

VIRGINIA WOOLF'S CRITICISM: TOWARDS THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS ON THE ART OF FICTION

RITA TEREZINHA SCHMIDT

If in her practice as a fiction writer Virginia Woolf wrested the novel form from the prison-house of prevailing rules and conventions, as a literary critic she placed herself in a position that can be defined today as revolutionary. Revolutionary in the sense that her essays, for all their courage and daring, expressed a wilful break from the dominant critical discourse of her time as far as her views on the novel were concerned. In numerous reviews and essays in which she examined either individual authors or particular literary works, Woolf revealed a deep concern with fiction and rendered her thoughts about what she conceived as being its relation to life, its scope, its form as well as about her notions of character and perspective, notions that obviously grew out of her very own fictional practice.

It is important to point out that Woolf, in no instance, attempted to inscribe her assumptions into a clear-cut set of definitions or conceptual categories. Rather, her assumptions emerge throughout her essays in a very unsystematic and, at times, imprecise form, what may disarm one seeking for a logical development, objectivity or even consistency on her part. Difficult as it may be, I will trace some of her views which, seen as integrated parts of a whole, make up what could be called Woolf's 'theory of fiction'.

It is a well-known fact that Woolf abhorred any sharp category or dogmatic approach of the novel. She herself acknowledged the danger that lay behind any theory of fiction. Her attitude towards labels and categorizations was skeptical, to say the least: they might reveal knowledge about fiction but not intimacy with it. And by

intimacy she meant not so much a pervasive analytical knowledge of its system but a deep understanding of its processes vis-à-vis what she considered its proper stuff: life. As she once wrote, "to speak of knowledge is futile. All is experiment and adventure."¹

By not considering the novel as a framework imposed on life, Woolf moved away from the traditional concept of her day, that is, a coherent, finished and unified representation of life, a concept clearly founded on the formal assumptions of modern realism. She strongly believed that the writer should be in a continuous search for new ways with which to give shape to his/her imagination, should be aware of the necessity for discovering new possibilities for the exploration of his/her territory so that his/her work would be constantly renewing itself as part of life's dynamic process. Hence, her obstinate refusal to say anything complete or that would sound as a final statement about the novel.

The novel, which Woolf considered the youngest and the most vigorous of the arts, underwent drastic changes during her lifetime, not only in terms of form and composition but also in terms of the theoretical assumptions that were raised in discussions about the genre. As a rebel against the dominant conventions of fiction writing, Woolf endeavored to stretch the concept of fiction beyond that which had been accepted by her predecessors, from Defoe to Galsworthy and Wells, for she understood that the novel could not keep on being limited and contained, any longer, in those "ill-fitting vestments" that tradition had provided it. These "vestments" included a method based on static descriptions of 'milieu' and objective registering of neatly, clear-cut visible actions. According to her, this was a fundamental failure of fiction in relation to life. She wanted to evolve a definition of fiction that would account for a reality beyond the surface of facts and events, a reality that would bring together the solid fact and its spiritual reality – in her artistic terms, granite and rainbow. When she said, in "Modern Fiction", "we are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it,"² she was really claiming for new assumptions that would definitely change the outlook of the novel and its tradition in the context of English literature and criticism.

In "Phases of Fiction", Woolf was explicit about what she viewed as some weaknesses in the tradition of fiction writing in England, though she gave credits to the accomplishments of Sterne and Henry James, for their psychological explorations, and of Jane Austen for the articulated consistency of the world of fiction and the world of human values. With a half-serious, witty, sometimes ironic tone, Woolf detected the so-called truth-tellers' proneness to degenerating into

mere fact-recorders; the romantics' refinement that emptied the novel's power of suggestion; the comedians' failure to convey intimacy due to their large-scale figures; the satirists' tendency to confine fiction within the scope of the writer's personality and the psychologists' mysticism whose concern with the intellect overpowered the capacity for feelings.³

For Woolf, these weaknesses revealed that the sense of life had escaped from fiction reducing it to an apparatus that caught life only an inch or two wide. And it was precisely this narrowness that Woolf addressed over and over in her essays. In "Phases of Fiction" she pointed out that the novel was the only form of art which sought to make us believe that it was giving a full and truthful account of life. In a way, she was not saying something completely new. In fact, Henry James in a much earlier essay, "The Art of Fiction", had affirmed that the only reason for the existence of the novel was because it tried to represent life, life without rearrangement nor compromise so that it achieved a kind of revelation, it touched truth. Yet, he never came to define what he understood by life or truth. Woolf, on the contrary, never missed the opportunity to dwell on these categories. For her, life was not only the concrete, the visible, the audible and the credible; it was both the inner and the outer, the objective and the subjective, the conscious and the unconscious, fact and vision, experience and what lay beyond experience. As she beautifully tried to capture it in the metaphor in "Modern Fiction," "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."⁴

Woolf's claim for life, spirit, truth, reality in fiction, meant a claim for an all-encompassing realism, not just the realism of presentation practiced by her contemporaries. At the center of this claim lay what she herself described as the struggle and tension between two powers: life and art. If, on the one hand, she asserted that fiction drew its sustenance from life, on the other she was inclined to affirm that fiction competed with life. Such is the notion put forth in "Phases of Fiction": life and art ran so close to each other they often collided. Here, no doubt, Woolf displayed a very complex position in relation to the status of fiction, a position that partakes of an elusive, almost impalpable dimension. She seems to be saying that the nature of fiction is incompatible with design and order, yet its very existence demands some distance from life, and this means certain kind of ordering and design.

In a sense, Woolf shared with E. M. Forster, her contemporary, some of his views presented in *Aspects of the Novel*.⁵ Forster stated

that the novel was a work of art with its own laws which were not those of daily life. Without being a formalist in the strictest sense of the word, Forster was advocating for the novel some basic principles of composition that would enhance its aesthetic qualities. Basically, he was addressing the old dialectic of form x content, whereas Woolf had in mind something larger, the very dialectic between art and life. How to balance between these two forces was what she tried to conceptualize at another moment in "Phases of Fiction":

It is the gift of style, arrangement, construction, to put us at a distance from the special life and to obliterate its features; while it is the gift of the novel to bring us into close touch with life. The two powers fight if they are brought into combination. The most complete novelist must be the novelist who can balance the two powers, so that the one enhances the other.⁶

On this account, one might understand the reasons for her dissatisfaction with Henry James' novels and, particularly, with Joyce's *Ulysses*, in "Phases of Fiction" and "Modern Fiction". In her point of view, both were unable to attain a balance between style and arrangement, and the content they intended to convey. James was too rigid in design and wearing in detail while ordering human experience, whereas Joyce was too disordered in his lifelike imitation of thought's processes.

In "The Novels of E.M. Forster", Woolf developed further the notion of balance into what she called "single vision", much like Lily Briscoe's vision in *To the Lighthouse*, which crystallizes part of Woolf's implied theory of art. Surprisingly, in this essay, Woolf's attention shifted to the pair content + craft, especially when she argued that there had to be a balance between what was objectively portrayed and what was abstractly implied. On these grounds she criticized Forster's novels, for he had not succeeded in achieving balance between a photographic picture of reality and its transformation into a transcendental image, the result of which was an elusive and confusing kind of revelation in the end. For Woolf, the singleness of vision bore the quality of making the high moment of revelation unmistakable, and this was made possible not only by contriving a conjuring trick at the critical moment of the narrative but also by choosing carefully a few facts of high relevance from the very beginning. Such is the point of view that underscored her criticism of D.H. Lawrence in "Notes on D.H. Lawrence." She detected in Lawrence's novels a continuous process of cohesion and dissolution, the result of his incapacity of bringing distinct parts/ideas into equilibrium.

In "Life and the Novelist", Woolf returned to the relationship between life and fiction, asserting that in order to turn life's raw material into fiction, the writer's task was "to take one thing and let it stand for twenty."⁷ Her position here points to the notion of selection which would be (at least this is what it seems to be implied here) at the basis of symbolism. It is important to observe, at this point, that no matter how much the notions of selection and arrangement were emphasized by Woolf, the insistency of her urge to convey "this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit", to record "the atoms as they fall upon the mind, in the order in which they fall" and "to trace the pattern however disconnected and incoherent in appearance which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness,"⁸ opens up the possibility of disorder and fragmentation in the fictional world. This contradiction was summed up in "Phases of Fiction", where she stated that the novel could amass data and could select, it could record life and could synthesize it. The tension that informs such statement is itself present in Woolf's own fictional practice.

Another recurrent notion that permeates Woolf's essays is the notion of perspective, which she conceived as a crucial element for the artist to control experience. From her point of view, object and subject have only a relative importance since "it's all a question of one's point of view."⁹ On this account, she praised Sterne whom she considered the forerunner of the moderns exactly because his angle of vision dared innovation. It enabled him to avoid the weight of exterior facts, bridging thus the gulf between outer and inner realities. She explained:

It is no use going to the guide book; we must consult our own minds; only they can tell us what is the comparative importance of a cathedral, of a donkey, and of a girl with a green satin purse.¹⁰

For Woolf, the correct perspective would avoid "the egotism of subjectivity and the dehumanization of objectivity,"¹¹ according to Woolf's critic Jane Novack. She considered the ego aggressive and domineering whereas objectivity, a disease that eventually could lead to the worshipping of solid objects in detriment of their spirituality. Basically, perspective meant adjustment to a proper scale of human values. In "Letters of Henry James", Woolf criticized sharply his point of view. His obsession with old houses and with the glamour of great names stemmed from his warped human values. The ideal perspective implied thus a moral, social, psychological, and probably rhetorical balance.

Woolf's idea of a perspective imbued with human values takes us to what she considered to be the foundation of fiction, that is,

character. Her definition of character, illustrated through an imaginary Mrs Brown in the essay "Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown", reached far greater depth than the current concept which defined character in terms of 'milieu', the material circumstances in which it was placed. The main target of her criticism was the practice of her contemporaries, Galsworthy, Bennett and Wells, who sacrificed the individual for the sake of 'reality', that is, their characters were virtually overburdened with a mass of details and grasped vis-à-vis no other world than the objective, material one. Not that the material world should be discarded altogether but that subjectivity, the character's inner life, should be presented as its counterpoint. Thus, she declared:

I believe that all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite. I believe that all novels, that is to say, deal with character, and that is to express character... not to preach doctrine, sing songs or celebrate the glories of the British Empire.¹²

Mrs Brown, the lady in the corner, embodies Woolf's ideal of character in its totality, meaning character apprehended at a moment when individual life and common life are intersected, when human nature and exterior reality partake of a self-contained whole which does not bear the weight of the authorial voice nor is subjected to the author's personality. Such ideal, in Woolf's point of view, had been attained only by Sterne and Austen whose detachment and somewhat impersonality of narration had allowed them to show an interest in character in itself, in things in themselves and, consequently, in the books themselves, the reason why their novels produce such a thorough sense of satisfaction on the readers, in the end.

Woolf's concept of character demanded a revision of the concept of fictional form. As Jean Alexander points out in *The Venture of Form in the Novels of Virginia Woolf*,¹³ the inherited forms of fiction writing could only suggest the conflicts between reality and the conventions of form, could only suggest the complexity of character and life without really raising the problematic issue of which form would be more adequate for the novelist who wanted to capture and explore, in depth, life beyond the surface, as Woolf would have it. Woolf rejected the traditional notion of form as the visual structure through which content was organized because this notion was incompatible with the vision of life the novel was supposed to convey. Though sometimes Woolf may not sound altogether consistent on this point, she was well aware of the difficulties in conceiving form without allowing for some kind of artificial framework. Only on theoretical grounds was she able

to solve these difficulties by arguing that form was the embodiment of the simplest of devices through which all novels come into existence, that is, it was a shape made out of emotions. In fact, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), she came to be very explicit about what she had meant in her essays. When she asserted that the novel was a structure leaving a shape on the mind's eye, a shape that first started with some kind of emotion, she was defining form not as something interposed between the reader and the book itself, but as the primary impulse of emotion underlying both the writing and the reading processes. Reading back her essay "On re-reading novels", we come near to understanding Woolf's uneasiness with the very word 'form', especially on discussing Percy Lubbock's definition in his book *The Craft of Fiction*, first published in 1921. Woolf claimed that the word 'form' belonged to the visual arts and that fiction derived from a different process which had nothing to do with "seeing" but with "reading". According to her point of view, any text acquired meaning only through "moments of understanding", which allowed the reader to grasp the text's insights and to realize why the story had been written. Here, she was, in fact, addressing the moment of empathy that regulates the reader's relationship with the text, with the story and feelings conveyed. It is in this context that the novel "is not form which you see, but emotion which you feel, and the more intense the writer's feelings the more exact without slip or chink its expression."¹⁴

It becomes clear that in Woolf's mind there was no room for the classical dichotomy of content and form, or even a gap between feeling and reason that her concept of fiction would not be able to come to terms with. In these seeming oppositions she saw the possibility of a continuous dialectical movement that would bring about, in the end, fusion and wholeness. Thus, she stated:

There is vision and there is expression. The two blend so perfectly that when Mr Lubbock asks us to test the form with our eyes we see nothing at all. But we feel with singular satisfaction, and since all our feelings are in keeping, they form a whole which remains in our minds as the book itself.¹⁵

While Woolf dismissed Lubbock's "visual form" and posed it in terms of an impressionistic design stemming from the writer's emotions reaching the reader's, she also acknowledged the intellectual necessity of form, something like craft or method that would enable the artist to control and order experience into the complete expression of an idea that would, ultimately, encompass a "vision of life". She put it in these terms:

... when we speak of form we mean that certain emotions have been placed in the right relations to each other; that the novelist is able to dispose these emotions and make them tell by methods which he inherits, bends to his purpose, models anew, or even invents for himself.¹⁶

In the light of this statement, we have reasons to agree with Reuben Brower in his essay "Something central which permeated: Virginia Woolf and *Mrs. Dalloway*."¹⁷ He argued that for Woolf the novel has a unique closeness of structure only slightly dependent on the story and its development. Structure is actually what is there between the lines and is only perceived by the reader in a moment of empathy. She herself asserted that "between the sentences, apart from the story, a little shape of some kind builds itself up."¹⁸ This "shape" represents Woolf's only concession to the notion of an objective pattern which controls, orders and constitutes what she called "fictional art".

Much of what we have said in relation to Woolf's assumptions on the art of fiction may have sounded repetitive. Actually, her views are so much interrelated that it is almost impossible to distinguish and isolate the terms she used to define one thing or another, though we can definitely identify certain differences and coherence of argument when she deals either with point of view, character or form. It is relevant to point out that Woolf's basic concern centered, all the way, upon the principle of balance, which should guide the artist's task of selecting and arranging the relations between the objective and the subjective, the physical and the spiritual, the outer and the inner in his/her representation or reality.

In a sense, her concern expressed a kind of dissatisfaction with the materialism that permeated the practice of fiction writing as well as the assumptions that informed the concepts of reality and character of her day. By writing about fiction, she tried to imbue it with a little more of the human spirit, tried to develop an idea of fiction as a dynamic artistic medium which, unlike any other, would capture and transfigure the totality of life.

In "Phases of Fiction", one of her most insightful and suggestive essays, Woolf sensed the changes that the novel was about to undergo in relation to the novel of the past. She welcomed these changes with optimism and regarded fiction as still in its infancy. That was probably the reason why she did not bother with encapsulating it within any theoretical formulation that would sound as such. Her assumptions transcend the boundaries of mere formalization to reach out to her

own experience as a writer who conspired against the powerful crystallizations of her culture.

NOTES

- 1 *The Waves* (New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1931) p.256.
- 2 "Modern Fiction". In: *Collected Essays*, vol II (New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1931), p.106.
- 3 The truth-tellers included Defoe, Swift, Trollope, Borrow, and W.E. Norris. The romantics were Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson and Mrs Radcliffe. The character-mongers and comedians were Dickens, Jane Austen and George Eliot. The psychologists were Henry James, in relation to whom Woolf considered Proust and Dostoevsky. The satirists included, above all, Sterne.
- 4 "Modern Fiction". In: *Collected Essays*, vol II, p.106.
- 5 England, Middlesex, 1963.
- 6 "Phases of Fiction". In: *Collected Essays*, vol II, p.101.
- 7 "Life and the Novelist". In: *Collected Essays*, vol II, p.135.
- 8 "Modern Fiction". In: *Collected Essays*, vol II, p.106.
- 9 "Sterne". In: *Collected Essays*, vol II, p.97.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p.97.
- 11 *The Razor Edge of Balance* (Florida, University of Miami Press, 1975), p.63.
- 12 "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown". In: *Collected Essays*, vol I, p.324.
- 13 London. Kennekat Press, 1974.
- 14 "On Re-Reading Novels". In: *Collected Essays*, vol II, p.126.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 In: *Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Claire Sprague, ed. (New Jersey, Prentice Hall Inc., 1971).
- 18 "The Anatomy of Fiction". In: *Collected Essays*, vol II, p.137.

