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An Imaginary Interview with Mrs. Woolf

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Spokesman: When you wrote your novels, who did you write them for?

VW: "A book is always written for somebody to read, and, since the patron is not merely the paymaster, but also in a very subtle and insidious way the instigator and inspirer of what is written, it is of the utmost importance that he should be a desirable man.

But who, then, is the desirable man — the patron who will cajole the best out of the writer's brain and bring to birth the most varied and vigorous progeny of which he is capable? Different ages have answered the question differently. [...] For who should we write? Fort the present supply of patrons is of unexampled and bewildering variety. There is the daily Press, the weekly Press, the monthly Press; the English public and the American public; the high-brow public and the red-blood public; all now organised self-conscious entities capable through their various mouthpieces of making their needs known and their approval or displeasure felt. Thus the writer who has been moved by the sight of the first crocus in Kensington Gardens has, before he sets pen to paper, to choose from a crowd of competitors the particular patron who suits him best. It is futile to say, 'Dismiss them all, think only of your crocus', because writing is a method of communication; and the crocus is an imperfect crocus until it has been shared."[1]

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[1]. *Common Reader I*, London: Hogarth Press, 1984, pp. 206-7.

Spk: And yourself, or perhaps we should say, writers of your generation ?

VW: "This business of patron-finding is one of the tests and trials of authorship. To know whom you write for is to know how to write. Some of the modern patron's qualities are, however, fairly plain. The writer will require at this moment, it is obvious, a patron with the book-reading habit rather than the play-going habit. Nowadays, too, he must be instructed in the literature of other times and races. But there are other qualities which our special weaknesses and tendencies demand in him. there is the question of indecency, for instance, which plagues us and puzzles us much more than it did Elizabethans. The twentieth-century patron must be immune from shock. He must distinguish infallibly between the little clod of manure which sticks to the crocus of necessity, and that which is plastered to it out of bravado. He must be a judge, too, of those social influences which inevitably play so large a part in modern literature, and be able to say which matures and fortifies, which inhibits and makes sterile. Further, there is emotion for him to pronounce on, and in no department can he do more useful work than in bracing a writer against sentimentality on the one hand and a craven fear of expressing his feeling on the other. It is worse, he will say, and perhaps more common, to be afraid of feeling than to feel too much. He will add, perhaps something about language, and point out how many words Shakespeare used and how much grammar Shakespeare violated, while we, though we keep our fingers so demurely to the black notes on the piano, have not appreciably improved upon *Anthony and Cleopatra.* And if you can forget your sex altogether, he will say, so much the better; a writer has none. But all this is by the way — elementary and disputable. The patron's prime quality is something different, only to be expressed perhaps by the use of that convenient word which cloaks so much — atmosphere. It is necessary that the patron should shed and envelop the crocus in an atmosphere which makes it appear a plant of the very highest importance, so that to misrepresent it is the one outrage not to be forgiven this side of the grave. He must make us feel that a single crocus, if it be a real crocus, is enough for him; that he does not want to be lectured, elevated, instructed, or improved; that he is sorry that he bullied Carlyle into vociferation, Tennyson into idyllics, and Ruskin into insanity; that he is now ready to efface himself or assert himself as his writers require, that he is bound to them by a more than maternal tie; that they are twins indeed, one dying if the other dies, one flourishing if the other flourishes; that the fate of literature depends upon their happy alliance — all of which proves, as we began by saying, that the choice of a patron is of the highest importance. But how to choose rightly? How to write well? Those are the questions" (208-9).

Spk: Did you ever have the contemporary literary critics in mind when you wrote?

VW: "A contemporary can scarcely fail to be struck by the fact that two critics at the same table at the same moment will pronounce completely different opinions about the same book. [...] Yet both critics are in agreement about Milton and about Keats. They display an exquisite sensibility and have undoubtedly a genuine enthusiasm. It is only when they discuss the work of contemporary writers that they inevitably come to blows. [...] It is equally disconcerting to the reader who wishes to take his bearings in the chaos of contemporary literature and to the writer who had a natural desire to know whether his own work, produced with infinite pains and in almost utter darkness, is likely to burn for ever among the fixed luminaries of English letters or, on the contrary put out the fire"(231).

Spk: But since you mention the "fixed luminaries" of English letters, perhaps we could ask your opinion of some other women novelists? Jane Austen, for instance?

VW: "Jane Austen is [...] a mistress of much deeper emotion than appears upon the surface. She stimulates us to supply what is not there. What she offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet it is composed of something that expands in the reader's mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial. Always the stress is laid upon characters. How we are made to wonder (in the abandoned novel, *The Watsons*), will Emma behave. [...] The turns and twists of the dialogue keep us on the tenterhooks of suspense. Our attention is half upon the present moment, half upon the future. And when, in the end, Emma behaves in such a way as to vindicate our highest hopes of her, we are moved as if we had been made witnesses of a matter of the highest importance. Here, indeed, in this unfinished and in the main inferior story, are all the elements of Jane Austen's greatness. It has the permanent quality of literature. Think away the surface animation the likeness to life, and there remains, to provide a deeper pleasure, an exquisite discrimination of human values. Dismiss this too from the mind and one can dwell with extreme satisfaction upon the more abstract art which, in the ballroom scene, so varies the emotions and proportions the parts that it is possible to enjoy it, as one enjoys poetry, for itself, and not as a link which carries the story this way and that"(138-9).

Spk: You admire her very much?

VW: "The balance of her gifts was singularly perfect. Among her finished novels there are no failures, and among her many chapters few that sink markedly below the level of the others. But, after all, she died at the age of forty-two. She died at the height of her powers. She was still subject to those changes which often make the final period of a writer's career the most interesting of all. Vivacious, irrepressible, gifted with an invention of great vitality, there can be no doubt that she would have written more, had she lived, and it is tempting to consider whether she would not have written differently"(143).

Spk: Differently?

VW: "She would have known more. Her sense of security would have been shaken. Her comedy would have suffered. She would have trusted less (this is already perceptible in *Persuasion*) to dialogue and more to reflection to give us a knowledge of her characters. [...] She 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. She would have stood farther away from her characters, and seen them more as a group, less as individuals. Her satire, while it played less incessantly, would have been more stringent and severe. She would have been the forerunner of Henry James and of Proust — but enough. Vain are these speculations: the most perfect artist among women, the writer whose books are immortal, died 'just as she was beginning to feel confidence in her own success'."[2]

Spk: And those other famous women novelists, the Brontës? What do you think, for example, of their use of Nature, natural phenomena, landscape, in their novels?

VW: "There is in them some untamed ferocity perpetually at war with the accepted order of things which makes them desire to create instantly rather than to observe patiently. This very ardour, rejecting half shades and other minor impediments, wings its way past the daily conduct of ordinary people and allies itself with their more inarticulate passion. It makes them poets, or, if they choose to write in prose, intolerant of its restrictions. Hence it is that both Emily and

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[2]. Ibid., p. 145 (quotations from J.E. Austen-Leigh: *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, 1870).

Charlotte are always invoking the help of nature. They both feel the need of some more powerful symbol of the vast and slumbering passions in human nature than words or actions can convey. It is with a description of a storm that Charlotte ends her finest novel *Villette*. 'The skies hang full and dark — a wrack sails from the west, the clouds cast themselves into strange forms.' So she calls in nature to describe a state of mind which should not otherwise be expressed. [...] They (the sisters) seized those aspects of the earth which were most akin to what they themselves felt or imputed to their characters, and so their storms, their moors, their lovely spaces of summer weather are not ornaments applied to decorate a dull page or display the writer's powers of observation — they carry on the motion and light up the meaning of the book"(158-9).

Spk: Its" meaning"?

VW: "The meaning of a book, which lies so often apart from what happens and what is said and consists rather in some connection which things in themselves different have had for the writer, is necessarily hard to grasp. Especially this is so when, like the Brontës, the writer is poetic, and his meaning inseparable from his language, and itself rather a mood than a particular observation. *Wuthering Heights*, is a more difficult book to understand than *Jane Eyre*, because Emily was a greater poet than Charlotte. When Charlotte wrote she said with eloquence and splendour and passion 'I love,' 'I hate,' 'I suffer,' her own experience, though more intense, is on a level with our own. But there is no 'I' in *Wuthering Heights*. There are no governesses. There are no employers. There is love, but it is not the love of men and women. Emily was inspired by some more general conception. The impulses which urged her to create was not her own suffering or her own injustice. She looked out upon a world cleft into gigantic disorder and felt within her the power to unite it in a book. That gigantic ambition is to be felt throughout the novel — a struggle, half thwarted but of superb conviction, to say something though the mouths of her characters which is not merely 'I love' or 'I hate,' but 'we the whole human race' and 'you, the eternal powers ...' the sentence remains unfinished. It is not strange that it should be so, rather it is astonishing that she can make us feel what she had it in her to say at all"(159-60).

Spk: You obviously feel great sympathy with these nineteenth-century writers. But what — if we may take the liberty of broaching a subject on which we know you have strong views — what about modern fiction?

VW: Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy [...] are materialists. It is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us, and left us with the feeling that the sooner English fiction turns its back upon them, as politely as may be, and marches, if only in the desert, the better for its soul. [...] If we fasten [...] one label on all these books, on which is one word materialists, we mean by it that they write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring.

We have to admit that we are exacting, and further, that we find it difficult to justify our discontent by explaining what it is that we exact. We frame our question differently at different times. But it reappears most persistently as we drop the finished novel on the crest of a sight — Is it worth while? What is the point of it all? Can it be that, owing to one of those little deviations which the human spirit seems to make from time to time, Mr. Bennett has come down with his magnificent apparatus for catching life just an inch or two on the wrong side? Life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worth while. It is a confession of vagueness to have to make use of such a figure as this, but we scarcely better the meaning by speaking, as critics are prone to do, of reality. Admitting the vagueness which afflicts all criticism of novels, let us hazard the opinion that for us at this moment the form of fiction most in vogue more often misses than secures the thing we seek. Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide. [...] The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a lot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour. The tyrant is obeyed; the novel is gone to a turn. But sometimes, more often as time goes by, we suspect a momentary doubt, a spasm of rebellion, as the pages fill themselves in the customary way. Is life like this? Must novels be like this?"(147-9).

Spk: And it is? Must they?

VW: "Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being 'like this.' Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions — trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and

as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling ,and not upon conventions, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailor would have it. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged, life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. It is not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other that custom would have us believe it.

It is, at any rate, in some such fashion as this that we seek to define the quality which distinguishes the work of several young writers, among whom Mr. James Joyce is the most notable, from that of their predecessors. They attempt to come closer to life, and to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves them, even if to do so they must discard most of the conventions which are commonly observed by the novelist. Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent is appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small. [...] In contrast with those whom we have called materialists, Mr. Joyce is spiritual, he is concerned at all costs to reveal the flickering of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain, and in order to preserve it he disregards with complete courage whatever seems to him adventitious, whether it be probability, or coherence, or any other of these signposts which for generations have served to support the imagination of a reader when called upon to imagine what he can neither touch nor see"(149-51).

Spk: Might we ask you to comment on the *method* of the modern novelist?

VW: "It is a mistake to stand outside examining 'methods'. Any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express, if we are writers; that brings us closer to the novelist's intention if we are readers. [...] The problem before the novelist at present, as we suppose it to have been in the past, is to

contrive means of being free to set down what he chooses. He has to have the courage to say that what interests him is no longer 'this' but 'that': out of 'that' alone must he construct his work. For the moderns 'that', the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology. At once, therefore, the accent falls a little differently; the emphasis is upon something hitherto ignored; at once a different outline of form becomes necessary, difficult for us to grasp, incomprehensible to our predecessors. [...] There is no limit to the horizon, and [...] nothing — no 'method,' no experiment, even of the wildest — is forbidden, but only falsity and pretence"(152-4).

Spk: So, if we have understood you correctly, the 'proper stuff of fiction' you mentioned just now...

VW: "'The proper stuff of fiction' does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss"(154).

Spk: So really the only criterion by which we may judge the 'rightness' of a method or the value of a subject is that all pretence and falsity should be excluded? Perhaps we should take an example, a public event — for instance, the Great War, which you lived through when you were in your early thirties. Can such terror and anguish, such violent emotions be expressed in literary form?

VW: "In the vast catastrophe of the European war our emotions had to be broken up for us, and put at an angle from us, before we could allow ourselves to feel them in poetry or fiction. The only poets who spoke to the purpose spoke in the lifelong, satiric manner of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. It was not possible for them to be direct without being clumsy; or to speak simply of emotion without being sentimental"(34).

Spk: So strongly-felt emotion can be expressed, honestly and sincerely, but perhaps not directly? It must be approached obliquely — otherwise the result will be not art but ... therapy? Would you say that the passage of time, too, can set the necessary distance between a painful experience and its successful expression in art? Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, for example...

VW: "There is an expressed emotion in the scene at the concert and in the famous talk about woman's constancy which proves not merely the biographical

fact that Jane Austen had loved, but the aesthetic fact that she was no longer afraid to say so. Experience, when it was of a serious kind, had to sink very deep, and to be thoroughly disinfected by the passage of time, before she allowed herself to deal with it in fiction. But now, in 1817, she was ready"(144).

Spk: And you have said, Charlotte Brontë in *Villette* is saying 'I love,' 'I hate,' 'I suffer.' But you also said just now that there is no 'I' in *Wuthering Heights* — no self, in other words. Yet surely the self has its importance? Montaigne, whom you admire, wrote of nothing else?

VW: "Montaigne stands out from the legions of the dead with [...] irrepressible vivacity. We can never doubt for an instant that his book was himself? He refused to teach; he refused to preach; he kept on saying that he was just like other people. All his effort was to write himself down, to communicate, to tell the truth, and that is a 'rugged road, more than it seems.' For beyond the difficulty of communicating oneself, there is the supreme difficulty of being oneself" (59).

Spk: Indeed, yes. You say in your essay "Street-haunting" something about the soul being "streaked" and "variegated." Montaigne demonstrates this to perfection. In this essay "On the Inconstancy of our Actions", he says the soul is...

VW: "'bashful, insolent; chaste, lusty; prating, silent; laborious, delicate; ingenious, heavy; melancholic, pleasant; lying, true; knowing, ignorant; liberal, covetous and prodigal' — in short, so complex, so indefinite, corresponding so little to the version which does duty for her in public, that a man might spend his life merely in trying to run her to earth. [...] By means of perpetual experiment and observation of the subtlest [Montaigne] achieved at last a miraculous adjustment of all these wayward parts that constitute the human soul. He laid hold of the beauty of the world with his fingers. He achieved happiness" (60-7).

Spk: And is this really the final aim of all such experiment and observation?

VW: "The question frames itself, 'Is pleasure the end of all?'. Whence this overwhelming interest in the nature of the soul? Why this overmastering desire to communicate with others? Is the beauty of this world enough, or is there, elsewhere, some explanation of the mystery? To this what answer can there be? There is none. There is only one more question: 'Que sais-je?'" (67-8).

Spk: Montaigne's writings teach us the value of self-knowledge and systematic doubt. But is any of this relevant to the writing of fiction?

VW: "Is the life that emerges more and more clearly as these essays reach not their end, but their suspension in full career. It is life that becomes more and more absorbing as death draws near, one's self, one's soul, every fact of existence: that one wears silk stockings summer and winter; puts water in one's wine; has one's hair cut after dinner; must have glass to drink from; has never worn spectacles; has a loud voice... [...] No fact is too little to let it slip through one's fingers, and besides the interest of facts themselves there is the strange power we have of changing facts by the force of the imagination. Observe how the soul is always casting her own lights and shadows; makes the substantial hollow and the frail substantial; fills broad daylight with dreams; is as much excited by phantoms as by reality; and in the moment of death sports with a trifle. Observe, too, her duplicity, her complexity. She hears of a friend's loss and sympathises, and yet has a bitter-sweet malicious pleasure in the sorrow of others. She believes, at the same time she does not believe. Observe her extraordinary susceptibility to impressions, especially in youth. [...] In short, the soul is all laced about with nerves and sympathies, which affect her every action, and yet, even now in 1580, no one has any clear knowledge — such cowards we are, such lovers of the smooth conventional ways — how she works or what she is except that of all things she is the most mysterious, and one's self the greatest monster and miracle in the world. '... plus je me hante et connois, plus ma difformité m'estonne, moins je m'entens en moy.' Observe, observe perpetually, and, so long as ink and paper exist, 'sans cesse et sans travail,' Montaigne will write" (66-7).

Spk: Yes, we understand. You were indeed complaining just now that 'life escapes' from the world of certain contemporaries. Close observation, than, of the self, of its fluctuating perceptions and emotions, can provide the novelist with some of the 'proper stuff' of fiction — but, presumably, all this raw material still needs to be organised into some sort of 'shape'?

VW: "In a good novel [...] everything contributes to bring the writer's conception as a whole before us" (213).

Spk: His vision?

VW: "The vision of a novelist is both complex and specialised; complex, because behind his characters and apart from them must stand something stable to which he relates them; specialised because since he is a single person with one sensibility the aspects of life in which he can believe with conviction are strictly limited" (228).

Spk: And it is this vision that unifies, creates a 'shape,' is part of the construction of the novel? As it is part, too, of the construction of poetic drama ... Elizabethan drama?

WV: "The play is poetry, we say, and the novel prose. Let us attempt to obliterate detail, and place the two before us side by side, feeling, so far as we can, the angles and edges of each, recalling each, so far as we are able, as a whole. Then at one, the prime differences emerge; the long leisurely accumulated novel; the little contracted play, the emotion all split up, dissipated and then woven together, slowly and gradually massed into a whole, in the novel; the emotion concentrated, generalised, heightened in the play. What moments of intensity, what phrases of astonishing beauty the play shot at us!

> You have oft for these two lips
> Neglected cassia or the natural sweets
> Of the spring-violet: they are not yet much withered.

With all her reality, Anna Karenina could never say

> 'You have oft for these two lips
> Neglected cassia .'

Some of the most profound of human emotions are therefore beyond her reach. The extremes of passion are not for the novelist; the perfect marriages of sense and sound are not for him; he must tame his swiftness to sluggardry; keep his eyes on the ground, not on the sky: suggest by description, not reveal by illumination. Instead of singing

> Lay a garland on my hearse
> Of the dismal yew;
> Maidens, willow branches bear;
> Say I died true,

he enumerates the chrysanthemums fading on the grave and the undertaker's men snuffing past in their four-wheelers. How then can we compare this lumbering

and lagging art with poetry? Granted all the little dexterities by which the novelist makes us know the individual and recognise the real, the dramatist goes beyond the single and the separate, shows us not Anabella in love, but love itself; not Anna Karenina throwing herself under the train, but ruin and death and the

> ... soul, like a ship in a black storm,
> [...] driven, I know not whither.

So with pardonable impatience we might exclaim as we shut our Elizabethan play. But what then is the exclamation with which we close *War and Peace*? Not one of disappointment; we are not left lamenting the superficiality, upbraiding the triviality of the novelist's art. Rather we are made more than ever aware of the inexhaustible richness of human sensibility. Here, in the play, we recognise the general; here in the novel, the particular. Here we gather all our energies into a bunch and spring. Here we extend and expand and let come slowly in from all quarters deliberate impressions, assimilated messages. The mind is so saturated with sensibility, language so inadequate to its experience, that, far from ruling off one form of literature or decreeing its inferiority to others, we complain that they are still unable to keep pace with the wealth of material, and wait impatiently the creation of what may yet be devised to liberate us of the enormous burden of the unexpressed" (53-4).

Spk: Virginia Wolf, we believe that *you* have succeeded in uniting poetry and the novel, and that in doing so you have gone some way towards liberating us from the enormous burden of the unexpressed.