

THE 13th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF



ISSEI

International Society for the Study of European Ideas

in cooperation with the University of Cyprus

**The Soul of the Novel: Woolf's Concept of Character**

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Paper presented At the Workshop: Narrativity and Ethics: The Relationship of Truth and Subjectivity

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"Modernity, in whatever age it appears," says Jean-Francois Lyotard, "cannot exist without a *shattering of belief* and without *discovery* of the 'lack of reality' of reality, together with the invention of other realities."¹ The belief that was shattered by Woolf and her fellow-modernists was the belief in there being a ready-made path to truth. As a self-conscious writer, Woolf was compelled to question the "inherited conglomerate"² and the meaning of the terms that go along with it—'reality' and 'truth', art', 'form', and 'character'. Although these terms are often interchangeable for Woolf, my focus here will be on her concept of 'character'. That character is

pivotal to Woolf's aesthetics seems obvious from her early assertion that "in or about December, 1910, *human character* changed." "All human relations have shifted. . . . And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature."³

My discussion of Woolf's concept of character will address three interrelated questions: (1) why does Woolf make 'character' the architectonic principle of the novel?; (2) how does her concept of character operate in *Mrs Dalloway*; and (3) what is the ethical import of Woolf's concept of character?.

I

In her major essays Woolf insists that the novel should be reconceived as an *aesthetic* object—a dramatic-prose-poem—where the revelation of character is the outcome of aesthetic affect.

"There is not a critic alive now," she complains, "who will say that a novel is *a work of art* and that as such he will judge it." What is needed is someone who will rescue "the poor lady whom . . . we still persist in calling the art of fiction."⁴ Her aim was to establish a new "code of manners which writers and readers accept as a prelude to the more exciting intercourse of friendship" (1.334).

But to forge this new 'friendship', Woolf had to reconstruct a critical and literary history on which to ground her experiments. And what she continually emphasized was that the novel should fuse *classical drama* and *Romantic sensibility*, and replace drama by emulating its effects: "The novels which make us live imaginatively, with the whole of the body as well as the mind, produce in us the physical sensations of heat and cold, noise and silence"; they produce "an emotion which is both distinct and unique" ("Phases of Fiction," 2.71).

The primary shift in her aesthetics is to identify the formal affectivism of the novel with the *revelation of character*, while altogether demoting 'plot' or action. Throughout her literary history she denies *plot* any positive role, even in drama, while promoting *character*. Beginning with Greek tragedy, she affirms "nobody can fail to remember the plot of the *Antigone*, because

what happens is so closely bound up with the emotions of the actors that we remember the people and the plot at one and the same time" ("Notes on an Elizabethan Play," 1.56).

In Elizabethan drama (except for the works of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson), she attacks *plot* as the enemy of *character*, finding no necessary connection between "the story" and "the emotions which it has aroused," which leads her to conclude that Elizabethan drama has "no *characters*." Where plot is paramount, "the actors themselves are obliterated and emotions which . . . deserve . . . the most delicate analysis are clean sponged off the slate" (1.56-57).

Her attack on 'plot' strikes a new pitch when she turns to neoclassical drama:

Who can remember the plot when the book is shut? . . . ; a plot should put the characters on the rack and show them thus extended. But what are we to say when the plot merely teases and distorts the character? ("Congreve's Comedies," 1.77)

And the final toppling of *plot* occurs in Romantic criticism, where, following Coleridge, Woolf casts Shakespeare as the greatest Romantic *poet* who appeals not to the actions seen on the stage but to the imagination.

Yet Shakespeare, at the same time, is also Woolf's model for creating character. Novelists, she writes, should "make real thoughts and real emotions issue in real words from living lips;" they should "practise the great, the Shakespearean art, of making people reveal themselves in speech" ("Sir Walter Scott," 1.138, 143).

Stressing *character* throughout her essays, it seems to exceed the accepted meaning of the word; Woolf appears to equate *character* with the aesthetic *form* of the novel, the precise impression it leaves on the mind. But, as she insists in "Phases of Fiction," aesthetic impressions are not haphazard: "nobody reads simply by chance or without *a definite scale of values*" (2.56; emphasis added). This "definite scale of values" hinges on character and becomes the ultimate

criterion to justify her literary preferences--“The Psychologists” (James, Proust, Dostoevsky), “The Poets” (Bronte, Hardy, Tolstoy), and the precursors of the modern novel, Jane Austen and Laurence Sterne. In Austen’s novels, for example, she finds that “always the stress is laid upon *character*” (“Jane Austen,” 1.148). Speculating on how Austen's style would have evolved, Woolf describes her own ideal style: Austen, she says,

would have devised a method, clear and composed as ever, but deeper and more suggestive, for conveying not only what people say, but what they leave unsaid; not only what they are, but what life is. (1.153)

These examples underscore two central points in Woolf's aesthetics: if the novel is to become a work of art, writers must be free to determine their fictions, and if their fictional characters are to strike us as real, novelists should focus on "the dark places of psychology." "Everything is the proper stuff of fiction," she states, "every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss." And her defence of artistic freedom is captured in the famous statement: "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged", i.e., life as experienced or as reproduced in novels is not reducible to laws or facts; "life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end", i.e., the self is a function of how a person experiences life, the 'semi-transparent envelope' that surrounds it (2.106). 'Consciousness' presupposes a world, and vice versa. "I believe that all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite. I believe that all novels . . . deal with characters, and that it is to express character . . . that the form of the novel has been evolved" (1.324).

"Character" clearly has more than one meaning for her. As a critical term it conveys the uniqueness of a writer’s style as the unity of a work of imaginative prose. As a literary term it

denotes a fictional self but also general humanity; it is used as a criterion in literary history and critical history; it replaces the conventional 'plot' but performs its unifying function; it is at once the body but also the soul of the novel; its aesthetics and ethics conjoined. Woolf's multilayered meaning of the term is perhaps best conveyed by her semi-question: "Think how little we know about *character*—think how little we know about *art*" (1.320; emphasis added). Just as art entails a whole civilization, "character" for Woolf is the self-reflexive mobius strip that unites art and life.

II

Mrs Dalloway is a test case for further clarifying Woolf's concept of character and for assessing whether it successfully replaces 'plot' as the aesthetic principle of the novel.⁵ How, then, are we to make sense of this novel where so little happens and so little is said? And what has the subplot, the story of shell-shocked Septimus Warren Smith, going around London in search of medical help, got to do with Clarissa Dalloway's thoughts throughout the morning, afternoon, and evening party? After all, the two never meet in the novel, and yet by the end of it, the two stories come together in a moment of intense pathos, as though the novel could not have ended without their strange, improbable meeting.

The psychology explored in the novel can be sharply delineated with the aid of Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*,⁶ his empirical study of the two concepts that have dominated and divided aesthetic discourse from the 18th century onwards. I want to show that Woolf's notion of 'character' in fiction comes into full view through what she implicitly *adheres* to in Burke's scheme, but even more importantly, through what she implicitly *rejects* in it. Put simply, my claim is that while Woolf upholds the distinction between the opposing orders of the sublime and beautiful on the surface level of *Mrs*

Dalloway, she at the same time methodically subverts their hierarchy on the deeper level of the novel. It is this subversion, I suggest, that discloses the ethical import of her aesthetics.

Burke's *Enquiry* is based on the opposition between pain and pleasure; the *existential* is categorically opposed to the *social*, as death is to life and madness to sanity. The emotions that relate to self-preservation--danger, sickness, and above all, death--are necessarily stronger than those that relate to society. This may be summarized as a distinction between things that produce *terror* and things that produce *love*. The former are "dark and gloomy," "solid and massive," and "vast in their dimensions"; they "overwhelm our will." The latter are "light and delicate," "smooth and polished," "comparatively small" and they submit to our will. The sublime and the beautiful, Burke concludes, "are indeed ideas of a very different nature, . . . and however they may vary afterwards from the direct nature of their causes, yet these causes keep up an eternal distinction between them" (113-14).

As we begin reading *Mrs Dalloway* it is immediately evident that Clarissa Dalloway fulfills Burke's requirements of the beautiful just as Peter Walsh and Septimus Warren Smith fulfill his requirements of the sublime. Clarissa represents the social passions of sympathy, comfort and pleasure (epitomized by the party), whereas Peter and Septimus represent states of distress and terror (Peter is always armed with his pen-knife, and Septimus is suffering from shell-shock). Clarissa is a member of the social elite; Peter, acknowledged by all to be a worldly failure, and Septimus, who succumbs to madness, are among those who are excluded from the social order.

The surface action consists of people going about their everyday life, intermixed with their remembering the past and imagining the future, and the still deeper levels of sense, feeling, and emotion. There are for example the sudden shifts in mood, when moments of anger, terror, and despair alternate with moments of elation. Apart from these well-concealed mood shifts, nothing unremarkable happens in *Mrs. Dalloway* and everything leads to Clarissa's party. There are only

two unusual events on that day in the middle of June, 1923: soon after 11 o'clock when Clarissa returns home with the flowers for her party, Peter Walsh, whom she had rejected twenty years earlier, visits her unannounced, having arrived in London from India the night before; and several hours later, at 6 pm, Septimus flings himself from the window of his flat, just as Dr. Holmes arrives to take him away to an asylum. (There is one other unexpected guest, Sally Seton, Clarissa's intimate friend from the past, who arrives unannounced to the party.)

Clarissa does nothing apart from the most routine actions throughout the day and almost never addresses anyone else. And yet we know her as no one else can know her. Her character is mainly conveyed by her silent speech, which weaves scenes from the present into the past and scenes from past into the present. How, though, are Clarissa's moments, which range from the banal to the revelatory, relate to those of Peter and those of Septimus? What do their hidden stories have in common?

This question directs us to the novel's 'dark places of psychology', and it is here, in the novel's diachronic representation of experience that Burke's brilliant theory proves inadequate. This is so because by excluding danger, pain, and terror from the realm of social intercourse, Burke denies the *existential* dimension of human relationships. He *excludes* desire--"the passion which belongs to generation" (39)--from the consideration of human misery and happiness. "Men," he explains, "are at all times pretty equally disposed to the pleasures of love, because they are to be guided by reason in the time and manner of indulging them. Had any great pain arisen from the want of this satisfaction, reason . . . would find great difficulties in the performance of its office" (38). Reason, Woolf shows, indeed has "great difficulties in the performance of its office" when separated from desire, as becomes clear by her making Septimus's suicide the *mise-en-abyme* of the novel.

For it is precisely what Burke brushes aside as unimportant that is experienced by Clarissa, Peter, and Septimus as actual pain and horror. Loss of love is the substance of their solitary,

unspoken inner struggles. It is the substance too of the growing bond that draws them together, while appearing on the surface plot as mere contingency. By connecting dramatically the stories of Clarissa's and Peter's unfulfilled love with Septimus's suicide, Woolf shows loss of love as genuine pain, with *existential* rather than merely *social* consequences. And she brings the three stories together in Burke's paradigmatic setting of the beautiful: Clarissa's party.

During the party the news of a young man's death is thrust upon Clarissa by one of her guests. "Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death" (201). She leaves her guests and alone, in a little room, she plunges into her pain, "her dress flamed, her body burnt," but after a while she emerges from her meditation as a person replenished, as if cured:

A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate. . . . There was an embrace in death. (202)

Clarissa's initially shocked response to the stranger's death induces a change in her state of 'character', she feels that "Somehow it was her disaster—her disgrace" (203). But by taking to heart Septimus's death, by vicariously living through it herself, his intrusion into her world releases her of her own hidden 'other': that "thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life." Her shock gives way to its opposite, an elated sense of well-being: "Odd, incredible; she had never been so happy." What are we to make of her sudden transformation? Why is she "so happy"? "Happy" about what? What is it that Clarissa has discovered? She remembers how she had once "walked on the terrace at Bourton" and seen the moon rise in the night sky. Was it *then* that she was "so happy" or is it now, thinking of the "young man" who's killed himself? The two events blend into each other. With the final tolling of Big Ben, as Clarissa turns away from looking at the night sky, she can return to her guests, to

Peter and Sally, salvaging what has lain buried in her throughout the day, their bond of love and friendship. This imperceptible transformative moment echoes the philosopher's words: "It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics is transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetics are one)."⁷ Perhaps it is also a glimpse of that "luminous halo": Clarissa hosting the stranger and those she has grown estranged from, including her own past, by enfolding them into her present thoughts and feelings. Just as her party draws together the people and events of the entire day, her empathic response affirms that the capacity for love, in all its forms, constitutes the human and, is therefore a constituent part of what we call society.

III

What, then, is the ethical import of Woolf's concept of character? Clarissa's moments throughout the day relate her distress to its cause—her fear of death, "of time itself." Early in the novel we hear that she has always known that "it was very, very dangerous to live even one day" (11) and at the same time her life, by any external standard, is secure and comfortable. Why would it be dangerous to live even one day for a person who incarnates the "social"? It would be so only if there is nothing with which to contrast the *social*; if there is no nonsocial dimension of human existence. The causes of the sublime and the beautiful are not opposed, as they are for Burke; they coexist in all the things we associate with ordinary life. They mix and overlap; they inhere in all those things. This invokes another simple truth: "Man is by nature a social being." I can here only suggest why Woolf's rejection of the hierarchical and gendered opposition of the sublime and beautiful converges on Aristotle's down-to-earth aesthetics and ethics. Since Woolf is primarily concerned with showing her characters' dispositions and tracing their causes, only a moral theory that accommodates both *actions and feelings*, conceives of the individual as part of society, and upholds human freedom, would be adequate to it. The novel, we recall, ends with Peter's ecstatic vision of Clarissa approaching him:

What is this terror? what is this ecstasy? . . . What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?

It is Clarissa, he said.

For there she was. (213)

Like Peter, we can only behold Clarissa as an individual who embodies the spirit of life itself. It is those we sympathize with, in the real world and no less in novels—for a complex feedback system links the two—that sharpens and tests our moral sense.

Woolf's plea on behalf of "the poor lady whom . . . we still persist in calling the art of fiction" thus establishes art as a reflection on and of human reality, affirming their interdependence, with ethics as their common ground. For if there is nothing in human experience that does not carry ethical import we are all involved in saving the "poor lady", in saving life. Art, however, though it is coterminous with ethics, would cease to be art if it openly declared its moral teachings. On this matter Woolf's position appears clear: Because art recreates life and discloses human character, it reveals what philosophy, in ordering our ideas of the world, obscures. This is so because the aim of the artist is to "to kindle and illuminate" the extraordinary in the ordinary mind on an ordinary day; the aim of the philosopher is to subject the irrational to rational inquiry. Art, accordingly, configures experience and knowledge, as in the microcosm of Clarissa's party, where a whole range of moments—sublime, beautiful, philosophic and lyrical—blend and resolve themselves in a moment of tragic pathos.

By making character her central aesthetic concept, Woolf appears to be saying that "ethics and aesthetics are one," or in her own lyrical prose:

that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. . . . we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.⁸

Notes

¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?" (1982), trans. Regis Durand, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 77.

² The term was coined by Gilbert Murray in *Greek Studies* (Oxford, 1947), 66.

³ Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown," in *Collected Essays*, vol. 1, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), 320, 321; subsequent references are cited in the text.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Fiction," in *Collected Essays*, vol. 2 (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), 55; subsequent references are cited in the text.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996); subsequent references are cited in the text.

⁶ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922) (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), 6.421.

⁸ Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch from the Past" (1939), in *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), 71-72.