

Virginia Woolf Miscellany

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ABOUT GERALD DUCKWORTH: Response to John Hulcoop's Review (VWM No. 5)

The review in your last issue (No. 5) of Virginia Woolf's Moments of Being raises a matter which I should like to take this opportunity of explaining.

Professor Hulcoop writes: '... it is only fair to note, as Woolf does but Bell does not, that Gerald as well as George made sexual overtures to her when she was a child.'

When I wrote my biography of Virginia Woolf, I relied upon a letter to Ethel Smyth of 12 January, 1941 in which Virginia wrote: 'I still shiver with shame at the memory of my half-brother, standing me on a ledge, . . .' etc. (see Volume I, p. 44, footnote). I had no reason to connect Gerald with this kind of transaction, and very wrongly I assumed that George Duckworth was the half-brother in question.

A few days after the publication of the English edition of my Volume I, my wife found among the Monks House papers, which she was sorting for Leonard Woolf's executrix, the typescript now published as 'A Sketch of the Past' in Moments of Being. The reprints of Volume I following each other very rapidly, it was only in the 7th reprint that I was able to insert a correction to the footnote on p. 44, which now incorporates the statement:

'It was not only George's attentions which disturbed Virginia. A document (MH/A5a) which came to light after the first publication of this volume makes it clear that the half-brother here referred to was Gerald, not George.'

The American one-volume edition of my biography was produced directly from sheets of the two English volumes as soon as they were available; my first knowledge of the paperback edition came with the complimentary copies. Thus my mistake has gone uncorrected in America. I should be very glad if the record could be set straight through the medium of the Virginia Woolf Miscellany.

In this matter I have been guilty of making an unwarrantable assumption. I can only plead that I err in good company - that of Professor Hulcoop.

In his review he accuses me of casting George Duckworth in 'the role of sexual sea-monster'; he goes on to suggest that I am in my judgements unfair, unimaginative, and a 'clinical lay-psychologist'.

The assumption here is that in the biography I have provided my own authorial analysis of George Duckworth's psyche, and that this is expressed in terms of popularized psychology. (The fact that Professor Hulcoop doesn't seem to know the meaning of the word 'clinical' and does not realise that a 'clinical lay-psychologist' is a contradiction in terms makes it a little hard to restate his indictment in refutable language.)

The assumption is false. Nowhere do I describe George Duckworth as a monster, nor is there any passage in the book from which it can fairly be inferred that this was my opinion of him. I did say that, to his half sisters, he appeared to be a monster and this I thought and still think to be a fair summary of the available evidence. Neither George Duckworth, nor indeed anyone else in the biography has been subjected to the kind of examination which

might be expected of a psychological clinician or of a lay-psychologist.

I think that the reported opinions of other people may have been confused with my own views and that this has led Professor Hulcoop, and possibly other people, into error. Whether he knows it or not he is being a little unfair. Let me hasten to add that I do not consider him to be a monster, whatever he may think of me; and that if he will forgive my trespasses I will certainly forgive his. This is what the advertising people call a 'bargain offer'.

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SOME SOURCES FOR BETWEEN THE ACTS

In the 1911 section of The Years, Eleanor Pargiter pays her yearly visit to her brother Morris just as the village fete is dispersing. A pageant of English history ("Miss Green got it up") and a scene from "Midsummer Night? As You Like It? I forget which" have been performed, for the benefit of the new church steeple. The steeple houses the elusive white owl (the ancient symbol of the mother-goddess), and Eleanor thinks that the English "past" is always the eighteenth century, "near, domestic and friendly"; she has been in Greece where "one was always going back two thousand years"; ". . . she felt no affection for her native land -- none whatever." "Craster had won the pig," the festival's one surviving connection with the ancient religious mysteries of the mother-goddess. Virginia Woolf probably believed, along with her friend the classicist Jane Harrison, that drama had originated in the worship of the mother-goddess and its festivals of the death and rebirth of the year. Eleanor seems to be "an old maid who washes and watches birds" but she is also an incarnation of an ancient Mother/Maid.

In Greece her brother Edward had been "lecturing troupes of devout school mistresses on the Acropolis;" as guardian of the classics he cannot even explain, later, what the chorus says in Antigone. In The Years Woolf attempts to write a modern Greek drama with the chorus merging into individual heroes and heroines; she dissolves the individual and the authorial voice in a collective voice, as if in an oratorio or opera whose mythic theme is the ritual death and rebirth of the year. She wants to compose like a musician, like, in fact, her friend Ethel Smyth. At the same time her language stresses the violence of primeval man and family relations; the "cave of mud and dung" is the first theatre.

Between the Acts grows out of all these preoccupations. As Jane Harrison had tried to dig back to primeval sources, beyond the reshaping of the goddesses accomplished by Greek patriarchal religion, so Woolf in Between the Acts digs up a primeval ritual drama in the family and the sexual act. While the village actors make English history live, live history is going on around them. Miss La Trobe realizes she has to dig further back to a primeval scene of the first humans, as Mrs. Swithin herself explores the primeval swamp of history and evolution. They are the maid and

mother in modern dress, the double aspect of the goddess. Woolf's immersion in Greek drama needs no proof. What is fascinating, however, is that in 1938 she was apparently considering dramatizing The Odyssey. Sydney Saxon-Turner wrote that he remembers that Peggy Ashcroft had told someone of this project. Woolf replied (June, 1938) that she was engaged with Saint-Denis on a highly stylized version of her favorite poem, but that all she had really done was to reread Samuel Butler's The Authoress of the Odyssey (letters in Sussex University Library). (The real incident in Anne Ritchie's life, when she shocked Butler by suggesting that Anne Hathaway wrote Shakespeare's sonnets, is delightfully parodied in Night and Day.) Butler said that he began his study "having written the libretto and much of the music for a secular oratorio, Ulysses," with his friend H. Festing Jones.

Woolf was writing in the age of the English oratorio when choral societies were at their height. There was a desire to democratize music and drama and she herself in The Years composed the collective voice of the chorus as a radical response to the aesthetic problem of writing an anti-heroic but deeply historical novel. Realistic and mythic, the novel gives us characters and narrator who have a simultaneous present and past, as if the Delphic oracle, where Woolf found her inspiration (see A Writer's Diary and Roger Fry), were speaking at once in classical and demotic Greek.

Just after sending Roger Fry to the printer, Woolf wrote to her friend Margaret Llewelyn Davies that her life would be perfect "if it weren't for the war," that Leonard and his friends were working to put some "brains into that fat timid sheep the labour party." She had become an active member of the Women's Institute "who've just asked me to write a play for the villagers to act. And to produce it myself. I should like to if I could. Oh dear how full of doings villages are -- and of violent quarrels and of incessant intrigues." She wrote that the parson's wife was an object of hatred and that she and Leonard were thought "red hot revolutionaries" because the Labour Party met in their dining room (letter in Sussex University Library, quoted courtesy of Quentin Bell and Nigel Nicolson).

History as a pageant has its own history for Virginia Woolf in Julia Cameron's photographic pageants; in Anne Ritchie's "Sibyl" essays and their ability to bring extraordinary women to life for Woolf and to make a pageant of their lives; in Woolf's own gift for pageantry in the Dreadnought Hoax; in Freshwater; and in Leonard Woolf's early essay on history as a pageant, which argues that royalty and servants have essentially the same views of history. The pageant was and is the perfect form for propaganda, for populist revisions of history. An amateur who aches to put herself or himself and an excluded class or sex back into history has a readymade form, not to mention the opportunity for the actors to change class or sex or leap over the centuries to the peace or the wars of the past.

But the Miss La Trobes who "get up" pageants had their real counterparts. In England between the wars Edith Craig was famous for her English pageants in a barn theatre at Smallhythe where she had set up a memorial to her mother, the great actress Ellen Terry. Her biography was written by another eccentric feminist artist, Christopher St. John (who also wrote the biography of Ethel Smyth), and introduced by Vita Sackville-West. In 1932 Edith Craig and Christopher St. John reissued Ellen Terry's Memoirs (first published in 1908 and certainly a source for Freshwater), in which Ellen Terry recalls the scene of Tennyson's The Cup (1881) where "the gigantic figure of the many-breasted Artemis . . . loomed through a blue mist." Another member of this circle of bold theatrical women was Cicely Hamilton, who wrote The Old Vic, a tribute to Emma Cons, its founder, and Lilian Baylis, who brought it to fame. What these women have in common is a sort of swashbuckling English eccentric spinster's style. Their dashing unconventionality and often lonely artistic integrity suggest a national and universal Miss La Trobe, virginal in vision but the

creator of a cathartic communal art form that would propitiate the gods of history on behalf of the human community.

Cicely Hamilton, Edith Craig, and Christopher St. John had been active members of the Actresses' Franchise League and wrote and performed plays as propaganda for the suffrage movement. Cicely Hamilton's Pageant of Great Women was (next to Elizabeth Robins' Votes for Women!) the most successful of these, although her Diana of Dobson's, which combined a protest against working conditions for women with feminism, was a long-run West End success. Her Marriage as a Trade (1913) is a neglected feminist tract.

Cicely Hamilton has an essay in H.G. Well's utopian socialist work The Great State (London & N.Y.: Harper's, 1912), which it seems likely Woolf would have read; it contained an essay by Roger Fry on the role of the artist which closely parallels her own views. There Hamilton wrote, "until no compulsion, social or economic, drives women into marriage or prostitution, it is practically useless to imagine that you can really and permanently raise the level of the mothers of the race." She thought a sane society ought to be able to produce conditions that would make motherhood "a voluntary institution"; until then most mothers are not people, "merely the reproductive faculty personified." Given the preoccupation with motherhood in Virginia Woolf's life and writing, a great shaft of light is shed on her final mother-figure, Isa, who is less a person than a myth, caught in a tangled web of sexual fantasy and violence, producing cannon-fodder for history's wars with the bed as the eternal battlefield.

Between the Acts also calls to mind the Woolfs' friendship with Octavia Wilberforce, Woolf's last doctor, and Elizabeth Robins, the Ibsen actress and feminist with whom Wilberforce lived. While the cows are present at the pageant for realistic reasons and are also in some sense the sacred cows of ancient goddess worship, they remind me of Dr. Wilberforce's prize herd at Becksettown near Rodmell. Miss Robins' memoir Both Sides of the Curtain (a title with implications similar to Between the Acts) was given its title by Virginia Woolf, and she and Leonard published Robins' Ibsen and the Actress. Leonard Woolf tells of their friendship in his autobiography; some of Woolf's earliest reviews were of Elizabeth Robins' novels; and Robins had known Julia Stephen, delighting Woolf by remembering her mother's wicked tongue rather than her perfection. Woolf had planned a sketch of Octavia Wilberforce's life, admiring its rootedness in the English past and its sturdy oak-like qualities, but also the determination that led her to become a doctor against her father's wishes, with Elizabeth Robins supporting her through medical school and the residency necessarily outside of England, in Switzerland.

Rooted as Between the Acts is in real England, real pageants and real eccentric artists, it recalls Woolf's early and deep fascination with the pageantry of Wagnerian opera. Writing as an amateur critic from Bayreuth (The Times, August 21, 1909) Woolf was particularly fascinated with the audience: "During the intervals between the acts, when they come out into the sun, they seem oppressed with the desire to disburden themselves somehow of the impression they have received." She felt that the music was more triumphant in its natural setting at Bayreuth than in a London concert hall because of intervals spent in the natural world:

It has been possible, during these last performances, to step out of the opera house and find oneself in the midst of a warm summer evening. From the hill above the theater you look over a wide land, smooth and without hedges; it is not beautiful, but it is very large and tranquil. One may sit among rows of turnips and watch a gigantic old woman with a blue cotton bonnet on her head, a figure like one of Dürer's, swinging her hoe. The sun draws out strong scents from the hay and the pine trees, and if one thinks at all, it is to combine the simple landscape with the landscape of the stage. When the music is silent the mind insensibly slackens and expands, among happy surroundings; heat and the yellow light, and the intermittent but not unmusical noises of insects and leaves smooth out the folds. In the next interval, between seven and eight, there is another act out here also: it is now

dusky and perceptibly fresher; the light is thinner, and the roads are no longer crossed by regular bars of shade. The figures in light dresses, moving between the trees of the avenue, with depths of blue air behind them, have a curiously decorative effect. Finally, when the opera is over, it is quite late, and halfway down the hill one looks back upon a dark torrent of carriages descending, their lamps wavering one above another, like irregular torches.

These strange intervals in the open air, as though a curtain were regularly drawn and shut again, have no disturbing effect upon Parsifal at least. A bat from the woods circled Kundry's head in the meadow, and little white moths dance incessantly over the footlights.

With England at war with Germany and Wagner's music being used for Nazi propaganda, Virginia Woolf recalled her early insight and used a very English and deliberately remythologized natural setting for her exploration of the relation between the violence of human history and the pageant the artist makes of it, finding the source of history's cycles as Vico did in human sexuality, which perpetually acts out the war between the sexes as the first war, the first drama.



REVIEW: THE LETTERS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

edited by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann

Volume I: The Flight of the Mind (1888 - 1912)

Volume II: The Question of Things Happening (1912 - 1922)

Hogarth Press and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich

The first two volumes of The Letters of Virginia Woolf should banish forever the old clichés of the spectral "invalid lady of Bloomsbury." In these letters, Woolf's spirited immersion in everyday life -- that side of her so often denied by literary criticism of the past -- cannot be separated from her explorations of the imagination.

In the first volume, appropriately titled The Flight of the Mind in the Hogarth edition, the letters are playful and tentative, trembling slightly as the young artist begins to unfold her wings. Throughout the second volume, Woolf is bolder and takes more risks; insisting on her joy in other people and in The Question of Things Happening (the volume's British title), she experiences what she calls in Mrs. Dalloway "the positive need" of the soul "to brush, scrape, kindle herself, gossiping" (244).

At the end of Volume II, in a letter to Gerald Brennan, she summarizes the theme we have seen emerging. Having completed Jacob's Room, she vows that her fictional experiments will never lead her to "write a book without people in it" (II, 598). She argues that art is formed from human relations ("not . . . by the relation of stone to stone," I murmur, thinking ahead to A Room of One's Own): "I mean, life has to be sloughed: has to be faced: to be rejected; then accepted on new terms with rapture. And so on, and so on; till you are 40, when the only problem is how to grasp it tighter and tighter to you, so quick it seems to slip, and so infinitely desirable is it" (II, 598 - 599). Now it will be difficult for anyone to condemn Woolf to an ivory tower after hearing her urge Brennan, the struggling young writer, "desert your mountain, take your chance, and adventure with your human faculties -- friendships, conversations, relations, the mere daily intercourse" (II, 599).

In both volumes, friendships with women are particularly crucial. At first Woolf looked to these women for maternal affection; in the second volume she calls herself Vanessa's "firstborn" (II, 312).

Vanessa remained important to Virginia throughout her life, and their letters are wonderfully filled with gossip, banter, domestic details, and more serious probings of their differences in personality and temperament. From these letters I know why Woolf called this closeness in her diaries and in Mrs. Dalloway that "quality which could only exist between women," that special sense of "being in league together" (50). (In several letters to Vanessa in Volume II, lines have been omitted with no editorial explanation. Might we have one?) The letters to Vanessa call out for her side of the correspondence, and I would like to see them published -- perhaps in a separate volume, perhaps in a volume with Violet Dickinson's and Vita Sackville-West's letters to Woolf.

While Madge Vaughan was Woolf's first great passion, her love for Violet Dickinson (as revealed in Volume I) created a kind of private, protected space in which she could grow stronger and more self-confident as a woman and as a writer. Unfortunately, many readers have followed Nicolson's lead and found these letters, with their pleas for affection and poses of the shy animal needing to be petted, fatiguingly sentimental. He claims that the letters to Clive Bell and other men "come as a relief" because she "honed her wit upon their rougher texture, and gave her letters more sinew" (I, xx). Without these letters to Violet, however, we cannot understand the strength and resilience of the second volume nor the sources of Woolf's aesthetic ideas in her feelings about women.

In her love for Violet, Woolf first came to believe that women, sharing special domains of experience, could plunge beneath the conventions of life: "Life would be so much simpler if we could flay the outside skin all the talk and pretences one doesn't feel, etc. etc. -- That's why I get on with you isn't it?" (I, 97). She goes on to explain why women are able to communicate without the rigidities of proper conversation: "You remember there is a very fine instinct wireless telepathy nothing to it -- in women -- the darlings -- which fizzles up pretences, and I know what you mean though you don't say it, and I hope its the same with you . . ." (I, 98). Reading these breathless exclamations, I look ahead to the metaphorical filaments connecting characters in Mrs. Dalloway, to the intuitive understanding of Mrs. Ramsay, and to the return of the "Captain Self" in Orlando, "when communication is established there is nothing more to be said" (314).

Friendships with women in both volumes are the basis of Woolf's feminism. Nicolson does not accept the political implications of many of her attitudes and comments in the second volume and reasserts that she "could not take politics seriously until she came to write Three Guineas" (II, xvii). But she never could take seriously Nicolson's implied definition of politics. Three Guineas was written to condemn conventional party politics and any institution based on masculine values of hierarchy, competition and domination. As she explains in a letter to Will Arnold-Foster, labour party politics were "all phantasies and moonshine, only mudcoloured moonshine" (the line quoted by Nicolson to prove his point) because "Bonar Law seems to me precisely the same as Lloyd George -- and so on" (II, 582).

Woolf was more sympathetic towards her labour women's group and the Women's Co-operative Guild. One of the many pleasures of the second volume are her letters to Margaret Llewelyn Davies in which her personal affection and her respect for her Guild work are clear in the midst of shared family news. Such letters should compel a redefinition of politics. Feminist beliefs do not separate the private from the public (Woolf's great lesson in Three Guineas), and conventional politics and organizations too often ignore personal values in order to gain power and control over others. Set in this context, Woolf's remark to Davies about the First World War is not a naive avoidance of reality, but a strong, political stand against patriarchal values: "I become steadily more feminist, owing to the Times, which I read at breakfast and wonder how this preposterous masculine fiction keeps going a day longer -- without