tions of innovative fiction. *Alternate Worlds* is an excellent map of the geography of antirealist American writing.

Stella McNichol
VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE POETRY OF FICTION
London: Routledge, 1990. Pp. 180
Reviewed by Annis Pratt

While reading this latest book from England about Virginia Woolf, having previously reviewed Jane Marcus's *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant* and Louise DeSalvo's *Virginia Woolf : The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work* for the *International Fiction Review*, I felt a certain dizziness, as if I were falling down a well. Stella McNichol provides lucidly written readings helpful to someone puzzling through Woolf's fiction for the first time. I have no problem with her premise that "Virginia Woolf is a poet who used prose fiction as her medium," or with her explications of Woolf's novels in terms of poetic structures and rhythms. I encourage my own students to follow Woolf's advice to the common reader to read imaginatively and experientially, so I ought not object to still another one-chapter one-novel personal reading.

As much as I sympathize with McNichol's desire not to interrupt the flow of her analysis by excessive footnoting, I can hardly agree with the book-jacket's assertion that this "will be of value to the serious Woolf scholar." In North-American literary criticism one takes into account all previous work on an author. English literary studies insist on this less strongly, which may explain why McNichol's bibliography contains very few books written since the 1970s, and far more articles from the sixties and even the fifties than examples of more recent scholarship.

I am disturbed by McNichol's book because, like several British authors I have recently reviewed, she prides herself on avoiding "topics outside the immediate scope of my study" to produce a strictly formalist reading. This deliberate overlooking of the historical and personal context of the novels arises from her preference for a purely aesthetic Woolf, and results in readings disturbingly like those of the forties and fifties in their lack of reference to her gender or politics. In McNichol's readings, Woolf's experimental innovations are elements in her poetic style, without mention even as contrast to the many recent analyses of the intersection between her linguistic explorations and her radical commentaries. To provide but one example of the dated results of positing a purely aesthetic Woolf in the 1980s, McNichol's citations from Woolf's diaries in her treatment of *To the Lighthouse* are all from *A Writer's Diary*, which Leonard Woolf selectively abridged to make it less personal than aesthetic, rather than from the unabridged diaries which so richly illustrate the intersection of the personal, political, and formal elements of Woolf's work.

But shouldn't I accept the book on its merits? Does everything written about Woolf have to deal with her gender and politics? I am worried about the

frightening consequences for the English public of reading Woolf in purely formal terms, an approach which constitutes, in itself, a political position. I feel like I am falling into a well when I read an entirely aesthetic Woolf criticism because DeSalvo, Marcus, and many others have told me that the hole in the ground lurks just there and that Woolf is trying to warn me about it while the premise that the well is a mere literary invention is likely to tumble those who know no better right into it. Critical antipathy to the psychosocial dimension of Woolf's fiction makes me empathize with what Freud's patients must have felt like when their Viennese fathers rejected his findings about real occurrences of incest. For how many Viennese daughters did analyzing their abuse as mere "fantasy" spell lifelong trauma, and how many students and common readers in England will fall straight into its patriarchal wells if they are taught to read Woolf's detailed, passionate warnings as merely poetical?

Steven Cohan and Linda M. Shires
TELLING STORIES: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVE FICTION
New York: Routledge, 1988. Pp. 197. $12.95
Reviewed by Jerry A. Varsava

Telling Stories offers another retelling of the story of structuralist narrative theory. The first chapter appropriates Saussurean language theory though it endorses at the same time two well-known criticisms of the latter's position--Volosinov's regarding Saussure's neglect of language's diachronic aspects, and Derrida's on Saussurean phonocentrism. In the second chapter, the authors build on Jakobson's insights into metaphor and metonymy to advance a taxonomy of narrative play. To Jakobson's relations of similarity and contiguity are added relations of opposition. The discussions of language and tropes in the opening chapters are methodical and clear, and provide a useful general introduction to the central tenets of structuralist narrative theory. However, the readings suffer in some measure from excessive acquiescence to these same tenets, from a reluctance to question their viability and to consider that of other theories of narrative. While an eclecticism does emerge later, notably in Chapters 5 and 6--moving *Telling Stories* in the direction of poststructuralism--this eclecticism is not apparent here nor does it subsequently offer a metacritique of structuralism itself.

Chapter 3 analyzes plot structure. It is most stimulating when it dares to go beyond the *merely* theoretical to relate strategies of plot configuration to such social themes as gender politics and the moral implications of the latter. Chapter 4 looks at narration, at its various components and modalities. As is often the case with structuralism, the accretion of categories and analytical constructs in these chapters seems almost an end in itself with the relevance of the taxonomies more assumed than proven. While it is clearly useful to name the constitutive elements of plot and narration, the usefulness lies not in the naming process itself but in the new lexicon's capacity to identify the values and priorities at play in the text. Cohan and Shires would certainly agree with this claim, for they admit that narrative structure is not merely the function of