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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly explores the related enterprises that assisted Virginia Woolf in her effort to re-form the English novel to include, not only the deeds, but the thoughts of her characters. Among these enterprises were Woolf's diaries, which she utilized to practice writing, work out her writing philosophy, and collect observations which would be refined and later included in her novels and short stories. Woolf, who had little formal education, read widely and extensively; she viewed reading thoughtfully as laying the groundwork for writing well and vice versa. Woolf's ability to read critically eventually led to her first publication, a book review. She continued to write essays for the rest of her life, although she always viewed her non-fiction writing as secondary to her novels. Woolf and her husband Leonard also founded a publishing company, the Hogarth Press. The Press not only published Woolf's non-fiction and fiction-writing, beginning with her third novel ("Jacob's Room"), but also published the innovative works of other authors. In addition to Woolf's diaries, reading, non-fiction writing, and publishing activities, she also wrote a series of short stories or sketches experimenting with form and perspective. It was the skills and strategies developed during her writing apprenticeship and the techniques devised in her experimental sketches that Woolf relied on to write her experimental novels beginning with "Jacob's Room," Woolf's first experimental novel. (Contains 23 references.) (Author/NKA)

The Cognitive Evolution of Novelist Virginia Woolf:

The Journey to Jacob's Room, Her First Experimental Novel

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NOTE: Entries from Virginia Woolf's early journals (1897-1909), diaries (1915-1930) and letters (1888-1941) are from volumes edited by Leaska (1990); A. O. Bell (1977; 1978); and Nicolson and Trautmann (1975; 1976), respectively. To avoid repeated lengthy citations in the text, references to the early journals are designated "EJ;" references to the diaries are followed by "D" and the volume number; and references to the letters are followed by "L" and the volume number. Where exact quotations from the journals, diaries, or letters are utilized, the date and page number are included as part of the citations. Many of the volumes referred to utilize English spellings (e.g., mould instead of mold) and retain Woolf's writing idiosyncrasies such as the omission of apostrophes, capitalization, underlining, quotation marks around titles, and the use of ampersands instead of "and." In this paper, the spellings have been Americanized, apostrophes and punctuation have been added where appropriate, and ampersands have been converted to "and." In addition, Woolf is referred to by her married name throughout, although prior to her marriage in 1912 to Leonard Woolf her name was Virginia Stephen; Virginia Woolf's works are cited as "Woolf" while Leonard Woolf's works are cited as "L. Woolf."

Abstract

The present paper paper briefly explores the related enterprises that assisted Virginia Woolf in her effort to re-form the English novel to include, not only the deeds, but the thoughts of her characters. Among these enterprises were Woolf's diaries, which she utilized to practice writing, work out her writing philosophy, and collect observations which would be refined and later included in her novels and short stories. Woolf, who had little formal education, read widely and extensively; she viewed reading thoughtfully as laying the groundwork for writing well and vice versa. Woolf's ability to read critically eventually led to her first publication, a book review. She continued to write essays for the rest of her life, although she always viewed her non-fiction writing as secondary to her novels. Woolf and her husband, Leonard Woolf, also founded a publishing company, the Hogarth Press. The Press not only published Woolf's fiction and non-fiction writing beginning with her third novel but also published the innovative works of other authors. In addition to Woolf's diaries, reading, non-fiction writing, and publishing activities, she, further, wrote a series of short stories or sketches experimenting with form and perspective. It was the skills and strategies developed during her writing apprenticeship and the techniques devised in her experimental sketches that Woolf relied on to write her experimental novels beginning with Jacob's Room, Woolf's third novel and first experimental novel.

The Cognitive Evolution of Novelist Virginia Woolf:

The Journey to Jacob's Room, Her First Experimental Novel

In the present paper, we will briefly examine some aspects of the life and work of novelist Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), focusing on the activities that led to a breakthrough in her work. In 1922 when Virginia Woolf was 40 years of age, Jacob's Room was published. This, Woolf's first novel to break with traditional form, was considered by Woolf and others to mark the beginning of her significant departure from the realism of the typical early twentieth century English novel (D2; Baldwin, 1989; Bennett, 1945; Eagle, 1970; Forster, quoted in Noble, 1972). The simplest explanation for the etiology of Jacob's Room is that Virginia Woolf devised a stream-of-consciousness approach in this, her third novel, as a result of familiarity with the earlier stream-of-consciousness novels of Dostoevsky, Joyce, and Richardson. But the classical scenario of influences disregards the well-documented evolution of Woolf's writing ambitions and practices.

Virginia Woolf nee Stephen grew up in a household that regularly entertained the English intellectual aristocracy (e.g., George Meredith, Henry James, Thomas Hardy, Alfred Lord Tennyson, George Eliot) and in a family that counted a number of artists, writers, and intellectuals among its ancestors (Alexander, 1992; Annan, 1984; Q. Bell, 1972). For the Stephens, writing was "the family business" (Dunn, 1990, p. 29) and Woolf decided as a young child that she would be some kind of writer (EJ; Annan, 1984; Q. Bell, 1972). Her earliest compositions were oral stories for her sister and two brothers at bedtime and during daily constitutionals in Kensington Gardens during the winter months (Dunn, 1990; Leaska, 1990; Rosenthal, 1979). Her first formal writing appeared in the Hyde Park Gate News, a household newspaper on which her older brother collaborated when he was home from boarding school. The first issue of this newspaper appeared in April of 1891, shortly after Woolf's ninth birthday, and the last surviving issue dates to January of 1895, just days before her mother's death. The earliest writing that survives the period subsequent to Woolf's recovery from the breakdown that followed her mother's death is in the form of correspondence and private journal entries.

Woolf's first surviving journal dates to 1897 and consists of a factual recording of each day's events. No journal survives for 1898. By 1899, short descriptive passages, essays, brief reviews of the works of other authors, and bits of philosophy were interspersed with a record of happenings. The next

surviving diary, for the year 1903 (plus one entry for 1904), is an indexed collection of titled, formal character sketches, descriptive passages, and literary criticism with an occasional aside commenting on her love of reading or her writing practices and ambitions. By 1903, Woolf had defined the initial role her diaries would play in her writing apprenticeship:

> The only use of this book is that it shall serve for a sketch book; as an artist fills his pages with scraps and fragments, studies of drapery -- legs, arms and noses --- ... so I take up my pen and trace here whatever shapes I happen to have in my head. It is an exercise -- training for hand and eye ... I have gone on this plan something over a month now, and propose ... to continue it in the country. There, with good luck, some live figures ought to cross my field of view -- and I shall attempt to cast their shadow on the page (EJ: July 30, 1903, pp. 186-187).

Beginning in 1905, Woolf's journals took on the form they were to retain for the rest of her life. In them, she wrote at a "haphazard gallop ... jerking almost intolerably over the cobbles ... The advantage of the method is that it sweeps up accidentally several stray matters ... which are the diamonds in the dustheap" (D1: January 20, 1919, p. 234; see also D2). From that point forward, the diary became a receptacle for observations to be used in her writing and Woolf frequently chastised herself if she failed to record "this loose, drifting material of life ... [which she] so much more consciously and scrupulously [put to use], in fiction" (D1: April 20, 1919, p. 266). Her intent was that her journal "resemble some deep old desk, or capacious hold-all, in which one flings a mass of odds and ends ... I should like to come back, after a year or two, and find that the collection had sorted itself and refined itself and coalesced ... into a mold, transparent enough to reflect the light of life, and yet steady, tranquil, composed with the aloofness of a work of art" (D1: January 10, 1966, p. 266). Thus her journals became a blend of her observations (of events, people, scenes), philosophies of art and life, plans for her fiction and non-fiction works, progress reports on her writing, critiques of what she had read, and discussions of her efforts to solve writing problems: a collection of data to be utilized in her later writing experiments.

Woolf's private journals began as a factual record of life events, then became a place to hone her writing skill absent critics and publishers, and eventually were the kind of record of observations and theories in development kept by a scientist at work (e.g., Michael Faraday, see Tweney, 1989; 1991). It was in these volumes that Woolf began practicing for Jacob's Room. In an October 17, 1924 diary entry, she wrote: "It strikes me that in this book I practice writing; do my scales; yes and work at certain effects. I

daresay I practiced Jacob here" (D2: p. 319). Woolf's self-assigned writing apprenticeship also included a reading program .

Woolf saw reading and writing as intimately connected. In a talk given in 1940, she indicated that a writer's preparation must include "reading omnivorously, simultaneously, poems, plays, novels, histories, biographies, the old and the new. We must sample before we can select" (Woolf, 1967, p. 181). Woolf based her comments on her own experience. While she did not have a formal education, her at-home schooling was overseen by her father, Leslie, who was a former Cambridge don and literary figure in his own right (Annan, 1984; Bell, 1972). Leslie Stephen hoped Woolf would become his "literary successor" but even he expressed concern about the volume of reading by his teenage daughter (Leaska, 1990, p. xvii; see also Annan, 1984). An examination of the first six months of Woolf's first surviving journal, begun just before she had turned 15, indicates that her reading for that period included 18 volumes of biography, 18 novels, 14 volumes of history, 7 volumes of essays, two additional books (probably essays) identified by author only, and poetry read to the family by her father. Her prescription for reading appears in an essay entitled "How Should One Read a Book," which was initially a January, 1926, lecture at a girls' school (1926/1932):

> To receive impressions with the utmost understanding is only half the process of reading; it must be completed, if we are to get the whole pleasure from a book, by another. We must pass judgment upon these multitudinous impressions, we must make of these fleeting shapes one that is hard and lasting. But not directly. Wait for the dust of reading to settle .... The book as a whole is different from the book received currently in separate phrases. Details now fit themselves into their places. We see the shape from start to finish .... To continue reading without the book before you, to hold one shadow-shape against another, to have read widely enough and with enough understanding to make such comparisons alive and illuminating -- that is difficult (pp. 241-242).

Woolf drew upon her ability to read critically as well as her writing skill when she returned to journalism -- abandoned since the last issue of the Hyde Park Gate News when she was barely 13 years old -- at 23 years of age.

Woolf's first published journalism appeared in The Guardian in December of 1904 (McNeillie, 1986). By early 1905, Woolf was writing regularly for three other publications as well. After an early burst of enthusiasm, however, Woolf expressed regret over the time that writing critical essays took away from her planned fiction efforts. In a letter responding to a friend's acknowledgement of her first review and written only eight days after the review's publication, Woolf wrote: "Not that a review deserves praise, it is

necessarily dull work" (L1: December 22, 1904, p. 167. Within the next few years she referred to her critical writing as "thankless work ... these horrible little snap shots: (L1: July, 1904, p. 200) and "hack work" (D1: October 21, 1919, p. 307) and said that writing reviews made her "feel like a child switching the heads off of poppies (Woolf, cited in L. Woolf and Strachey, 1956, p. 56). Nevertheless, Woolf continued to write and publish literary essays until her death in 1941; she understood that being a critical reader was essential to writing creatively. In her words: "A writer, more than any other artist, needs to be a critic because words are so common, so familiar, that he must sieve them and sift them if they are to become enduring" (Woolf, 1967, p. 181). Woolf's journalistic efforts served to further familiarize her with the craft of writing and the publication process and was, furthermore, instrumental in revealing the complex nature of the relationship between writer and readers. Journalism was employed by Woolf in service of her primary goal: to develop her skill as a fiction writer sufficiently so that she could extend the boundaries of the traditional novel.

At age 26, four years before she read the first English translation of Dostoevsky's work and some 10 years before Woolf first read Joyce or Richardson, Woolf wrote in her journal that she "should like to write not only with the eye, but with the mind; and discover the real things beneath the show" (EJ: September, 1908, p. 384). That same month, Woolf wrote: "As for writing, I want to express beauty ... a different kind of beauty ... showing all the traces of the mind's passage through the world and achieve in the end some kind of a whole made of shivering fragments; to me this seems the natural process, the flight of the mind" (EJ: September, 1908, pp. 393-394). While Woolf had determined she would be a writer some years before and was already an established literary critic, these 1908 journal entries signal a significant refinement of her literary goals. Woolf's reading and writing apprenticeship continued and, shortly, a new acquisition was to remove another obstacle. She and her husband founded the Hogarth Press in 1917. For Woolf, this meant independence from evaluation by established commercial publishers, who might be reticent to consider publication of her writing experiments.

> The main purpose of the Hogarth Press was to produce
>
> works of genuine merit which, for reasons well known and difficult to gainsay, could scarcely hope to secure publication through ordinary channels. In the second place we were resolved to produce no book merely with a view to pecuniary profit. We meant to satisfy ourselves to the best of our ability that the work had literary or artistic merit before we undertook to produce it (fifth anniversary publication of the Hogarth Press cited in Willis, 1992, p. 63).

In addition to a number of publishing coups including the first English publication of T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland," Hogarth Press was the publisher of Woolf's short stories, many of her critical works, and responsible for the first English publication of Woolf's novels starting with Jacob's Room (Willis, 1992).

Woolf's two novels prior to Jacob's Room were realistic in style and traditional in form. Just months before the completion of her second novel, Woolf wrote to a friend: "Novels are frightfully clumsy and overpowering of course; still if one could only get hold of them it would be superb. I daresay one ought to invent a completely new form" (L2: July 26, 1917, 1976, p. 167). In a journal entry three weeks after her second novel was published, Woolf wrote: "I think I can foresee in my reluctance to trace a sentence, not merely lack of time and a mind tired of writing, but also one of those slight distastes which betokens a change of style. So an animal must feel at the approach of spring when his coat changes" (D1: November 15, 1919, p. 311). While there were whispers of a novel that might be in Woolf's first two novels, it was in Jacob's Room that "the whole made of shivering fragments" and the depiction of the "flight of the mind" that Woolf envisioned in 1908 became a reality (EJ: September, 1908, p. 393).

Jacob's Room is more than a mere variation of the stream-of-consciousness techniques of Joyce and Richardson. Woolf's assessment was that their stream-of-consciousness novels yielded a necessarily distorted view of life by relying on the point-of-view of a single character (D2); in Jacob's Room, Woolf instead balances the consciousnesses of her characters against each other so that, via a shifting chorus of internal voices, we not only know what the characters think but what they think of each other (Woolf, 1922/1950; Zwerdling, 1986).

At this point, Woolf had worked long and diligently: first to become a writer; later in her 20's she redefined the focus of her network of enterprise as the capture of the flight of the mind; and, next, in her 30's she specifically targeted the novel as the vessel that would hold this new shape of writing. While writing her first two novels, Woolf had continued the fiction experiments which first appeared in her early journals. Some of these shorter works were unfinished at the time of Woolf's death, and the vast majority of them were not published during her lifetime. Three of these sketches -- "Kew Gardens," "The Mark on the Wall," and "An Unwritten Novel" -- were among Woolf's first published short stories. These three stories embodied experiments in perspective, the rhythms of prose, and narrative structure which Woolf identified as providing the foundation for Jacob's Room. In her words, she had

> arrived at some idea of a new form for a new novel. Suppose one thing should open out of another -- as in "An Unwritten Novel" -- only not for ten pages but 200 or so -- doesn't that give the looseness and lightness I want; doesn't that get closer and yet keep form and speed, and enclose everything, everything? ... For I figure that the approach will be entirely different this time; no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen ... Whether I'm sufficient mistress of things -- that's the doubt; but conceive "Mark on the Wall," ["Kew Gardens"] and "Unwritten Novel" taking hands and dancing in unity ... My hope is that I've learnt my business sufficiently now to provide all sorts of entertainments. Anyhow, there's no doubt the way lies somewhere in that direction; I must still grope and experiment but this afternoon I had a gleam of light. Indeed, I think from the ease with which I'm developing the "Unwritten Novel" there must be a path for me there (D2: January 26, 1920, p. 14).

For Woolf, an aha! experience followed years of honing her craft in service of her intention to re-form the novel to reflect the flight of the mind. It was with the completion of Jacob's Room that Woolf's wide-ranging writing apprenticeship ended; her pursuit of expertise as a critical reader, literary critic, journalist, fiction writer, and novelist and status as a publisher enabled her -- some 14 years after she took the important step of formulating her literary ambitions (and recording them in her 1908 journal) -- "to begin (at 40) to say something in ... [her] own voice" (D2: July 26, 1922, p. 186).

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