

Virginia Woolf, Nathalie Sarraute, and Mary McCarthy: Three Approaches to Character in Modern Fiction

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In the writings of Virginia Woolf, Nathalie Sarraute, and Mary McCarthy we find three disparate views of character and its relation to the novel, views which are particularly noteworthy since they reflect important trends of the times—leading, in the case of Woolf and Sarraute, to very different results from those originally intended.

The first quarter of this century saw a radical shift in the approach to character, which was now described from within rather than from without; and Virginia Woolf was one of those who helped bring this about. Among the many reasons for the shift were an increasing tendency to view personality as fluid rather than fixed, a growing interest in the complexities of consciousness, and a post-Dostoevskian interest in the unconscious. No longer could the protagonist be defined in terms of what he wore, where he lived, or what he owned. Nor could he be defined solely in terms of his conscious behavior, since his visible self represented merely the tip of the iceberg. For Virginia Woolf and her contemporaries, the objective approach of the Bennetts and the Balzacs had lost its validity.

Virginia Woolf was intrigued by the complexities of a consciousness bombarded daily by "a myriad impressions," "an incessant shower of innumerable atoms," and she defined her characters in terms of the myriad, conflicting impressions they received. Thus, in "Modern Fiction," she rejected the technique of Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy precisely because they failed to render these impressions. "Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall," she urged, "let us trace the pattern, *however disconnected and incoherent in appearance*, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness."¹

Ultimately, Virginia Woolf believed that no one can really know another. First of all, because people are by nature contradictory and ambiguous. We may attempt to define them by their attitudes, their actions and reactions, but these change according to the moment and the mood. One's viewpoint, also. One moment, for example, Lily Briscoe admires Mr. Ramsey as the greatest man she has ever known, but a moment later she finds him petty, egotistical, and demanding. And who is to say whether it is his behavior that has changed, or her mood, or both? Since neither the observer nor the observed remains fixed, it is impossible to say that one is this or that. Thus, despite her intuitive understanding of people (or because of it), Mrs. Dalloway "would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that."²

And beyond one's visible self, with its contradictions and ambiguities, lies a self even more fluid and unfathomable. As Mrs. Ramsey observed, "One after another, she, Lily, Augustus Carmichael, must feel, our apparitions, the things you know us by, are simply childish. Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you know us by."³

In May 1924, Virginia Woolf was asked to speak on character in modern fiction and the result was "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," which contains her most detailed statement on the subject, as well as her most telling criticism of her predecessors, Bennett, Wells, and Galsworthy. She agrees with Bennett that the basis of good fiction is the creation of character and acknowledges her own belief "that men and women write novels because they are lured on to create some character which has . . . imposed itself upon them." In fact she goes so far as to say that "all novels . . . deal with character, and that it is to express character . . . that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved."⁴ But she questions what is meant by "character" in fiction, and points out that "Mrs. Brown," the enigmatic old lady sitting in the opposite corner of the railway carriage, would impress everyone differently, according to his age and the country (i.e. the culture) he was born in. For example, an English writer would emphasize her individual quirks and make the old lady an eccentric. A French writer would give a more abstract view, ignoring her individual mannerisms and making her more representative of human nature in general. And a Russian would reveal her soul.

Going one step further, Mrs. Woolf imagines the way Mrs. Brown would be handled by Mr. Wells, Mr. Galsworthy, and Mr. Bennett. Mr. Wells, noting her poor dress, her harassed state, her apparent lack of education, would immediately begin constructing a Utopia wherein such women do not exist, and become so involved in making her what she ought to be that he would fail to see her as she is. Mr. Galsworthy would see her as a discarded product of the factory system and launch an attack on working conditions. And Mr. Bennett would take an inventory of the carriage, note Mrs. Brown's attire, her mended gloves, determine her social rank, and place her, at length, in some mortgaged home at Datchet. Mr. Bennett, charges Mrs. Woolf, is trying to make us believe that because he has constructed a house, there must be someone living in it, forgetting that novels are primarily about people and only secondarily about the houses they live in.

None of the three will have caught Mrs. Brown. For a novel to survive, the characters must be real, said Mr. Bennett, but what is meant by "real"? asks Mrs. Woolf. A character that seems real to one person, or one age, may seem very unreal to another. And for the Edwardians reality was based upon property—upon externals. Not so for Virginia Woolf, who had a very different concept of reality and a very different concept of character. It was the inner reality that she was concerned with, and to render that one must capture the myriad impressions and conflicting attitudes that one experiences *simultaneously*—not successively, in an orderly progression. In a letter to the French painter Jacques Raverat (October 3, 1924), Virginia Woolf attacked the oversimplified, straight-line approach of Bennett, Galsworthy, and their contemporaries as the "falsity of the past," insisting that "people don't and never did feel or think or dream for a second in that way; but all over the place in your way."⁵

But the attempt to capture the myriad impressions of the moment resulted inevitably in a novel in which the characters do not so much act as react, internally: a novel of sensibility. Even more devastating in its effect on the novel was her belief that personal identity is an illusion—a necessary illusion, but an illusion nonetheless. In reality, thought Woolf, one is part of the general mass of humanity, one of the waves that emerge, separate and distinct for a time, then dissolve into the sea mass again. "We come up again differently, for ever and ever," says Bernard in *The Waves*. And not only does one merge with the general mass when the little business of "being" is over, there is an

overflow of one person into another, a merging of identities among the living. "I am not one person only," Bernard says repeatedly. "I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am—Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis: or how to distinguish my life from theirs."⁶ For some, like Rhoda, this overflow of personalities, this mingling and merging is unbearable. On the one hand, her fragile illusion is threatened by stronger egos that would dominate her; and on the other, by the void, the nothingness waiting to absorb one. And because she cannot maintain the illusion of selfhood in the face of the void and the overpowering egos around her, she is unable to survive.

It is ironic that a writer who believed so firmly in the importance of character should have contributed so much to its destruction; but, unwittingly, Virginia Woolf did just that. For a character to survive, it must act, not merely react. Yet in the modern novel of sensibility, as Mary McCarthy rightly charges, nothing happens: "The shimmer of consciousness occupies the whole field of vision. Happenings are broken down into tiny discrete sensory impressions, recalling pointillism or the treatment of light in Monet."⁷ Character is fragmented as well. E. M. Forster complained that Virginia Woolf rarely created characters that could be remembered on their own account, and many critics, including Arnold Bennett, agreed. "People, like Arnold Bennett, say I can't create, or didn't in *Jacob's Room*, characters that survive," she admitted in her diary, June 19, 1923. "My answer is—but I leave that to the *Nation*: it's only the old argument that character is dissipated into shreds now; the old post-Dostoevsky argument."⁸

By emphasizing the disparate, simultaneous nature of impressions and the fluidity and interchangeability of human personalities, Virginia Woolf helped pave the way for that final dissolution of character which has become a trademark of the New French Novel—nowhere better demonstrated than in the writings of Nathalie Sarraute, one of its most vocal practitioners. To a complaint that *she* fails to create memorable characters, Sarraute would reply, "Good!" For that is what she most wants to avoid: anything that might remotely be said to have a "personality," or a life of its own.

"Who today," she asks in "Conversation and Sub-conversation," "would dream of taking seriously, or even reading, the articles that Virginia Woolf wrote, shortly after the First World War, on the art of the novel? Their naive confidence, their innocence of another age, would only elicit a smile." Times have changed; for one thing, the moderns have shifted the primary interest in the novel from character and plot, or manners and customs, to "the revelation of a new psychological subject matter."⁹ But neither Proust nor Joyce went far enough, or probed deeply enough, says Sarraute. The people we know may *appear* to have a finished, whole personality, she argues in *Portrait of a Man Unknown*, but this is merely an illusion which we maintain as a matter of convenience, or convention. Beneath the polished surface lies one's true self, fluid and amorphous, perpetually dissolving into a series of impulses and sensations.

Wishing to get to one's *real* personality, Sarraute determined to explore the realm *beneath* the interior monologue, a region on the threshold of consciousness, where innumerable images, sentiments, and impulses jostle and collide—psychological movements which cannot be perceived directly by the conscious mind but which nevertheless affect our actions and our words. To simulate these movements (or "tropisms," as she calls them elsewhere), she developed her famous "sub-conversation," which she conceives of as taking place on the frontiers of consciousness—actual dialogue being merely the *outward* continuation of subterranean actions and sensations which cloak them-

selves in words. Hence, in the Sarraute novel, character is neither essential nor desirable. It is merely a prop for the psychological movements she wishes to study. Beyond that, as she freely admits, character holds no interest for her. She welcomes the depersonalization of the hero in current fiction as proof of the increased sophistication of writer and reader and considers the process of depersonalization similar to that which has already occurred in painting: ". . . the psychological element, like the pictorial element, is beginning to free itself imperceptibly from the object of which it was an integral part. It is tending to become self-sufficient and, in so far as possible, to do without exterior support." As she sees it, the purpose of the experimental novelist is to further that end, to make the psychological element as self-sufficient as possible. "And since what the characters gain in the way of facile vitality and plausibility is balanced by a loss of fundamental truth in the psychological states for which they serve as props, [the reader] must be kept from allowing his attention to wander or be absorbed by the characters."¹⁰ In fact, she criticizes Proust because, no matter how many fragments he examines from the "subsoil" of his characters, the fragments unite to form a coherent whole, a recognizable type, the moment the book is closed.¹¹

It is difficult to imagine anyone more directly opposed to Arnold Bennett and his views, and yet, in her attempt to banish character from the novel, Sarraute may have done more for its restoration than Virginia Woolf, who sought to preserve it. For, if they do nothing else, Sarraute's works show how essential character is to the novel and how impossible it is to make the psychological elements "self-sufficient."

Sarraute's first attempt to put theory into practice was *Tropisms*, originally published in 1939, a book which, according to the author, contains *in nuce* all the raw material of her later works: a series of moments in which those subterranean movements she calls "Tropisms" occur, "dramatic actions, hiding beneath the most commonplace conversations, the most everyday gestures, and constantly emerging to the surface of the appearances that both conceal and reveal them."¹² This is what she *intended* to portray; the actual result, however, is another matter: sometimes a simple description of the inner feelings and psychological attitude of her nameless "prop." For example, the anonymous male in sketch II who feels obliged to play the game with the opposite sex, to pretend to be something he is not, to be submissive, retiring, to agree with their pronouncements, lest something violent, something unexpected occur. "It seemed to him that then, in a sudden surge of action, of power, with immense strength, he would shake them like old soiled rags, would wring them, tear them, destroy them completely. But he also knew that this was probably a false impression. Before he would have time to leap at them—with that sure instinct, that instinct for defense, that easy vitality that constituted their disturbing force, they would turn on him and, all at once, he did not know how, they would knock him senseless" (pp. 5-6).

Many of the sketches offer psychographs of universal types, as in VI, which describes the domineering wife and mother who manipulates her family in the name of "things," her instrument for control and defeat. "When you lived with her, you were a prisoner of things, a cringing slave burdened with them, dull and dreary, continually being spied upon, tracked down by them. Things. Objects. Bells that rang. Things that should not be neglected. People who should not be kept waiting. She used them like a pack of hounds that she kept turning on them: 'There's the bell! There's the bell! Hurry, quick, quick, somebody is waiting for you'" (pp. 15-16).

Often, her technique comes perilously close to a kind of psychological impressionism, such as she condemned in Woolf and Proust. For example, sketch X, describing the housewives, their faces "stiff with a sort of inner tension," gathering at tearooms in the afternoon: "And they talked and talked, repeating the same things, going over them, then going over them again, from one side then from the other, kneading them, continually rolling between their fingers this unsatisfactory, mean substance that they had abstracted from their lives (what they called 'life,' their domain), kneading it, pulling it, rolling it until it ceased to form anything between their fingers but a little pile, a little grey pellet" (p. 27).

Tropisms not only contains the essence of Sarraute's later work, it also demonstrates vividly the limitations of her technique and the impossibility of separating the psychological element from its exterior support, or of finding equivalent images to express the inexpressible. In *Portrait of a Man Unknown*, *Martereau*, and *The Planetarium*, we find her using less abstract characters and at least some semblance of a plot, but, as the narrator of *Martereau* carefully explains, the attitudes and reactions he has described were actually "expressed not in so many words, of course, as I am obliged to do now for lack of other means, not with real words like the ones we articulate distinctively out loud or in our thoughts, but suggested rather by certain sorts of very rapid signs" which he has attempted to translate.¹³

And in *The Golden Fruits* and *Between Life and Death* Sarraute returns to the goals, and the limitations, originally found in *Tropisms*, both novels presenting universalized types (the reader, the critic, the writer) which serve as props for the subterranean movements Sarraute attempts to record. One begins, says the anonymous writer in *Between Life and Death*, by setting down words, repeating them countless times until at last what emerges "is neither an image, nor a word, nor a tone, nor any sound . . . a movement rather, a brief flexing of muscles, leaps, grovelings, recoilings, gropings. . . ." ¹⁴ One is immediately reminded of a similar attempt by Gertrude Stein, equally futile ("Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose."), to make the word reach beyond the cognitive to precognitive levels.

In her "tropisms" and "sub-conversations" Nathalie Sarraute pushes the fragmented personality and the fragmented vision to their ultimate limits, proving how impossible it is to create a *novel* without a character of sorts. And her works remind us afresh that while universal types may be good subjects for scientific analysis, they do not make good subjects for fiction.

That Sarraute's primary interest is that of the scientist rather than the artist is indicated by her constant reference to her own works as "research." But, ironically, it is as research that they have the least claim to validity, relying as they do upon an extremely *subjective* interpretation of the region between conversation and subconversation. Indeed, the subjective excesses of writers like Sarraute have helped pave the way for the return to facts which we find in writers like Mary McCarthy: concrete fact, the original basis of Arnold Bennett's characters, and the original subject of Virginia Woolf's attack.

In "The Fact in Fiction," Mary McCarthy states categorically that "The distinctive mark of the novel is its concern with the actual world, the world of fact, of the verifiable, of figures, even, and statistics." Take *Moby Dick*, the

works of Tolstoy, Jane Austen, says McCarthy; or the early novels, which all pretended to be factual reports. And the most essential facts, she insists, are the social ones. The voice of the narrator must be the voice of the neighbor relating gossip. "That is the trouble with the art-novel (most of Virginia Woolf, for instance); it does not stoop to gossip."¹⁵ But gossip can only come from a small, comprehensible, finite world. The problem for the novel today, thinks McCarthy, is that the present world has grown too big and terrible to be believable, or knowable. It is no longer possible to know a complete society. Hence the modern writer lacks the social range of the masters.

McCarthy and Sarraute agree as to the efficacy of the first person viewpoint and the modern reader's demand for veracity, for fact. But they do not agree on the kind of fact. Emphasizing as she does the gossipy nature of the novel, McCarthy of necessity places a value on characterization which Sarraute does not. In "Characters in Fiction," McCarthy notes with regret the fading sense of character in the novel, which she considers the result of technological progress and experiments concerned either with the recording of sensibility (Woolf, Mansfield, Forster, etc.), or the recording of sensation (Hemingway and his imitators). Unfortunately, says McCarthy, the effect of the novel of sensibility and the novel of sensation is the same; both abolish the social aspect and annihilate the sense of character. "In violence we forget who we are, just as we forget who we are when engaged in sheer perception." Thus "the perambulating sensibility of Mrs. Dalloway . . . cannot fix for us Mrs. Dalloway as a person; she remains a palpitant organ, like the heroine of a pornographic novel."¹⁶

Significantly, McCarthy defends the interior monologue (which Sarraute dismissed), seeing it as the one modern technique open to the novelist who is interested in character, because at base it is a form of mimicry—and to mimic is to imitate something *real*. "A sustained power of mimicry is the secret of all creators of character; Joyce had it while Virginia Woolf, say, did not. That is why Joyce was able to give shape and body . . . to the senseless data of consciousness."¹⁷

The trouble with our recent novelists, observes McCarthy, is that they get carried away by the mechanics of imitation (see Salinger and Updike), drawing disproportionate attention to the technique itself. Also, she questions the validity of describing a character from the inside, pretending to *be* rather than *see* Mrs. Micawber—a technique employed in most modern fiction, including her own book *The Groves of Academe*. What has happened, she suggests, is a reversal of subject and object in which the author tries to show the object as subject—an existential impossibility which "cannot be resolved by technical virtuosity." When the author does manage to create a Benjy, a Jason, a Molly, or a Mr. Bloom, it is because the character is "more or less 'successful' in exactly the old sense, more or less 'realized,' concrete, objectively existent." Even more important, what makes its existence real is an emphasis on the changelessness of character, rather than its fluidity. This changelessness, argues McCarthy, is the essence of the comic character, who is always more memorable, more "real" to us than the hero who must grow and change. (For example, Mr. Micawber as opposed to David Copperfield, Molly Bloom as opposed to Stephen Dedalus.) "Real characterization," she thinks, "is seldom accomplished outside of comedy or without the fixative of comedy; the stubborn pride of Mr. Darcy, the prejudice of Elizabeth, the headstrongness of Emma."¹⁸

Though McCarthy insists that there is no ignoring our technological advances, no turning back to the objectivity of Tolstoy, it would seem that she is turning at least in the direction of Tolstoy, toward characters that are objectively as well as subjectively presented. Certainly her novels and critical works represent a reaction to the subjective excesses perpetrated in the name of "objectivity" by writers like Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet. And in the rediscovery of the changelessness of human nature and the importance of the social world of the novel, McCarthy's writings suggest that one *can* utilize modern technique without necessarily sacrificing that sense of character which both McCarthy and Woolf recognize as elemental to the novel.

What we have witnessed in the experiments of Sarraute and other practitioners of the New French Novel is a departure from the novel to another form; hopefully, what we see foreshadowed in the fiction and the critical writing of McCarthy is a return. The concept of personality may be an illusion, but it is an illusion necessary not only to the survival of the self but, as writers like Woolf and Sarraute have shown all too clearly, necessary to the survival of the novel as well.

At the end of "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Virginia Woolf predicted that "we are trembling on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature. But it can only be reached if we are determined never, never to desert Mrs. Brown."¹⁹ That the great age has not been reached, in England or elsewhere, is perhaps because we did desert her. The one certainty is that if the novel is to survive as an art form, there will have to be *some* kind of return to an objectively identifiable Mrs. Brown.

NOTES

¹See Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," in *The Common Reader: First and Second Series in One Volume* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), pp. 212, 213. Italics mine.

²Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1925), p. 11.

³Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Random House, 1937), p. 96.

⁴See "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," in *Collected Essays*, I (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1966), pp. 319, 324.

⁵Quoted by Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, II (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1972), pp. 106-107.

⁶Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1931), pp. 114, 276.

⁷Mary McCarthy, "Characters in Fiction," in *On the Contrary: Articles of Belief, 1946-1961* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1961), p. 279.

⁸*A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1954), p. 56.

⁹See Nathalie Sarraute "Conversation and Sub-conversation," in *The Age of Suspicion: Essays on the Novel*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Braziller, 1963), pp. 77, 89.

¹⁰"The Age of Suspicion," in *Age*, pp. 68-69.

¹¹See "Conversation and Sub-conversation," in *Age*, pp. 79-80.

¹²Foreword to *Tropisms*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Braziller, 1967), p. vii. Subsequent references in text.

¹³Nathalie Sarraute, *Martereau*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Braziller, 1959), p. 25.

¹⁴Nathalie Sarraute, *Between Life and Death*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Braziller, 1969), p. 173. Ellipses in text.

¹⁵Mary McCarthy, "The Fact in Fiction," pp. 250, 265.

¹⁶Mary McCarthy, "Characters in Fiction," in *On the Contrary*, pp. 276, 277.

¹⁷Mary McCarthy, "Characters in Fiction," p. 280.

¹⁸Mary McCarthy, "Characters in Fiction," pp. 292, 288.

¹⁹Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays*, I, p. 337.