisfies our sense of probability; inasmuch as they are, like ourselves, composite, full of irresolutions, often self-conscious, and apt to change their minds; whereas in the novels of Dickens we find a single salient characteristic which is often given to us as portraying the complete man or woman.

What would Dickens, for instance, have done with Sophia Baines? In her youth she is shown, more or less determinedly, as reckless, flighty even, of a not too exemplary honesty. Can we doubt that having thus shaped her, Dickens would have maintained the mould? The last state of Sophia, as a result of the steady confirmation and deepening of these salient and instantly recognizable characteristics, would have been far worse than the first. But Mr Bennett—*pace* all you worshippers of Victorian greatness—was aware of many things of which Dickens was blandly ignorant. Mr Bennett was aware, in the first place, of heredity. He knew his Baineses; and he recognized those inherited qualities in Sophia which, in the circumstances, would presently override the impulses of youth and leave her a successful, if not an altogether satisfied, woman. Hers is, in short, an absolutely convincing portrait. We know for certain—as soon as Mr Bennett has told us—that she could have acted only as she is shown to have acted. Furthermore, she represents a type in the same sense that so many characters in Dickens represent types. Yet the average mind will forget a Sophia Baines and remember a Mrs Nickleby or a Betsey Trotwood.

Further examples are hardly necessary, but to point the application of the one cited to our other two novelists, it may be as well to add Edward Ponderevo and Soames Forsyte to the list. Both, according to the rigid classification of the Dickensian methods, are 'bad' men; and in the case of the former we know what Dickens would have done from the sad instance of Montague Tigg. Soames Forsyte, with his business capacity and his one act of brutality to his wife Irene, might possibly have become in Dickens's hand a kind of Dombey. And we know quite well what Dickens would have done with Irene.

Now, at first sight, the difference of treatment seems to be due solely to a change of attitude and of method. The older attitude with its resultant method evidences the fading influence of classicism, with its

fundamental assumptions of a strict division into categories and the inescapable vigilance of a presiding and deeply interested Fate. Our three Edwardians had all pitched Fate out onto the rubbish-heap at the bottom of the garden—where it fell and failed to sprout. They were empiricists, a-posteriorists, and so far under the influence of the scientific method that they passionately desired to get as near the truth as a mere novelist may. They wanted before all things to present men and women as they themselves had seen them, not as Dickens did in a startling cartoon, but in three dimensions—at least three. After Fate had landed on the rubbish-heap, all sorts of queer things had gone after it, such things as predestination, the chronology of Bishop Usher, the theory of the divine origin of mankind, no end of funny-looking stuff; and our three novelists sat down in their clean and rather bare houses to write of themselves and us in the light of observation and reason.

But when we have justified their attitude, when we have admitted that they could not and should not have written in any other way about the men and women of their own time, we are still confronted with that difficult question as to whether the effect of their art on the public mind is as stimulating as that of Dickens. Just as, in the case of young children, Pip, Squeak, and Wilfred leave a clearer impression than Lewis Carroll's White Rabbit or his Red Queen; so, in the parallel case of our hypothetical average of public intelligence, the cartoonist will succeed where the chiaroscurist will fail. Your average reader of novels loves hard outlines, not subtleties and vague distances; certainties (or the appearance of them) rather than suggestions. But if we really care about our influence on him (Dickens, remember, was distinctly educative), ought we not to use the medium that reaches him more directly?

The answer to that question necessitates an inquiry into the further consideration that was hinted at when we began this development with a conditional 'at first sight'. For we have reached a stage at which we may boldly ask whether the change of attitude in the novelist does not foreshadow a parallel change, as yet far from complete, in the reader. Is it perhaps true, for instance, that in the eighteen-forties there were more queer, one-ideaed, less complicated, less self-conscious people about in England than there are in the nineteen-twenties? Has that marked change in the tendency of philosophic thought that became comparatively wide-spread in the last quarter of the nineteenth century—opening so many doors on to unguessed-at vistas which retreat, and lose themselves in infinite distances, where once was the

calm assurance of such definite labels as Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell to dissuade the adventurer from opening the door for himself—has that change of thought had its influence on the public mind, or, alternatively, is it an indication of a rapidly developing change of consciousness?

Personally—for, lacking the witness of the Galtonian Institute in this matter, I am driven back to expressing a personal opinion—I favour the latter solution. I believe that, taking the average English man or woman, we shall find them more aware of their own diversity, more introspective, and hence more complicated, than would be the corresponding specimens picked out from a sample of early Victorians. I remember my mother's stories (she was born in 1837) of the friends who came to her father's house in her youth, and many of these friends, with their stock tricks of speech and their stock reactions to religion, politics, and society, could have gone straight into a Dickens novel. And the characterization of them would have been adequate. I even remember similar specimens in my own boyhood. Now, among my contemporaries, I search for them in vain. The world of to-day, as I see it, is filled with people who are too aware of themselves to be peculiar by conviction. The great divergencies of what we call 'types'—which means the abstraction of a preponderating characteristic—tend to converge by assimilation. For when we become more aware of ourselves, we inevitably become more aware of other people.

Even in politics, the process is displayed for us. Our parties witness to no passionate certitudes. Our leaders are no longer willing to die for their convictions, in the manner of a Burke, a Lincoln, or a Gladstone. They are conscientiously aware that there are two sides to every question; and only in the squalid emergencies of a general election should we now taunt a man with having changed his mind in regard to the advantages of, say, a fiscal policy.

And if we admit this growing change due to the evolution of consciousness, shall we say that the art of Wells, Galsworthy, or Bennett is of a lower order of achievement than that of Dickens or Thackeray, because our selected trio have presented us with a characterization that is truer to our own day than the depicting of the older 'type'? Has not, for example, Mr Bennett fully justified his dictum in his own work? Are his character-creating powers less than those of Dickens because they are more subtle? And, finally, is not the failure, such as it is, with those of us who are still in that condition in which we prefer Pip, Squeak, and Wilfred to the Red Queen?

I await the verdict.

39. Logan Pearsall Smith, 'First Catch Your Hare', *Nation and Athenaeum*

2 February 1924, 629–30

Smith (1865–1946) American literary man associated with Bloomsbury, especially Roger Fry, who was a close friend. The Woolfs published his *Stories from the Old Testament* in 1920. Leonard Woolf gives a picture of him about the time of this article:

> I did occasionally go to Logan's tea-parties where one drank Earl Grey's china tea amid china, furniture, pictures, books, and human beings, not easily distinguishable from one another or from the tea with its delicate taste and aroma, for they were all made, fabricated, collected in accordance with society's standards of sophisticated culture and good taste. Earl Grey has never been my cup of tea, nor was Logan (*Downhill All the Way*, pp. 99–100).

This portrait accords with the precious style of the following essay, which is, nevertheless an interesting discussion of character in fiction. Perhaps his remarks encouraged Virginia Woolf to widen the scope of the second version of 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (see Introduction, p. 16).

Mrs Woolf, in her recent answer to Mr Arnold Bennett in these columns, and Mr Beresford, with his reply to Mrs Woolf, have started a hare, and inaugurated a hunt of such fascination that even the most grizzly and retired of critical greyhounds must be irresistibly tempted to leap from his kennel and join the exhilarating chase.

The essence of fiction, the *sine qua non* of novel-writing, is the game they are after: that [it] is the creation of character, they agree with Mr Bennett; but where, in what covert the elusive animal is hidden, is among them a matter of lively dispute. I should like to suggest (if I may join them) that the field to which they confine themselves is rather too narrow. It isn't a question merely of English fiction; or, in English

fiction, of the Victorians, the Edwardians, and our contemporary novelists. Indeed, to make sure that one has left no covert unexplored one should include, I think, not only foreign novels, but the drama, and even the epic; for these portray character as well as novels; they are also, if I may permit myself the pun, 'forms' in which our essential hare may be found lurking.

If, then, we wish to arrive at some definite idea of what we mean by character-creation in fiction, and, taking the word in its widest meaning, we summon up before our memories all the vast populations which people these worlds of the imagination, we shall see, I think, that those personages divide themselves pretty definitely into two groups. By far the great majority of them are stock figures, devoid of any independent existence. Personifications of the passions, idealizations of abstract qualities, embodiments of simple forces, or types of various professions, these heroes and lovers and heroines and villians and lords and misers and millionaires and clergymen and lawyers have all their names, their places in the social fabric; they all are endowed, and sometimes over-endowed, with the characteristics of their sex; they are upholstered in different kinds of clothes; they are often described and analysed and dissected at enormous length—and yet they almost all remain puppets: we see the strings that pull them; and when the play or novel in which they figure is over, their life ceases, they are laid aside, and we think of them no more.

But in the works of certain great writers some of the figures (though by no means all) present a very different appearance. They seem to be framed in a different manner and composed of other materials, to be real human beings, discoveries and not invention; they are no sooner brought into existence than they seem to have always existed: and when the novel is closed, or the curtain falls upon the drama, they go on living in our imaginations, and are as familiar to us as our relations and our best-acquainted friends. These are the figures which we call 'characters'; and the power of evoking them is what we call 'character-creation'. It is a power possessed in the highest degree by Shakespeare; we find it also in Scott, in Jane Austen, in Thackeray; and Dickens possessed it almost to madness. It is commonly regarded as the greatest gift of these novelists, and the very essence of their art. And yet, curiously enough, none of our critics, with, as far as I know, only one exception, have attempted an analysis of this creative power, or at least any real discrimination between stock figures and 'created' characters. This exception is that obscure, almost forgotten diplomatist

and politician of the eighteenth century, Maurice Morgann, who published in 1777 one small masterpiece of criticism, an *Essay* on the character of Falstaff, in which he deals with this question in a profoundly interesting way. What is the essential difference, he asks, between Shakespeare's characters and the stock figures of the other playwrights? The answer he gives—and I think it is essentially a true answer—can be paraphrased in our modern vocabulary as follows. No personage can be put whole into a work of art; the writer can only present the qualities and aspects which he needs for his purpose; and in other playwrights the parts which are not seen do not in fact exist; their makers have told us all they know about them; there is nothing more in these figures, as they conceive them, than what we see, and their hidden interiors are, as we may put it, filled, like dolls, with sawdust.

But Shakespeare's characters are created as vital wholes; they possess independence as well as relation; they are living organisms, in which each part depends upon, and implies, the complete person. Although we see them in part only, yet from these glimpses we unconsciously infer the parts we do not see; and when Shakespeare makes them act and speak, as he sometimes does, from their unportrayed but inferred aspects, he produces an astonishing effect of unforseen, yet inevitable truth.

Morgann does not discuss the means by which Shakespeare presents these characters to us, so as to make them seem real and living in our eyes. We have only, however, to look at one of his plays to perceive his method. He does not, of course, describe them—that as a dramatist he could hardly do—but he makes them, as it were, talk themselves into existence. The impression of individual character is produced by an individual way of speech; each personage possesses an idiom, a diction, a rhythm, a sort of sing-song of his own, so distinctive that, without reading their names, we can recognise each speaker by his voice. And when we look into it, we see that all our great character-creating novelists have adopted this Shakespearean method; we find it in Scott, in Jane Austen, in Thackeray, and above all in Dickens, who created hundreds of living beings, endowing each with his own inner song, his excited or drowsy twitter, his personal 'note', as distinctive as the note of a wren or chaffinch. Dickens and the other Victorians no doubt abused this enchantment, this way of making their characters sing themselves into existence; they reiterated their little tunes and catchphrases so monotonously that their successors became disgusted

with this method, and adopted the method of description and analysis instead. Is this, perhaps, the cause of that loss of character-creating power which Mrs Woolf notes in them—the reason why our novelists no longer people our imaginations with living forms? Human nature nowadays, Mr Beresford suggests, is too complex, too self-conscious, too irresolute, to be moulded into salient and definite characters like those of our older writers. But does human nature change so rapidly? Are many of us more complex, more self-conscious, more irresolute than Hamlet? And yet has not Shakespeare created in Hamlet a most unmistakable and distinct and living being? And, let us note, Hamlet is made real to us very largely by his speech-rhythms and intonations—there is, for instance, as Mr Bradley has finely noted, nothing in the play more intensely characteristic, and more unmistakably individual, than Hamlet's trick of verbal repetitions. 'Words, words, words'—'very like, very like'—'thrift, thrift, Horatio'—'except my life, except my life, except my life'—is not the very essence of Hamlet embodied in these little phrases? Could any number of pages of analysis and description have made him more living to us?

If, then, this power of conceiving, and creating, and presenting character is found in the greatest of our playwrights and novelists, and in them alone (for no really second-rate writer possesses it); if, moreover, we find it present in proportion to their greatness, and if its presence always gives enduring value to their works, is it not possible that we have found in this creative power the *sine qua non*, the quintessential quality of fiction? Is our hunt over, our hare captured, and ready to be jugged and served up at last?

I do not think so; the doctrine, which is now so fashionable, of the single essential ingredient, has always seemed to me too great a simplification of esthetic problems. Even suppose we do find a *sine qua*

y in the absence of which esthetic value is always
: say that other qualities, non-esthetic in themselves,
intrinsic art-value when they combine with the
, as it were, a kind of chemical combination?
at may be, once we think of foreign literature, we
acter-creation is not really even a *sine qua non* in
rdly more an essential element in it than portraiture
dient in the art of painting. To make hare-soup, one
irst catch one's hare; but there are many other
oup brewed in the world's kitchens. How many of
elf-subsistent beings, like Hamlet or Falstaff or

Pickwick or Mr Micawber, do we find outside of English literature? Hardly as many, I feel inclined to say, as in one play of Shakespeare, or one novel of Dickens or Jane Austen.

It would be pleasant to sit down and read through the whole of European fiction to find if this is really so; but not having leisure now for that perusal, I can only look into the phantasmagoria of memory to see what personages of foreign literature start to life at the evocation of their names. The Achilles and Agamemnon of Homer appear and speak with their individual voices; and Nausicaa is clad with an exquisite immortality. In my memory of the Greek drama I find ideal types and noble beings, but no really independent self-subsisting characters. Nor do I find them in Racine, nor in French fiction—in Stendhal or in Balzac. The truth is, I think, that this kind of creation is a special characteristic of English literature. We may find its roots perhaps in Chaucer, but it was in Shakespeare that it burst into exuberant and amazing blossom; and it is from Shakespeare that our great novelists derived their conception of it, and their method of portrayal.

Continental writers, whose ideal has on the whole been the classical one of turning events into ideas, and making them into food for the mind, have on the whole found typical personages, rather than 'characters', better and more transparent vehicles for their criticism of life—for their study of human relations and passions and circumstances. There are exceptions no doubt—there is Cervantes, who created Don Quixote; and there are the Russians, who have imitated English fiction. In our own day also there is Proust, who, as I should like to suggest to my fellow-huntsmen, has succeeded in moulding into living characters, with their own idiosyncrasies of speech, the most subtle complexities of our modern and self-conscious human nature. Nevertheless, character-creation, as we find it in English literature, is not, on the whole, an essential element in Continental fiction.

If we should attempt to take, from a classical and Continental standpoint, a general view of our English novels, might they not appear, in spite of—and even, perhaps, on account of—their swarming abundance of living characters, somewhat trivial and superficial as analyses of life? Are not our immense miscellaneous English novels rather like immense picnics and meaningless outings, in which a lot of odd people meet together in irrelevant horseplay, and then separate or pair off for no especial reason? Are not their different episodes of more importance than the whole impression they create? And have the

individual characters in them much more than a casual relation with the novel in which they happen to appear? Could not the great characters of Dickens have figured just as well in almost any other of his novels? And hasn't the power of creating independent beings in some ways embarrassed even our greatest writers? Didn't that monster of exuberance, Falstaff, pull down, like Samson, the structure of the plays in which he figured, and didn't the most consummate of English artists endanger the scheme of his great epic by making his Devil so much more alive, and so much more interesting, than his God?

'By all means,' a Continental spectator of our coursing might address us, 'by all means hunt your hare, and when you catch it and serve it up, we hope that we shall be invited to the feast. The brown hare of your meadows is a creature which, though it sometimes goes mad in March, possesses admirable and even magical properties. And certainly its antics are a source of inexhaustible amusement. But it is indigenous to England, and is scarcely to be found abroad, save in Russia, whither its breed has been imported from your shores. The game we are after, our *lièvre*, is the mountain hare; to us it seems a creature of a rarer, more quintessential and almost divine quality; and its native home is on those ranges of thought, upon those high, Muse-haunted mountains where the ancient Greeks, not unaccompanied by the Immortals, were wont to pursue the chase.'

'CHARACTER IN FICTION'

1924

40. 'Simon Pure', from a review, *Bookman* (New York)

October 1924, 193–5

'Simon Pure' was the novelist, Frank Swinnerton (b. 1884). He is reviewing Virginia Woolf's essay 'Character in Fiction' which appeared in the *Criterion* in the previous July, and which was published in the following December in the Hogarth Essay series, with the title 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown': not to be confused with the first essay of that name (see Introduction, p. 16).

Mrs Woolf also tells us a little story about two people in a railway carriage, at the same time disclaiming any attempt to illustrate her own cleverness in telling the story. Mrs Woolf does herself injustice. Her story is very clever. So are her satiric accounts of Mr Wells and Mr Bennett and Mr Galsworthy. But just as the story is principally amusing as a revelation of Mrs Woolf's cleverness, so are the satiric accounts of Mr Wells and Mr Bennett and Mr Galsworthy amusing for the same reason. That is, Mrs Woolf strikes at familiar foibles of all three writers, but she does not create convincingly the characters of Mr Wells and Mr Bennett and Mr Galsworthy. If she had been a real Georgian novelist, she would have cast aside all her details about Mr Bennett and Mr Wells and Mr Galsworthy, and would have made these three men live before us. We should have been reminded of the very character of their work. We are only so reminded because we find that Mrs Woolf's descriptions are inadequate. Mr Wells is *not*–in his stories of emotional

Majumdar, Robin (Editor); McLauren, Aden (Editor). Virginia Woolf.
London, GBR: Routledge, 1997. p 130.
http://site.ebrary.com/lib/princeton/Doc?id=10058122&ppg=147

excess—always picturing an oversanitary world. Mr Galsworthy's emotional novels are generally free from social propaganda. Mr Bennett, depicting a form of society alien from Mrs Woolf's world of aesthetic cliques, may use cumbrous machinery to establish that world in the reader's eye, but at least when he gets to business, he does stimulate the reader's imagination, which Mrs Woolf never does. Would it not be open to me to take the long—the excessively long—page of *Night and Day* and make fun of them? Somehow I believe it would. But there is no need to make fun of *Night and Day*. Mr Massingham once attempted to count the number of times the people in *Night and Day* had tea; but when he had passed two hundred he gave up the computation. He let the characters go on having their tea. But he did not remember anything about the characters themselves. I doubt if anybody could now tell us anything about the characters in *Night and Day*. The one thing about them that I now recall is that one of them once looked out of a window. I think this is significant. Mrs Woolf does not, if I may say so, think in terms of character at all. She thinks in terms of intuitions. Her story of the old lady called Mrs Brown is an instance of this. She does not allow me to realize a Mrs Brown, but she does remind me of my own attitude to people in railway carriages. That is, she indicates the vague, rambling currents of intuition which pass through the consciousness in face of railway carriage companions more than of any other class of people. She is occupied in receiving intuitions. But the creation of character is something quite different from this. It is not something picked up in railway carriages, but something generated in the imagination of the writer. Of this imagination Mrs Woolf gives no sign, either in her critical writings or in her novels. Given a person, one can speculate about his or her character—that is easy. It is the novelist's off-time job. To create character that is subsequently memorable is a different thing. One does not remember the characters in Mrs Woolf's books, because Mrs Woolf's method is the vague and speculative method of an inactive dreamer. One does remember characters in Mr Bennett's books or Mr Wells's books, or Mr Galsworthy's books, because these characters have been created, and not dreamed about. One remembers them as one remembers real people, whom one has known actively, not as casually encountered strangers about whom one has idly speculated. Do I make myself clear? Mrs Woolf, like other expositors, is again making qualities of her own defects.

There is another point. Mrs Woolf comes to the conclusion that human nature changed about 1910. She bases this information upon

Majumdar, Robin (Editor); McLauren, Aden (Editor). Virginia Woolf.
London, GBR: Routledge, 1997. p 131.
http://site.ebrary.com/lib/princeton/Doc?id=10058122&ppg=148

the character of her own cook. Strange how expert our women writers have become upon cooks and household helps. We had Rebecca West the other month being very authoritative about servants, and now it is Mrs Woolf's turn. Her cook, apparently, comes in and out of the drawing room to borrow the *Daily Herald* and to discuss a new hat. This Mrs Woolf regards as sufficient proof that human nature changed in or about 1910. If Mrs Woolf will read again the plays of Shakespeare or the novels of Fielding or Dickens, she will find that servants were quite alive in the Elizabethan era, the eighteenth century, and the nineteenth century. It may be true that the servants she remembers as a child were subdued in face of their masters and mistresses, but those perhaps were servants in large establishments, where segregation was practicable. In smaller households, such as the smaller establishments of the present day make inevitable, the servants have always been upon more friendly terms with their mistresses. Let Mrs Woolf read that great book, *Little Women*, and decipher the character of Hannah. Let her read any domestic chronicle of a family which supports only one or two servants. In each one of these she will find that servants were human beings before 1910. It is not human nature that has changed. It is Mrs Woolf who has become self conscious. She should mix with the world a little more, and learn from the lives of her comrades in the field. It is much better training for the novelist than the introspectiveness which has spun a short yarn about hypothetical Mrs Brown. As for Mrs Woolf's list, apart from Mr Lawrence, all the members of it are intellectually capable, but creatively sterile. It is not a revolutionary impulse, as she seems to think, which makes these writers so very refined and pernickety. Their trouble is that they can none of them think what the devil to write about.

'MR BENNETT and MRS BROWN' (Second Version)

30 October 1924

41. Edwin Muir, from a review, *Nation and Athenaeum*

6 December 1924, 370

Edwin Muir (1887–1959). Poet and literary critic. Leonard Woolf, who became literary editor of the *Nation* in 1923, printed one of Muir's poems, and they met and became friends. Woolf gave him some reviewing for the magazine and the Hogarth Press published his *First Poems* in 1925. A précis of the argument of 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' has been omitted from the beginning of the review.

The case is admirably stated, and it is irrefutable. But surely Mrs Woolf magnifies the strength of the Edwardian convention. It cannot be such an appalling obstacle as she makes out. Certainly, the Georgians she mentions—Mr Joyce, Mr Eliot, Mr Strachey, Mr Lawrence, and Mr Forster—are writing against the current, and that is always immensely difficult. Still, part of their difficulty—I except Mr Strachey and Mr Forster from this generalisation—is caused by the fact that they do not clearly know how they want to do what they want to do. The temporary strength of the Edwardians consisted in the fact that they knew that. This enabled them to run up their convention expeditiously. Indeed they scarcely had to run it up at all; they ordered its parts from France and from the Fabian Society, and fitted them together. The result is that, after working successfully, these have very quickly fallen

Majumdar, Robin (Editor); McLauren, Aden (Editor). Virginia Woolf.
London, GBR: Routledge, 1997. p 133.
http://site.ebrary.com/lib/princeton/Doc?id=10058122&ppg=150

asunder. The formulae were wrong: the difficulty at present is that there are no formulae which everybody will accept. And all the signs point to the probability that these will only be discovered by experiment, wasteful as that method is to the artist. Thus, the artist has to do not only his own work for the time being, but that of the critics as well, for criticism has for more than a decade been obviously of little use.

42. 'Feiron Morris', review, *Criterion*

January 1925, 326–9

The reviewer was Mrs T.S.Eliot.

'I believe,' says Mrs Woolf, in her brilliant essay—already known to readers of the *Criterion*—an essay which should arouse all the elder novelists to spring to the defence of their threatened territories—'that all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite.' Mrs Woolf proceeds to describe her encounter with the old lady in the third-class carriage, the old lady whom she labels 'Mrs Brown', and introduces us to some of 'the myriads of irrelevant and incongruous ideas' which crowded into her head as she observed Mrs Brown. Mrs Woolf makes a bold, direct challenge to controversy.

It is difficult to confute a writer of Mrs Woolf's powers of style and persuasion, especially when these powers are backed by Mrs Woolf's prestige in the art of English prose; and all the more difficult because her contrast is partly between Mr Bennett and Tolstoi, and partly between Mr Bennett and Mr Forster, Mr Lytton Strachey, Mr Joyce, and Mr Eliot. What she says about Tolstoi is so obviously true and worth saying, what she says about the other writers mentioned is such brilliant criticism, that the simple reviewer is bewildered as to what, in her remarks, is relevant to 'the art of the novel'. So we are thrown back to the point: who and what is Mrs Brown?

Mrs Woolf 's Mrs Brown is a romantic creature—the romance of the humble to the humble's betters. She is 'tragic, heroic, yet with a dash of the flighty and fantastic'. This sounds like Don Quixote. But no: Don Quixote was not picked up in a railway carriage. The first comment that comes to one's mind when one has digested Mrs Woolf 's summary of Mrs Brown is that 'there ain't no sich person.' That there *was* such a person, we know. Mrs Brown survived, panting a little at the last, until somewhere about 1913—when, and not in 1910, we believe a change occurred. Indeed, a great deal of minor Victorian fiction is based on Faith in Mrs Brown. Since 1913 it may be conceded that the shade of Mrs Brown has been seen or felt by various persons practising the art of fiction; but it cannot be disputed that Mrs Brown is no longer flesh and blood and apprehensive. She belongs to the Age of Heroes, or Myth-making Age. Not the youngest—least of all, perhaps, the youngest—of shingled heads on male or female shoulders, concerns itself now with 'incongruous or irrelevant ideas' about fellow travellers in railway trains, or sees the denizens of a bus as 'tragic, heroic, or with a dash of the flighty or fantastic'. Modern young intellectuals—and here I distinguish between the minority of really modern young intellectuals and the semi-modern majority who still think that Katherine Mansfield's stories are 'simply too marvellous for words'—refuse any longer to be filled with romantic interest in the doings and sayings of some patchwork Petroushka, pieced together out of a few possibly inaccurate and probably biased observations on which are imposed some 'fantastic or flighty' situations born of romantic day-dreams. Mrs Brown may puzzle the young people—but only as to why she was concocted. For them she is a mystery of Udolpho.

The sort of flight of imagination, the fictive Mrs Brown, in which Mrs Woolf indulges is very pleasant to make; but what, we ask, has it to do with the creation of character? And in what respect is the Mrs Brown of Mrs Woolf more 'real' than the Mrs Brown of Mr Bennett, whose reality is said to consist of a vast number of accurate 'external' facts? Mrs Woolf distinguishes sharply between the period of the novel before 1910, when Mr Bennett was still a modern novelist and servants lived in the basement, and the period of the novel since 1910, when Mr Bennett is old-fashioned and servants borrow the *Daily Herald* from their mistresses, and live all over the house. Is it unfair to ask whether the incursion of irrelevant and incongruous ideas, as well as of the *Daily Herald*, is a symptom of the period since 1910?

Is it indeed true that the genesis of a novel—which Mrs Woolf

Majumdar, Robin (Editor); McLauren, Aden (Editor). Virginia Woolf.
London, GBR: Routledge, 1997. p 135.
http://site.ebrary.com/lib/princeton/Doc?id=10058122&ppg=152

believes to be, for all novelists, including herself, the *creation of a character*—begins with the 'old lady'—that is, with some person observed externally, about whom we form 'irrelevant and incongruous ideas'? If so, it is only fresh evidence that the age of 'the novel' is ended. Is it true that Mr James Joyce—for Mrs Woolf cites him—arrived at Bloom by observations in a Dublin tram? and did Mr Eliot—for Mrs Woolf cites him also—deduce Sweeney from observations in a New York bar-room?

Now, Mrs Woolf's analysis of the method of Mr Wells, Mr Galsworthy, and Mr Bennett is not only very witty, but, we think, very sound. According to this method, if you observe accurately a vast number of the facts surrounding a character—if you observe *enough* of the facts—you reach the character itself. And this we believe to be true. We agree that this was not the method of *War and Peace*. Nevertheless, Mr Polly and Hilda Lessways are real, although not eternal, as Prince André is. But Prince André is a symbol: of the eternal reality of Death. We believe that one of the motives of the modern age is its desire to find reality—even, and especially, the most barren, elementary, stripped reality. And the age finds it through the symbolic figure. But—to modern eyes—Mrs Brown, the creature of fancy, would evaporate into thin air long before the Richmond train reached Waterloo.

In an age of machinery, an age of horrid young people who won't fall in love, and who talk in harsh staccato tones, with no nonsense about it, an ominous demon has slipped into old Mrs Brown's corner. We will call him, if he must be named, Mr Leopold Bloom; or we may call him Mr Zagreus; or we may call him Sweeney. Here are three unpleasant travelling companions in a third-class carriage, who are neither 'tragic, heroic, nor with a dash of the flighty or fantastic' in the ordinary sense; yet our young people seem to be at ease with them, and handle them with the same terrible efficiency as they do their motorcars and their dancing. They watch with calm understanding the activities of the machine-like insect, which is man, in the form of Mr Bloom, held steadily for their inspection under the microscope of Mr Joyce's intellect.

Mr Bloom is real: he might almost be called, by friends of Mrs Brown, 'photographic'—a dreadful word. But what can one hang on one's walls now? What is there, unless one keeps a lodging-house, except the photographic and the abstract? And has not modern literature solved its problem by finding the symbolic in the photograph—as Mr Bloom is both a photograph and a symbol?

But are we to accept these three nightmare figures, James Joyce,

T.S.Eliot, and Wyndham Lewis as the only representatives of modern literature? Such an idea is ludicrous. What about Proust, for instance? Proust is by no means a negligible figure to the young 'intellectuals'. They like Proust–and if they cannot read him in French they are properly grateful to Mr Scott Moncrieff. But did Proust impose upon his readers a Mrs Brown? The most interesting, real, photographic character in the whole of that immense chronicle and document of scientific and aesthetic research is Proust himself. And Proust himself cunningly leads them into every by-way of sensibility, showing them philosophies and theories of life, and above all, cultivating their self-consciousness.

Mrs Woolf has written a very able argument upon a thesis which we believe to be wrong. The argument is so clever that it is difficult to disprove the thesis: we can only wait in the hope that Mrs Woolf will disprove it herself.

Majumdar, Robin (Editor); McLauren, Aden (Editor). Virginia Woolf.
London, GBR: Routledge, 1997. p 137.
http://site.ebrary.com/lib/princeton/Doc?id=10058122&ppg=154