

‘OBSERVE, OBSERVE PERPETUALLY,’ ‘Montaigne’,
(Virginia Woolf, *Essays IV 1925-1928* p.71)

by Gill Lowe

This paper will consider the figure of the ‘*patron au-dedans*’ or ‘invisible censor within’ in Woolf’s writing. It will show that Woolf’s interrogatory practice may be seen as both internal soliloquy and as dialogical; she is in constant debate with ‘invisible presences’ (MOB 92) who constantly check and verify the writing self. I will propose that, in a sketch written for the *Hyde Park Gate News*, the thirteen year old Virginia was experimenting with the dialectical processes inherent in composition: writing and reading; creating and editing; producing and marketing.

Creation is a contradictory process. A distinguished novelist once told me that teaching her insatiable creative writing students was like breastfeeding 24 babies. Their voracity led to some musing as we considered a Kleinian ‘good breast-bad breast’ model for this analogy. Those of you who teach will know the contradictions implicit in the task. We support and praise BUT, concurrently, we have the contrary task of being critical; we have to censure and check.

Throughout her memoirs, diaries and letters there is a sense of Woolf perpetually observing the workings of her own mind; conversing with her self about composition and the editing process. She distinguishes ‘a spectator in me who,’... ‘remained observant, note taking for some future revision’ (MOB p.155). Woolf knows that a degree of autonomy has been achieved when one is able to step back to better observe one’s self. In ‘Montaigne’, she writes: ‘The man who is aware of himself is henceforward

independent' (*E IV* p.73). As Judith Allen shows, both Montaigne and Woolf: 'were intensely interested in what ensues when one brings one's self, in all its mystery and mutability, to meet another self,' (2010, p.17).

The crucial instruction in 'Montaigne' to 'Observe yourself' (*E IV* p.74) has, by the end of the essay, become more urgent. 'Observe yourself' is substituted by 'Observe her' and the imperative is repeated four more times, finishing with 'Observe, observe perpetually'¹. Woolf describes the soul in an inner room 'as she broods over the fire' (*E IV* p.72). The self and the soul are not unified; we watch the soul 'with absorbed interest', it becomes 'an enthralling spectacle' (*E IV* p.78). For Woolf, Montaigne's success came by 'means of perpetual experiment and observation' (*E IV* p.78). In the same essay Woolf considers readership and how the '*patron au-dedans*', may be our best appraiser:

One writes for a very few people, who understand. Certainly, seek the Divine guidance by all means, but meanwhile there is, for those who live a private life, another monitor, an invisible censor within, "un patron au dedans", whose blame is much more to be dreaded than any other because he knows the truth; nor is there anything sweeter than the chime of his approval. This is the judge to whom we must submit; this is the censor who will help us achieve that order which is the grace of a well-born soul.²

Her essay considers the contradictions involved in creation; a person must be encouraged 'to explore and experiment' BUT, there needs to be 'some internal balance'. 'This freedom...which is the essence of our being, has to be controlled' (*E IV* p.75). She understands that encountering internal conflict facilitates the creative act. Experts on creativity would concur. As Derek Attridge writes: "The very term "experiment" paradoxically combines the notions of a controlled, repeatable physical process and the unpredictable trying-out of new procedures'(Attridge, 2004, p.20).

The 'Montaigne' essay was originally published in the *TLS* of January 1924 to review a recent publication of Charles Cotton's translation of the *Essays of Montaigne*³. A month later, Woolf drafted 'The Patron and the Crocus'⁴. Caroline Pollentier makes an interesting point about Woolf's decision to use the original French expression in her review, rather than Cotton's translation of the word *patron*. She writes:

patron signifies "pattern" and thus relates to a private order within the self, that is, a moral idea of withdrawal and self-knowledge. By quoting the text in French rather than providing us with Cotton's unequivocal translation ("a pattern within ourselves"⁵), Woolf added another meaning to the original text, giving Montaigne's early modern ethics of privacy a modern twist.

(Pollentier, 2008, p. 77)

Woolf uses her own translation, 'an invisible censor within', so that she can raise the issues of readership and its relationship to patronage. She signifies the idea of an internal order or pattern, like Cotton, but, additionally, her translation of 'patron'⁶ suggests synonyms of power such as master, host, superior, boss, employer, chief, or governor. In 'The Patron and the Crocus', she shows 'the influence of the audience in the production of art, by figuring the patron as an internalized agent of pressure on the author' (Pollentier 2008, p.77). Woolf is clearly aware of the market when she refers to how a book may be received:

For a book is always written for somebody to read, and since the patron is not merely the paymaster, but also in a very subtle and insidious way the instigator and inspirer of what is written, it is of the utmost importance that he should be a desirable man (*E IV* p.212).

Woolf was acutely sensitive towards her readership. She used both internal and external voices to help her compose, order and find a pattern from an inchoate mass of ideas⁷.

She was alert to the criticism of her readers, especially those whom she admired⁸. On 7th August 1939, she breaks off from the ‘mornings grind’ of revising:

I have been thinking about Censors. How visionary figures admonish us.... If I say this So & So will think me sentimental. If that ... will think me Bourgeois. All books now seem to me surrounded by a circle of invisible censors (*D V* p.229).

Virginia Woolf heard voices in her head and, most of the time, they were not speaking Greek. Sometimes these voices were her family’s and sometimes the voice was another part of her self, asking questions, reassessing, censoring, checking and re-checking. She understood that she could receive conflicting and inconsistent advice from these voices⁹.

Woolf welcomed the idea of a fine critic¹⁰ who could set standards but, in ‘An Essay in Criticism’, stigmatises the arrogance of ‘these insignificant fellow creatures [who] have only to shut themselves up in a room, dip a pen in the ink, and call themselves “we” for the rest of us to believe that they are somehow exalted, inspired, infallible’ (*E IV* p. 450).

She worries that one who believes reviews will begin to ‘doubt and conceal his own sensitive, hesitating apprehensions when they conflict with the critics’ decrees’ (*E IV* p. 450). Woolf despises this kind of authority: the right to judge, to command and to compel compliance. She preferred the idea of a two-way dialogue leading to consensual agreement. Although the patron is perceived as an agent of pressure, for Woolf the concept must embrace the idea of affirmative collaboration.

She began writing as a small child but her life as a professional writer only began in December of 1904, after her father had died. On the 96th anniversary of Leslie Stephen’s birth, she recognises that her success depended on his death; only one of them could thrive: ‘His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing;

no books;- inconceivable.’ The importance of the two meanings of ‘inconceivable’ can be inferred here; she is impelled to eliminate those who conceived her before she can create for herself. A few lines later she admits she is still influenced by him: ‘I hear his voice’ (*D III* p.208) ¹¹.

After Julia’s death, ‘A finger seemed laid on one’s lips’ (*MOB* p.104). To break what she calls this ‘stifling’ silence (p.104) she tries to smother and suppress her mother’s hidden presence. The gagging does not work though; she acknowledges her mother’s posthumous authority: ‘I could hear her voice’ (*MOB* p.92). To be able to speak again she had ‘do battle’ with her ghost (*MOB* p.157).

In the *Hyde Park Gate News* of Monday 8th April 1895, Virginia Stephen dramatises the figure of a writing woman. It is the last existing piece before children’s journals stop, interrupted, as in *To the Lighthouse*, by a mother’s death. If, in ‘The Patron and the Crocus’, we replace ‘he’ with ‘she’, we can see that, although thirty years apart, these two texts can be related. The Editor in the sketch is analogous to ‘the patron who will cajole the best out of the writer’s brain and bring to birth the most varied and vigorous progeny of which he is capable’ (*E IV* p.212). This patron/ midwife/ editor assists with the birth of the writer’s offspring. This figure may be seen as a separate person **and** part of the writer herself.

In the sketch the Author is trying to write but is blocked. Another woman intrudes on the writer’s ‘musings’. She is the Author’s Editor, presented at first as a vaguely intimidating and contrary figure. We are told: ‘The Editor was not an ordinary person. She knew her Author very well’ (Lowe, 2005, p.201). The Author is aware that she is dependent on her Editor. They work best as a duo rather than when duelling. The Editor

gets the best from her Author when she is a pleasant 'patron' rather than a confrontational critic.

Previously I have suggested that this figure can be seen as a projection of Virginia's sister, Vanessa, who was Editor of the *Hyde Park Gate News*. Much has already been written about the close personal and artistic alliance between Vanessa and Virginia. Diane Gillespie points out that: 'In spite of all they shared, a dualistic structure inevitably dominates discussions of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, in part because each woman caricatured the other as opposite' (1991, p.5). Gillespie demonstrates that it is convenient for the narrative of 'biographers or critics' to set up the sisters' relationship as a series of dualities: 'to think of the virginal, barren woman versus the sensual, maternal one; the domestically inept versus the practical and competent; the dependent versus the independent; the conversationalist versus the silent listener; the mentally unstable versus the sane' (Gillespie, 1991 p.5).

Perhaps the expedience of this convention led me to read Vanessa as the motherly judge of the susceptible aspiring writer in the sketch. We are used to considering Vanessa as a surrogate for those 'invisible presences' who, though dead, powerfully influenced Woolf still. It **is** possible to see the Editor figure as an *alter ego* for Vanessa. We can read the sketch as an exploration of intersubjectivity; Virginia and Vanessa as two distinct figures in relation to each other. BUT, in this paper, I want to suggest that this is a self-referential piece, that the Editor can be seen as another version of the Author, herself.¹² Clearly, these two interpretations do not have to be mutually exclusive; they can, creatively, exist together. I wish to suggest that both the Author and the Editor can be seen as two selves: the prospective young writer **and** the self-critical *patron au-dedans*.

In 'The Patron and the Crocus' Woolf recognises that a patron must 'efface' 'or assert himself as his writers require; that he is bound to them by a more than maternal tie; that they are twins indeed, one dying if the other dies, one flourishing if the other flourishes; that the fate of literature depends on their happy alliance' (*E IV* p.215). This suggests that the receiver of Virginia's work, whether her own self or an external figure, fulfils more than a quasi-maternal role in relation to the writing figure. Stating that the patron and the writer are 'twins indeed' implies co-dependency. There may be some competitive connection but they need also to be able to co-operate if their joint venture is to flourish. The juvenile sketch also shows these tensions: Virginia intentionally shows the sometimes effacing, sometimes asserting, editing self, in apposition to the writing self.

There are two extant manuscripts of the *Hyde Park Gate News* for 14th December 1891.

The fair copy in Vanessa's hand uses the word 'Editor' but, in the second rougher version, 'Editor' is crossed through and, in Virginia's writing 'Author' is pencilled above. This suggests that Virginia was debating with herself these differing, but complementary, roles.

Six months later, when Adrian decides to set up the "Talland Gazette" in competition, an article¹³ speaks disparagingly about his ambition to function as **both** author and editor.

He 'has been strongly advised to give up writing by himself but to join with this respectable journal.' The writer, presumably Virginia, chooses to use the depersonalised but united 'we' in a curt dismissal of his attempts. Katerina Koutsantoni, writing not about this example but rather about the use of 'we' in *The Common Reader* essays, expresses its effect succinctly: 'By using collective attribution inclusively, the author asserts her own expertise but offers her views as shared, commonly held ones,

strategically coating them in a cloak of solidarity'. Here we have the tyro reviewer employing 'collective authority' (Koutsantoni, 2009, p.80):

We have not yet had time to look over "The Talland Gazette" with a view to criticism We hope that Master Adrian Stephen will take the advice of his parent and give up "The Talland Gazette" altogether (Lowe, 2005, p.75).

The Stephen children sought to write in obscurity by preserving anonymity¹⁴ or using *personae*, but, simultaneously, sought praise and public recognition. They were already aware of the power of an audience but knew how to evade individual responsibility for what they had written. Nina Skrbic refers to the juvenilia as responding to a 'particular impulse to thwart the official censor' (2004, p.xv).

The sketch enacts a fictional discourse between Editor and Author. This is literally 'scene making' (*MOB* p.145) as the young Virginia employs theatrical devices. It seems to me that this is a heuristic piece, a practical experiment to discover what it might mean to be a professional writer. Dramatising this encounter is a safe way of exploring the relationship between writing and reading; seller and marketplace. The sketch performs an encounter between two coolly oppositional selves. This is a double act: a dialogic interaction between a guileless writing self and a more demanding 'other than self'. The Editor is a detached inspector but also self-interestedly supportive: she wants to profit from publishing the Author's poems. The Author is seen as reliant; she seeks advice but is relatively passive. Author and Editor are set up in dialogue so Virginia can better interrogate the way the two roles interact, first in tension with each other but finally in co-operation. Virginia recognises, even in this early project, the obligation of a writer to keep a separation between the spontaneity of creation and the rigour of editing.

We can discern Woolf's habitual wry tone; the piece should not be taken entirely seriously¹⁵. It begins with a stage direction, 'Scene- a bare room, and on a black box sits a lank female, her fingers clutch her pen, which she dips from time to time in her ink pot and then absently rubs upon her dress.' The writer is depicted as inert and abstracted as she limply looks out on the indifferent and darkening world outside. The window is a trope to show the separation between interior and exterior states¹⁶. This is the outlook from Leslie's library: Hyde Park to the north and the street 'which led nowhere' (*MOB* p.126) to the south. The depiction is not, however, entirely negative. Virginia was allowed access to her father's books BUT the woman here is allowed more than a reader's pass. She is inside 'the cage' (*MOB* p.123) of the patriarchal space BUT the window is open to the world outside.

Pathetic fallacy is surely being mocked here. The writer 'wishes to be poetical' but Nature is not consoling: the 'gaunt poplar' waves its arms without empathy; she sees 'gloomy' silhouettes of 'bleak' trees to the north; the sun 'dives' for cover behind a black cloud. The church 'rears itself in the distance' as if it were antagonistic to the figure's need for divine inspiration. Funereal wreaths of smoke 'monotonously' rise from Dickensian chimney tops. There seems to be a sardonic vein of humour in the sketch: an ironic elegy for childhood plays out to the mournful sound track of 'Auld Lang Syne'. The calendar tells us 'authoritatively' that the sun will set at 6.42; it may be autumn. Time is running out but the Author has written nothing.

The Author is a caricature. She has a disagreeable unattractive expression which becomes cartoonish as the piece progresses. Her nose, illuminated by the setting sun, is shiny and she has 'few hairs.' She has been commissioned to write poetry but this task is not suited

to her 'time of life' or to her temperament: 'Poetry she considered to be an indelicate exhibition of your innards' (Lowe, 2005, p.200). Her silence can be seen as petulant rather than powerful.

Woolf reprises this figure, but with a more serious purpose, in a famous scene for her 1931 talk, 'Professions for Women'. She is speaking autobiographically: 'I want you to figure to yourselves a girl sitting with a pen in her hand, which for minutes, and indeed for hours, she never dips into the inkpot' (*E VI* p.482). Confronted by the creeping phantom of the 'Angel in the House', the Author has to fling her ink pot at her, in self-defence. Finally, she 'turned upon her and caught her by the throat'. Dramatically, we are told: 'She died hard' (*E VI* p.481).

Both tableaux conceptualise the contradictions inherent in the writing process and set in opposition pertinent dualities: subjectivity/ impersonality; public/ private; liberation/ control and authority/ autonomy. Woolf recurrently had to remove unwelcome voyeurs; to eradicate the critical voices inhibiting her craft; to listen instead to the '*patron au-dedans*'. For 'that young woman' to 'be herself', she had to 'rid herself of falsehood' (*E VI* p.481).

¹ On Saturday March 8, 1941, Woolf revisits this imperative. Her words are retrospectively poignant given that it is part of her last diary entry: 'No: I intend no introspection. I mark Henry James's sentence: Observe perpetually. Observe the oncoming of age. Observe greed. Observe my own despondency. By that means it becomes serviceable.'

² 'Montaigne' (*E IV* p.75). This was 'the first single-author essay in the first volume of *The Common Reader*' (Dusinberre, 1991, p.219).

³ Footnote in (*CE III*, 1967, p.18): '*Essays of Montaigne*', translated by Charles Cotton, 5 vols. The Navarre Society (1923) £6.6s. net. See Dusinberre (1991, p.237) for more textual detail on this edition by William Carew Hazlitt. Charles Cotton (April 28, 1630 – February 16, 1687).

⁴ Published in the *Nation and the Athenaeum* in April 1924. Both essays were collected in *The Common Reader*, published 1925

⁵ M. de Montaigne, 'Of Repentance', *The Essays of Montaigne*, trans. C. Cotton (London, 1923), IV, 204.

⁶ See also 'The Artist and Politics': 'but intellectually also he depends upon society. Society is not only his paymaster but his patron.' *The Moment and Other Essays*, p.227.

⁷ See 'behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern' (*MOB*, 2002, p.85). 'There is a pattern hidden behind the cotton wool' (pp. 85-6).

⁸ She also interprets silence as criticism. She writes about Lytton Strachey: 'I have felt his silence disapproving; have moderated my folly under it' (*D III* p.208).

⁹ See 'The Artist and Politics' (*CE II*, 1966, p.232) where 'crying and conflicting voices' are heard in his studio by the artist.

¹⁰ 'How it Strikes a *Contemporary*': 'A great critic, they say, is the rarest of beings.' *E III* p.353 and *E IV* p.233

See also 'The Narrow Bridge of Art' *E IV* p.440 re. a critic's duties and 1927 'An Essay in Criticism' *E IV* p. 449ff. 'Are not the best critics private people, and is the only criticism worth having spoken criticism?' *JG* p. 224.

¹¹ 28 November 1928

¹² 'I am always in a way other to myself' (Attridge, 2004, p. 25).

¹³ Monday June 27th 1892 Volume II No. 24

¹⁴ 'To forget one's own sharp absurd little personality, reputation & the rest of it, one should read; see outsiders; think more; write more logically; above all be full of work; & practise anonymity.' *D III* p.169 1927

¹⁵ As Alex Zwerdling states, 'A certain analytic distance had in fact always been a strong element in Woolf's nature, and some form of irony had characterised her writing as early as the *Hyde Park Gate News*' (Zwerdling, 2003, p.182).

¹⁶ Gazing from one may suggest 'confusion, frustration, or even curiosity' or, perhaps, 'boredom' (Gillespie, 1991, p. 298).

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