The Whole Contention Between
Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Woolf

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For most of the readers of this journal, Arnold Bennett’s literary criticism probably exists—if it exists at all—only as a reflection in his enemy’s eye. Virginia Woolf’s “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” has become the standard example of her kind of impressionism; it is included in anthologies of modern criticism, and is mentioned in histories of modern literature. But who attends to Bennett’s criticism? Not one of his eight critical books is in print either in the United States or in England, and his hundreds of articles have simply disappeared. The colorful, opinionated, influential artist that was Arnold Bennett has faded into the author of one Edwardian novel, and the defeated antagonist of a fierce bluestocking.

A consequence of this state of affairs is that Mrs. Woolf’s essay has come loose from its context, and is read as though it were a complete, objective statement of the differences between two writing generations. But in fact it is neither complete nor objective: it is simply one blow struck in a quarrel that ran for more than ten years, and was far more personal than generational. Reading “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” as a separate critical document is like watching the third round of a fifteen-round fight. We will understand both the essay and the combatants better if we understand the whole of their quarrel.

In 1919, when the quarrel began, Bennett was 52, successful, and astonishingly prolific. He had been writing novels at the rate of one a year for twenty years; he had had eight plays produced; and in his spare time he had turned out a vast amount of lively popular journalism. He wrote rapidly and easily, budgeted his time, and counted his words—that is to say, he was a professional. He was probably the best-known English novelist of the time; as he noted with satisfaction, his name on a poster sold newspapers, and strangers recognized him on the street. His evident pleasure in this sort of fame helped to establish what is still the dominant image of Bennett, as the self-satisfied provincial philistine who would write on any subject for two shillings a word, and who kept a yacht and a mistress on the proceeds.

But if there is truth in this version of Bennett, it is not the whole truth. There was another and more important side to him as a writer. One can see the other Bennett most clearly in the earlier critical writings, and especially in the columns that he contributed to the New Age under the pseudonym of Jacob Tonson (he collected some of the best in Books and Persons). These casual weekly pieces, which Bennett wrote for nothing, did much to make Edwardian England conscious of the twentieth century. Bennett was one of the few Englishmen in that insular time modern enough to be aware of what was happening in Europe, and he used his column to spread the news. He was the first English critic to testify to the great-
ness of *The Brothers Karamazov* (he had read it in French before Constance Garnett’s translation appeared); he praised *The Cherry Orchard* when it was first performed in London, and scolded the audience for walking out; and he recognized the significance of the first Post-Impressionist show in London, not only for painters, but for all artists, including himself. He was a shrewd judge of his fellow novelists, and most of his judgments of writers like James, Conrad and Galsworthy will stand without revision. In all these matters he had what one might call modern intuitions.

When Bennett wrote about the novel, he was likely to make two main points: one, that the novelist should consider his audience; and two, that the novel is a serious art form. In the popular image of Bennett the first point has been stressed and the second ignored; consequently he appears as at best a skillful hack (this is the point of Ezra Pound’s portrait of Bennett as “Mr. Nixon” in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*). But the essence of Bennett’s theory of the novel was that both these points should be made:

> there is a theory [he wrote in 1901] that the great public can appreciate a great novel, that the highest modern expression of literary art need not appeal in vain to the average reader. And I believe this to be true—provided that such a novel is written with intent, and with a full knowledge of the peculiar conditions to be satisfied; I believe that a novel could be written which would unite in a mild ecstasy of praise the two extremes—the most inclusive majority and the most exclusive minority.¹

Here Bennett is testifying to his belief in what he called “the democratization of art”; but it is important to note that the critical standards that the passage imposes remain those of literary art. A few years later, reviewing a book by Sturge Moore, Bennett wrote:

> His value is that he would make the English artist a conscious artist. He does, without once stating it, bring out in the most startling way the contrast between, for example, the English artist and the Continental artist. Read the correspondence of Dickens and Thackeray, and then read the correspondence of Flaubert, and you will see. The latter was continually preoccupied with his craft, the two former scarcely ever—and never in an intelligent fashion. I have been preaching on this theme for years, but I am not aware that anybody has been listening. I was going to say that I was sick of preaching about it, but I am not. I shall continue…²

The striking thing about this passage is the number of ways in which it echoes the views, and even the phrases, of Edwardian writers with whom Bennett is not usually connected—James, for example, and Conrad and Ford. One can find the idea of the “conscious artist,” the comparison of English and Continental attitudes, the admiration for Flaubert’s dedication and the contempt for Thackeray, all in Ford’s *The English Novel*, and similar remarks are scattered through the essays and intro-

¹ *Fame and Fiction* (New York, 1901), p. 16.

ductions of James and Conrad. The best of Bennett’s novels—Clayhanger, The Old Wives’ Tale, Riceyman Steps—are built on these critical principles, and the best of his criticism unambiguously proclaims his serious commitment to art. If one considers Bennett in these terms—in terms, that is, of his best work and his most thoughtful critical statements, then one must conclude that his place among Edwardian novelists is with the Conscious Artists, and not with Galsworthy and Wells. If this is true, then ironically he belongs among the literary ancestors of Virginia Woolf.

In 1919 Mrs. Woolf was younger, less known, and less productive than Bennett. In eleven years she had written three novels, none of which had sold well. She also wrote reviews and articles, as Bennett did, but she shunned the publicity that might have attended literary journalism; much of her reviewing was anonymous in the TLS, and other pieces were signed with initials. To all her writing, whether a novel or a short review, she gave the same meticulous attention; a single paragraph of an unimportant review might go through a dozen drafts before it pleased her. She worked slowly and painfully and at great emotional expense, and she was excessively sensitive to criticism of what she had written. And what was true of her art was also true of her life: she was a reserved, fastidious, aristocratic woman who found human relationships difficult, and who stayed within the familiar and protective limits of her Bloomsbury circle.

Clearly Bennett and Mrs. Woolf were antithetical in all the important particulars of their personalities. It is equally obvious, I think, that they were not antithetical in their views of their common art. Their quarrel, when it came, rose out of their personal differences, and not out of their aesthetic convictions; but it soon lost definition, and became an untidy and bitter wrangle that marred both their lives for more than a decade.

The first document in the case is perhaps not, strictly speaking, the beginning of the quarrel: it is an unsigned essay by Mrs. Woolf, titled “Modern Novels,” and published in the TLS in April, 1919 (a revised version called “Modern Fiction” was included in The Common Reader in 1925). The essay is a sketch of the criticism of Bennett, Wells, and Galsworthy that was later elaborated in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”: it attacks the three writers for their “materialism,” calls Bennett the worst culprit of the three, and—in a figure that recurs in later essays—compares Bennett’s novels to well-built houses in which nobody lives. It is worth noting that at this stage, Mrs. Woolf was willing to concede (though with qualifications) Bennett’s skill at characterization:

His characters live abundantly [she wrote], even unexpectedly, but it still remains to ask how do they live, and what do they live for? More and more they seem to us, deserting even the well-built villa in the Five Towns, to spend their time in some softly padded first-class railway carriage, fitted with bells and buttons innumerable; and the destiny to which they travel so luxuriously becomes more and more unquestionably an eternity of bliss spent in the very best hotel in Brighton.3

3 “Modem Novels,” TLS (April 10, 1919), 189.
As so often in Mrs. Woolf's criticism, the point is blurred by fancy, but there is surely a note of class-conscious disapproval in the well-built villa and the Brighton hotel.

While there is no evidence that Bennett read this essay, or guessed the identity of its author, it seems unlikely that a man so conscious of his status would have missed a front-page notice in the TLS; and London literary life being what it is, it is equally unlikely that he would not have known who his critic was. But if Bennett did know, he cannot have been much upset, for he took four years to retaliate. It was not until March, 1923, that he referred to Mrs. Woolf in print. Then, in an article called "Is the Novel Decaying?", he cited Jacob's Room as an example of the sort of thing the new novelists were doing. "I have seldom read a cleverer book," he wrote. "It is packed and bursting with originality, and it is exquisitely written."

But, he added, the novel had one flaw: "the characters do not vitally survive in the mind, because the author has been obsessed by details of originality and cleverness." The point is not one that most readers of Mrs. Woolf would dispute—even her friend E. M. Forster agreed that she was not much good at characterization—but Mrs. Woolf disputed it. By choosing characterization as a critical issue, Bennett had inadvertently chosen the battlefield for the quarrel that followed.

Two months after Bennett's article appeared, Mrs. Woolf was still brooding over his offense. In her diary for June 19 she wrote:

People, like Arnold Bennett, say I can't create, or didn't in Jacob's Room, characters that survive. 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. I daresay it's true, however, that I haven't that 'reality' gift. I in-substantiate, willfully to some extent, distrusting reality—its cheapness.

The Nation and Athenaeum was the instrument through which Mrs. Woolf had decided to strike back—quite naturally, since her husband was its Literary Editor. On December 1, 1923, an article by Mrs. Woolf appeared in its pages, titled "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." This is not the much-anthologized essay of the same title, however; it is a shorter and very different first draft. The differences are worth pausing over.

In this first rebuttal, Mrs. Woolf moved directly, if a little clumsily, to the attack. "The other day," the essay begins,

Mr. Arnold Bennett, himself one of the most famous of the Edwardians, surveyed the younger generation and said: "I admit that for myself I cannot yet descry any coming big novelist."

This quotation from "Is the Novel Decaying?" is followed by two paragraphs of further summary and quotation (or rather, of misquotation, for Mrs. Woolf was not over-scrupulous in controversy, and revised and rearranged Bennett's words)

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6 Nation and Athenaeum, XXXIV (Dec. 1, 1923), 342.
to suit her needs), which prepare the ground for a vigorous counterattack. As the basis for her defense, Mrs. Woolf chose the point on which Bennett had criticized Jacob’s Room—the point of characterization. Yes, she agreed, the novel is a remarkable machine for the creation of human character, and yes, vivid characterization has disappeared from English fiction. But the culprits were not of her generation. During the Edwardian years, two things had happened: first, sensitive men had become aware of the iniquities of the Victorian social system; and second, Mrs. Garnett’s translations of Dostoevsky had appeared. Social awareness turned novelists into reformers; Dostoevsky destroyed their conventional notions of what a “character” was. Together these two influences altered writers’ minds and, Mrs. Woolf suggests, the effect was to make them better men, but worse artists.

The Edwardian novelists therefore give us a vast sense of things in general; but a very vague one of things in particular. Mr. Galsworthy gives us a sense of compassion; Mr. Wells fills us with generous enthusiasm; Mr. Bennett (in his early work) gave us a sense of time. But their books are already a little chill, and must steadily grow more distant, for “the foundation of good fiction is character-creating, and nothing else,” as Mr. Bennett says: and in none of them are we given a man or woman whom we know.†

One must admire the skill of the in-fighting here—the use of Bennett to abuse Bennett, and the parenthetical dismissal of all his later work—but it scarcely amounts to a theory of fiction.

Mrs. Brown, the illustrative figure in the second version of the essay, appears in the first only at the end, and confusedly there, as though she were an afterthought. She has no identity, no distinct appearance, no mysterious story; she is simply a name. What does the young novelist do, Mrs. Woolf asks, when he finds himself disagreeing with Wells, Galsworthy, and Bennett concerning the character of Mrs. Brown?

... it is useless to defer to their superior genius. It is useless to mumble the polite agreements of the drawing-room. He must set about to remake the woman after his own idea. And that, in the circumstances, is a very perilous pursuit.

For what, after all, is character—the way that Mrs. Brown, for instance, reacts to her surroundings—when we cease to believe what we are told about her, and begin to search out her real meaning for ourselves? In the first place, her solidity disappears; her features crumble; the house in which she has lived so long (and a very substantial house it was) topples to the ground. She becomes a will-o’-the-wisp, a dancing light, an illumination gliding up the wall and out of the window, lighting now in freakish malice upon the nose of an archbishop, now in sudden splendor upon the mahogany of the wardrobe. The most solemn sights she turns to ridicule; the most ordinary she invests with beauty. She changes the shape, shifts the accent, of every scene in which she plays her part. And it is from the ruins and splinters of this tumbled mansion that the Georgian writer must somehow reconstruct a habitable dwelling-place; it is from the gleams and

† Ibid., 343.
flashes of this flying spirit that he must create solid, living, flesh-and-blood Mrs. Brown. Sadly he must allow that the lady still escapes him. Dismally he must admit bruises received in the pursuit. But it is because the Georgians, poets and novelists, biographers and dramatists, are so hotly engaged each in the pursuit of his own Mrs. Brown that theirs is at once the least successful, and the most interesting, hundred years. Moreover, let us prophesy: Mrs. Brown will not always escape. One of these days Mrs. Brown will be caught. The capture of Mrs. Brown is the title of the next chapter in the history of literature; and, let us prophesy again, that chapter will be one of the most important, the most illustrious, the most epoch-making of them all.

That is the whole of Mrs. Brown in her first appearance; she simply flits through the conclusion of the essay, like a Georgian Ariel, wooing novelists away from Caliban-Bennett. It is not a happy fancy.

But then, the first version of “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” is not very impressive in other respects, either. It has few virtues and many faults, and those of kinds that are not often found in Mrs. Woolf’s critical writing—faults of clumsiness, of ill-temper, of failure of imagination. The essay seems hastily done; and yet her diary shows that Mrs. Woolf was at work on it six months before it appeared. And apparently Mrs. Woolf did not find the piece unsatisfactory; she published it in three places in three months—once in England and twice in the United States. Then she set about to re-write it, for delivery as a lecture at Cambridge, where she read it to the girls of Girton College in May, 1924.

The argument of this, the familiar second version of the essay, is essentially that of the first, but the strategy is very different. Most noticeably, Mrs. Brown’s part in the show has been expanded from her brief appearance as Ariel to a starring role in a dramatic vignette about a clean old lady in a Waterloo train. The scene takes up a good deal of space, and one may wonder why an imaginary character should so dominate an essay concerned with the art of the novel. The ostensible answer is that Mrs. Woolf is demonstrating by example how human character has changed, and the inadequacy of the old methods of characterization to deal with the new task. But Mrs. Brown quickly expands beyond this function, and one may conclude that her real role in the essay is simply to be an imagined character; Mrs. Woolf, still brooding over her lack of “that ‘reality’ gift,” is demonstrating that she has it, by creating a character right before our eyes. It is a demonstration designed not only to prove that she can create character, but to show the superiority of her method to Bennett’s (which is ridiculed in a lengthy and somewhat misleading analysis of a passage from Hilda Lessways8). But in fact, if we examine Mrs. Brown carefully, we will find that she is put together in pretty much the same way that Hilda is, out of physical description and details of a characteristic environment; “I thought of her in a seaside house, among queer ornaments” is not unlike Bennett’s account of Hilda’s house.

The tone of the second version is also remarkably changed. Perhaps Mrs. Woolf

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8 For an excellent analysis of Mrs. Woolf’s methods, see Irving Kreutz, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Woolf,” Modern Fiction Studies, VIII (Summer, 1962), 103–115.
had recovered her temper; or perhaps she realized that cheerfulness and charm were better weapons in a lady's hands than abuse. In any case, she managed in her revised version to ridicule, patronize, and actually distort Bennett's writing without raising her voice. Like the first version, this essay was published and republished: first in T. S. Eliot's Criterion (where it was called "Character in Fiction"), then as the first pamphlet in the Hogarth Essays series, and again the following summer in the New York Herald Tribune. For one paragraph of mixed praise and criticism of Jacob's Room, Bennett had reaped six separate published attacks and one lecture.

In the summer of 1924, Bennett and Mrs. Woolf appeared together in a symposium, "What is a Good Novel?", published in The Highway, a Socialist journal of adult education. Each took the occasion to reaffirm and harden previously stated critical views. Bennett repeated his opinion that good fiction depends on character-drawing, plotting, and "an effect of beauty"; Mrs. Woolf argued that "a good novel need not have a plot; need not have a happy ending; need not be about nice or respectable people; need not be in the least like life as we know it," and renewed her attack on the use of exhausted conventions. Neither writer mentioned the other, but one can sense a critical drawing apart; for the first time, the critical attitudes they take are orthogonal. It is at this point, I think, that the two become self-consciously representatives of opposed schools; and it seems clear that it was Mrs. Woolf who had forced the breach.

Bennett was aware of both Mrs. Woolf's replies, but he did nothing to extend the quarrel, even though Eliot proposed in September, 1924, that Bennett reply to "Character in Fiction" in The Criterion. In May, 1925, Mrs. Woolf provided a new target in Mrs. Dalloway, but Bennett did not comment on the book for more than a year. Then, in November, 1927, Leonard Woolf reviewed Bennett's Lord Raingo unfavorably in the Nation. The Woolfs and Bennett met shortly after at a dinner at H. G. Wells'. According to Woolf, Bennett contributed nothing to the conversation except to stutter, at frequent intervals, "W-w-woolf d-d-does not l-l-like my novels." Bennett's own note on meeting the Woolfs was: "Both gloomy, these two last. But I liked both of them in spite of their naughty treatment of me in the press." And he regretted that he had not been seated where he could "have a scrap with Virginia Woolf."

He found his opportunity later the same month, when he began a new series of weekly "Books and Persons" articles for the London Evening Standard. His second and third articles were addressed to young writers, and the latter of these focussed particularly on Virginia Woolf, and on the Woolf-Bennett quarrel.

The real champion of the younger school [he wrote] is Mrs. Virginia Woolf. She is almost a senior; but she was the inventor, years ago, of a half-new technique, and she alone, so far as I know, came forward and attacked the old. She has written a small book about me, which through a culpable neglect I have not read. I do, however, remember an article of hers in which she asserted that I and my kind could not create character. This was in answer to an article of mine in which I said that the sound drawing of character was the foundation of good fiction,

and in which incidentally I gave my opinion that Mrs. Woolf and her kind could not create character.\textsuperscript{10}

This is a fairly accurate account of the origins of the controversy, though one may doubt whether Bennett was in fact guilty of “culpable neglect”; certainly he had read both versions of “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” in the periodicals in which they first appeared.

Bennett then moved on to a more direct criticism of Mrs. Woolf’s books:

\textit{I have read two and a half of Mrs. Woolf’s books. First, ‘The Common Reader,’ which is an agreeable collection of elegant essays on literary subjects. Second, ‘Jacob’s Room,’ which I achieved with great difficulty. Third, ‘Mrs. Dalloway,’ which beat me. I could not finish it, because I could not discover what it was really about, what was its direction and what Mrs. Woolf intended to demonstrate by it.}

To express myself differently, I failed to discern what was its moral basis. As regards character-drawing, Mrs. Woolf (in my opinion) told us ten thousand things about Mrs. Dalloway, but did not show us Mrs. Dalloway.\textsuperscript{11}

The reader familiar with “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” will recognize that final charge: it is simply a paraphrase of Mrs. Woolf’s judgment of Hilda Lessways.

From this point on, the public side of the argument was all Bennett’s. The weekly column in the \textit{Standard} provided him with a platform, and an appropriate stance. For as Bennett proceeded in his anti-Woolf campaign, he saw it more and more as a quarrel between popular art and coterie art, and for the champion of the popular a popular evening paper was an ideal medium. He was addressing the People—the tube-riders and commuters—and he addressed them as one of themselves, an ordinary bloke who wrote novels, and who knew what he liked.

Between 1927 and 1930 Bennett reviewed three books by Mrs. Woolf, and disliked them all. He liked \textit{To the Lighthouse} the best—thought it her best book—but having said that, he withdrew his praise in a series of slurring qualifications: Mrs. Ramsay almost amounts to a complete person, the story is wilful and seemingly designed to exhibit virtuosity, the middle part doesn’t work, the style is tryingly monotonous.\textsuperscript{12} The following year he was more aggressively hostile to \textit{Orlando}: the book was “fanciful embroidery, wordy, and naught else,” it lacked imaginative power, and it was even ungrammatical.\textsuperscript{13}

That same year (1928) Bennett had another opportunity to advance his cause; he was asked to write on “The Progress of the Novel” for \textit{The Realist}, a journal on which he was a member of the editorial board.\textsuperscript{14} The essay that he wrote is a recapitulation of his later views of the novel, but the form that his views took seems keyed to Mrs. Woolf’s criticisms of his own work. What he was writing was one more—and as it turned out, the last—refutation of “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.”

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Evening Standard} (Dec. 2, 1926), 5.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Evening Standard} (June 23, 1927), 5.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Evening Standard} (Nov. 8, 1928), 5.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{The Realist}, 1 (April, 1929), 3-11.
He therefore began his essay with a defense of social criticism: "The chief mark of the serious novelist, after fundamental creative power, is that he has a definite critical attitude towards life." (Mrs. Woolf had complained that the Edwardian novelists' books were incomplete: "in order to complete them it seems necessary to do something—to join a society, or, more desperately, to write a cheque.") Bennett countered by praising novelists who were critics of life: Balzac, Wells, and Galsworthy (Mrs. Woolf's two other Edwardian victims, linked to an unquestioned master). But, Bennett continued, "Simply to ask whether they are image-breakers or image-makers would be too simple and too crude." (Mrs. Woolf had described Joyce as "a desperate man who feels that in order to breathe he must break the windows.") He looked for examples of "the constructive spirit" in modern fiction, and found it in the novels of Galsworthy and Wells.

Bennett had always admired Wells, but his praise of Galsworthy seems pretty clearly a reaction to Mrs. Woolf, for in earlier essays his judgments had been on the whole unfavorable (and more in line with his own high standards). He wrote of The Man of Property and The Country House, for example, "personally I do not consider that either of Mr. Galsworthy's novels comes within the four-mile radius of the first-rate," and he objected to Galsworthy's treating oppressors with less sympathy than the oppressed—i.e., he disliked his social criticism; but those opinions were uttered in the days before Mrs. Woolf, when Bennett was in his own eyes an artist, and not a popular artist.

At the end of "The Progress of the Novel," having defended Edwardianism, Bennett turned to the young. And there, between R. H. Mottram and Henry Williamson, he found room for a few words on Mrs. Woolf.

Virginia Woolf has passionate praisers, who maintain that she is a discoverer in psychology and in form. Disagreeing, I regard her alleged form as the absence of form, and her psychology as an unco-ordinated mass of interesting details, none of which is truly original. All that I can urge in her favor is that she is authentically feminine, and that her style is admirable. Both these qualities are beside my point.

This would seem to be the definitive and final dismissal of his antagonist, but one further opportunity presented itself, and Bennett took it. In October, 1929, Mrs. Woolf published A Room of One's Own, and Bennett commented on it, and on her, in the Standard. "If her mind were not what it is," he wrote, "I should accuse her of wholesale padding. This would be unjust. She is not consciously guilty of padding. She is merely the victim of her extraordinary gift of fancy (not imagination).

This distinction is a new one in Bennett's criticism; what it seems to distinguish is the kind of mind that could create Mrs. Brown (fancy) from the kind of mind that had created Hilda Lessways. A more significant, and unfortunate, distinction is the one Bennett makes between himself and Mrs. Woolf:

She is the queen of the high-brows; and I am a low-brow. But it takes all sorts of brows to make a world, and without a large admixture of low-brows even Bloomsbury would be uninhabitable.

15 Evening Standard (Nov. 28, 1929), 5.
Here the class bias that had been implicit in the quarrel from the beginning nearly reached the surface. This is sad, because Bennett was not a lowbrow, either socially or artistically. But he had been despised in public by a lady, and voluntary vulgarity was one defense against her; and so he abdicated his place among serious artists, and widened the gap between two excellent kinds of fiction.

Even after such severe words, the two combatants met socially, and apparently amiably. In December, 1930, they were together at dinner; Bennett’s journal-note was “Virginia is all right; other guests held their breath to listen to us.” In her diary, Mrs. Woolf was less generous: “This meeting I am convinced was engineered by B. to ‘get on good terms with Mrs. Woolf’—when Heaven knows I don’t care a rap if I’m on terms with B. or not.” She ridiculed his stutter, his vanity, his art. “I like the old creature,” she noted. “I do my best, as a writer, to detect signs of genius in his smoky brown eye. . . .” But she concluded that she did not feel him to be a creative artist. The whole entry makes unpleasant reading—most unpleasant because it is gratuitous cruelty and aggressiveness recorded for the private eye alone.

Three months later Bennett was dead. Mrs. Woolf recorded the event in her diary:

Arnold Bennett died last night; which leaves me sadder than I should have supposed. A lovable genuine man; impeded, somehow a little awkward in life; well meaning; ponderous; kindly; coarse; knowing he was coarse; dimly floundering and feeling for something else; glutted with success; wounded in his feelings; avid; thicklipped; prosaic intolerably; rather dignified; set upon writing; yet always taken in; deluded by splendor and success; but naive; an old bore; an egotist; much at the mercy of life for all his competence; a shopkeeper’s view of literature; yet with the rudiments, covered over with fat and prosperity and the desire for hideous Empire furniture; of sensibility. Some real understanding power, as well as a gigantic absorbing power. These are the sort of things that I think by fits and starts this morning, as I sit journalising; I remember his determination to write 1,000 words daily; and how he trotted off to do it that night, and feel some sorrow that now he will never sit down and begin methodically covering his regulation number of pages in his workmanlike beautiful but dull hand. Queer how one regrets the dispersal of anybody who seemed—as I say—genuine: who had direct contact with life—for he abused me; and I yet rather wished him to go on abusing me; and me abusing him. An element in life—even in mine that was so remote—taken away. This is what one minds.

A curious, exposed comment. Mrs. Woolf twice says that Bennett was genuine—a quality which she associated with grossness, coarseness, and appetite. He had “direct contact with life,” and that gave him, perhaps, the “reality gift” that Mrs. Woolf doubted in herself, the gift that she despised and envied. But Bennett was also the critic who had abused her, and even at his death she had to go on abusing him back, sneering in private at his “shopkeeper’s view of literature” and his vulgar taste in furniture.

16 Writer’s Diary, pp. 165–166.
There is one further comment in the diary, and it is a revealing one. In May, 1933—two years after Bennett’s death—Mrs. Woolf was preparing to write The Pargiters, the book that eventually became The Years.

*I think I have now got to the point where I can write for four months straight ahead at The Pargiters. Oh the relief—the physical relief! I feel as if I could hardly any longer keep back—that my brain is being tortured by always butting against a blank wall—I mean Flush, Goldsmith, motoring through Italy. Now, tomorrow, I mean to run it off. And suppose only nonsense comes? The thing is to be venturous, bold, to take every possible fence. One might introduce plays, poems, letters, dialogues: must get the round, not only the flat. Not the theory only. And conversation: argument. How to do that will be one of the problems. I mean intellectual argument in the form of art: I mean how give ordinary waking Arnold Bennett life the form of art?*

The whole of the contention is in that final phrase: for Mrs. Woolf, Arnold Bennett represented Life—ordinary, waking life. For Bennett, Mrs. Woolf represented Art—highbrow, bloodless, supercilious art. These are the poles of a quarrel that has little to do with generations, or Edwardians vs. Georgians, though it has a lot to do with the history of the novel in the twentieth century. The quarrel between Bennett and Mrs. Woolf publicized the divorce of art from ordinariness in the novel, and thus helped to create a coterie audience for Mrs. Woolf (which was certainly bad for her reputation). It also speeded the decline of Bennett’s reputation as a novelist, and this is even worse for Bennett, who deserves the place that Mrs. Woolf denied him, among the conscious artists.

*Ibid., p. 201.*