

LOUISE A. DeSALVO

# Virginia Woolf's First Voyage A NOVEL IN THE MAKING

Louise A. DeSalvo

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> First published in the USA 1980 First published in the UK 1980

Published by THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD London and Basingstoke Companies and representatives throughout the world

> Printed in the USA by Universal Lithographers, Cockeyesville, Maryland

### British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

DeSalvo, Louise A

Virginia Woolf's first voyage.

1. Woolf, Virginia. Voyage out

I. Title

823'.9'12

PR6045.072V6

ISBN 0-333-29353-3

## **Preface**

Virginia Woolf published her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, in 1915 after a prolonged illness which had attended its completion in 1913. Thirteen years later, in January and February of 1928, at the height of her literary powers, while working at the last chapters of *Orlando*, Woolf wrote that because "the first novel is always apt to be an unguarded one, where the author displays his gifts without knowing how to dispose of them to the best advantage," one would do well to *begin* an analysis of an author's process of literary creation with a study of his *first* novel. And what Woolf wrote of George Meredith's first novel, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, is true for her own first novel, *The Voyage Out*:

It needs no great sagacity to see that the writer is a novice at his task. The style is extremely uneven. . . . He has been, it is plain, at great pains to destroy the conventional form of the novel. . . . This defiance of the ordinary, these airs and graces, the formality of the dialogue . . . are all there to create an atmosphere that is unlike that of daily life, to prepare the way for a new and an original sense of the human scene.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout her long and very productive literary career, Woolf habitually destroyed the Typescripts of her novels, leaving behind only the Holographs or handwritten drafts. But the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, the major repository of Woolf manuscripts in the world, contains much typescript material from Woolf's composition of *The Voyage Out*. (A two-volume Holograph is also extant.) One wonders why, of all her

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novels, did Woolf choose to save the Typescripts of Voyage and not those of her later and more popular creations (To the Lighthouse, Mrs. Dalloway, or The Years, for example)?<sup>3</sup> Why, if not to preserve for herself, and perhaps for posterity, a record of how that first novel, that unguarded one, came into being?

It has been possible for me to reconstruct four distinct earlier versions of the novel within the manuscripts at the Berg Collection -two of these are virtually complete-and to date them with accuracy.4 These reconstructed earlier versions, together with the letters, diaries, and journals that Woolf was writing at the time, provide the most complete account of Woolf's process of literary creation available to us at this time. Because I have dated these earlier versions, it has also been possible to connect the thread of creativity with meaningful events in Woolf's life. The most fascinating link between Woolf's life and her art that I have uncovered is the fact that each time Woolf wrote or revised the delirium and death scene of her central character, Rachel Vinrace, she herself went mad and once tried to commit suicide. This study of the composition of Woolf's first novel is offered as a paradigm, not only for the study of the composition of her other novels, but also as an exploration of the connection between Woolf's art and her mental equilibrium—between her use of fiction as a device for masquerading and structuring her own feelings and her frequent incapacity to maintain the facade.

\* \* \*

To prepare the way for a new and an original sense of the human scene. This, certainly, was Woolf's accomplishment in the creation of her first novel. And if we wish to understand how that original sense of the human scene burgeoned and blossomed into those great works of her maturity, into Jacob's Room and Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse and The Waves, we might—indeed, we must—begin where Woolf herself began, with the creation of that first, that unguarded work, The Voyage Out.

## Acknowledgments

My debts are many.

Whatever value this study possesses is largely due to the example of Professor Mitchell A. Leaska of New York University and his research into Virginia Woolf's process of composing *The Years*. He first suggested that I undertake the study and, throughout, his encouragement and his guidance have helped me to translate his initial inspiration into this completed form.

Without the generous grant of an Anderson Fellowship from New York University, this study would have proceeded far more slowly. I wish to thank Professor Robert S. Berlin and Professor David W. Ecker for their responses to this work in its initial form and Dean Daniel E. Griffiths for his effort on behalf of the Fellowship.

Professor Janice L. Gorn was a model historian throughout and Professor Carol Smith of Douglass College did much to initiate my interest in Virginia Woolf.

Acting Dean Lewis Jacobs and Professor Norma Levine of the Peter Sammartino College of Education at Fairleigh Dickinson University provided the intellectual climate conducive to the completion of this work. For that I am grateful. Professor Frank McLaughlin's encouragement and support were greatly appreciated, as were Jim Feather's.

My obligation to Frederick B. Adams, Jr. is overwhelming. He placed his copy of the novel with Virginia Woolf's holograph and typescript changes at my disposal at The Pierpont Morgan Library. His many and gracious replies to my queries concerning his volume

and his suggestions for Chapter V are deeply appreciated. I should also like to express my gratitude for his permission to describe my results in these pages.

John Lehmann was kind enough to search his remarkable memory for information concerning the publication of the American edition. Nigel Nicolson, editor of Virginia Woolf's correspondence, generously provided the proofs of letters from the second volume before its publication which he thought might be useful for my comparison of the American and English editions.

Dr. Anthony Storr, Clinical Lecturer in Psychiatry, University of Oxford, took time from his exceedingly demanding schedule to read a portion of the manuscript and provided invaluable support. His work in creativity provided important background against which to study this individual instance.

I wish to thank Dr. Grace Radin for sharing the results of her research on *The Years* with me and Dr. Howard Scheiber for sharing his research on *The Waves*. Dr. Elizabeth Heine's discovery that a portion of the earliest complete draft was written much later than I had originally thought is an important contribution to the history of the evolution of this draft and I would like to thank her for sharing it with me before the publication of her article.

During the final stages of this project, the good wishes and support of Professor David V. Erdman and Dr. Jane Marcus were invaluable as were the interest of Professor Morris Beja and Professor Thomas Cooley of Ohio State University.

The staff in charge of The Monk's House Papers at The University of Sussex Library, Falmer, Sussex, England, were especially helpful during my two visits.

Mr. William Anderson and Mr. Frank Starling of Brighton were good friends during my visits to Sussex. Mr. Starling sent me English editions of Woolf's correspondence as soon as they were available and combed the local press for information.

I should like to thank the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations for access to and permission to quote from the manuscripts of *The Voyage Out* and Clive Bell's 1910 letter to Virginia Woolf. The presence and good wishes of Dr. Lola L. Szladits, Curator, did much to speed my progress. Acknowledgment

is also made to Harcourt Brace Jovanovich and The Hogarth Press for permission to quote from the published works of Virginia Woolf, Quentin Bell, and Leonard Woolf.

The staff of the Berg Collection, David Pankrow, Barbara Grogan, and Robert F. Wiseman, must be thanked for their congenial and highly efficient assistance.

I should like to express my gratitude to Professor Quentin Bell and The Author's Literary Estate for granting me permission to quote from the manuscripts of *The Voyage Out* and from Clive Bell's 1910 letter to Virginia Woolf.

The support and help of my parents, Louis and Mildred Sciacchetano, were invaluable.

My husband, Ernest J. DeSalvo, was unflagging in his confidence, encouragement, and good humor. He had the patience to listen to and comment upon more versions of each chapter than I care to remember. At every stage, he helped to transform initial glimmerings into patterns of meaning. My children, Jason and Justin, have provided models of persistence and patience for me to emulate, for during the years when this study was in progress, I watched Jason learning to read and write and I listened to Justin learning to express himself.

If one shuts one's eyes and thinks of the novel as a whole, it would seem to be a creation owning a certain looking-glass likeness to life, though of course with simplifications and distortions innumerable. At any rate, it is a structure leaving a shape on the mind's eye, built now in squares, now pagoda shaped, now throwing out wings and arcades, now solidly compact and domed like the Cathedral of Saint Sofia at Constantinople. This shape, I thought, thinking back over certain famous novels, starts in one the kind of emotion that is appropriate to it. But that emotion at once blends itself with others, for the "shape" is not made by the relation of stone to stone, but by the relation of human being to human being.

Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own

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#### CHAPTER I

## Introduction

In Chapter XXII of *The Voyage Out* by Virginia Woolf, Terence Hewet, a fledgling author, works on his novel, while his fiancée, Rachel Vinrace, plays the piano:

. . . Terence sat near her, engaged, as far as the occasional writing of a word in pencil testified, in shaping the world as it appeared to him now that he and Rachel were going to be married. It was different certainly. The book called *Silence* would not now be the same book that it would have been. He would then put down his pencil and stare in front of him, and wonder in what respects the world was different. . . . <sup>1</sup>

Woolf's first novel contains the idea that a novel in progress will change as the life experiences of its author change and one wonders how the earlier versions of *this* novel (called *Melymbrosia* in its earliest stages) were different from *The Voyage Out* when it was completed in 1913 by Mrs. Leonard Woolf because of the changes which had occurred in the life of *its* creator.

Voyage, in its published form, is a novel about the experiences of twenty-four-year-old Rachel Vinrace aboard her father's ship, the Euphrosyne, and in Santa Marina, a South American port. Accompanying her on her journey are her aunt and uncle, Helen and Ridley Ambrose; a servant, Mrs. Chailey; and an old acquaintance, Mr. Pepper. When the ship stops at the mouth of the Tagus River, Rachel's father returns, accompanied by Clarissa and Richard Dallo-

way. During a storm at sea, Richard kisses Rachel, and she has a terrifying nightmare and delusions because of that kiss.

The Dalloways soon disembark and Helen Ambrose begins to educate her niece. Helen persuades Willoughby Vinrace that Rachel should join them on their holiday to Santa Marina rather than stay with her father on his journey up the Amazon River. Rachel meets an English tourist, Terence Hewet, while on Santa Marina. After an expedition upstream, during which they decide to marry, Rachel becomes dangerously ill, develops a headache and fever, becomes delirious and delusional, loses consciousness, and dies. Many of the tourists are shocked and surprised and try to ascertain the significance of Rachel's unexpected death.<sup>2</sup>

According to her nephew and biographer, Quentin Bell, Virginia Stephen may have been inspired to write *The Voyage Out* almost immediately after the death of her father, Sir Leslie Stephen. By May 1904 she was anxious to begin work on a project that was sufficiently complicated to take her mind off the restless feelings which had preoccupied her since his death on 22 February 1904. But during that month, she experienced a mental breakdown, entering a nightmarish period during which her grief for her father and her distrust of her sister Vanessa intensified:

She heard voices urging her to acts of folly; she believed that they came from overeating and that she must starve herself . . . [;] she made her first attempt to commit suicide. She threw herself from a window, which, however, was not high enough from the ground to cause her serious harm.<sup>3</sup>

But whether or not inspiration for the novel came as early as 1904, that Virginia Woolf believed the death of her father was necessary for her to be able to create a work of art and that the completion of her literary works might have been accompanied by feelings of guilt she herself did not even recognize is suggested by a diary entry she made many years later in 1928. What would have happened if Sir Leslie had lived, she mused:

Father's birthday. He would have been 96, 96, yes, today; and could have been 96, like other people one has known: but mercifully was not. His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books;—inconceivable.<sup>4</sup>

Soon after her recuperation, Virginia Stephen began to write literary criticism. By the beginning of 1908, when she was actively writing the novel, she had contributed more than twenty-five articles or reviews to periodicals such as *The Academy*, *The Guardian*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, and *The National Review* on works such as Lewis Melville's *The Thackeray Country* and H. Allingham's *William Allingham: A Diary*. <sup>5</sup>

Virginia, Vanessa, Adrian, and Thoby Stephen established a household of their own in the autumn of 1904 in a large, roomy house just north of the British Museum, at No. 46 Gordon Square in Bloomsbury, well away from Kensington where they had grown up. There they began "Thursday Evenings"—where Thoby's Cambridge friends, Saxon Sydney-Turner, Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey, Walter Lamb, Leonard Woolf, and others, would meet to continue the discussions they had begun at Trinity College. These discussions were probably drawn upon for St. John Hirst's and Terence Hewet's conversations in *The Voyage Out*.

By this time, she had cultivated two extremely intimate friendships: one, with Madge Vaughan; the other, with Violet Dickinson and the quasi-maternal relationships of these women with Virginia Stephen can be understood by her many extant letters to them. Their characters, together with Vanessa's and Virginia's memories of her mother Julia Stephen, who died in 1895, and her half-sister Stella Duckworth, who died in 1897, provided her with models for Rachel's dead mother and the mother-surrogate Helen Ambrose in *Voyage*.

In 1904, the Stephens and their half-brother Gerald Duckworth journeyed to Italy and Paris, meeting Violet Dickinson in Florence. In 1905, Virginia Stephen took another trip, this time to Spain with her brother Adrian. Both were sea journeys, in part, providing life experiences for the beginning of *Voyage* which occurs on board the steamship *Euphrosyne*. In a letter to Violet Dickinson which dates from the trip to Spain with Adrian, she uses the phrase "the voyage out" in her description of the journey—a phrase which would stand on the title page of her first published novel some ten years later and would attest to the emotional significance of her voyage with Adrian to the creation of its pages. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, editors of Woolf's correspondence, believe that although she used the phrase

inadvertently, "this sea journey was in fact the source of her inspiration for the early chapters of her first novel, *The Voyage Out*."8

In 1905, she began teaching at Morley College, lecturing on the life of Benvenuto Cellini and Greek mythology, among other topics. In 1906, she took a trip to Greece with her brothers Thoby and Adrian, and with Vanessa and Violet, but this one ended in catastrophe. During and after the trip, Vanessa, Violet, and Thoby were all dangerously ill. On 20 November 1906, Thoby Stephen died of typhoid fever, the fourth member of Virginia Stephen's family to die before she actively began her first novel. Two days after Thoby's death, her sister Vanessa agreed to marry Clive Bell. Virginia Stephen, who had already lost her mother, a mother-surrogate (Stella Duckworth), her father, and her brother, knew that she was to lose the attentions of her beloved Vanessa through marriage. Her despair was exacerbated by Violet Dickinson's continuing illness. Doctors feared that her friend's condition would become worse if she learned of Thoby Stephen's death. In an extraordinary series of letters to Violet Dickinson, she maintained the fiction that her brother was still alive for almost a month. Quentin Bell has observed:

Thoby's death was a disaster from which Virginia could not easily recover. Two years later she felt her loss acutely; it was odd to be living in a world that did not contain him, and even after twenty years it still seemed to her that her own continuing life was no more than an excursion without him, and that death would be no more than a return to his company.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the writing of *The Voyage Out* was undertaken in her attempt to expiate the feelings of guilt for having survived Thoby: the heroine Rachel Vinrace dies during her twenty-fourth year, Virginia Woolf's age when Thoby died, and Rachel's death from an illness described as a fever by many of the hotel guests can be viewed also as a symbolic substitution of Virginia Woolf's death for Thoby's.

Between May 1908 when she began to describe the novel's progress regularly in her letters and the delivery of the manuscript to the family firm of Duckworth and Company on 9 March 1913, 12 she was preoccupied in her life, as she was in her fiction, with creating relationships, with forming romantic attachments, and with reflecting about womanhood and marriage. In March 1909 she wrote Madge

Vaughan: "Oh how I wish I could write a novel! People and their passions, or even their lives without passions, are the things to write about" (#477). While writing Voyage, she was courted by both Hilton Young and Walter Lamb. And after the birth of Vanessa Bell's first child, her brother-in-law Clive Bell and she carried on a prolonged flirtation. While at St. Ives, they took long walks together to escape the new-born intruder who so fascinated Vanessa. Woolf probably drew upon this emotional experience while creating early drafts of the novel's triangular relationships among Helen Ambrose, Ridley Ambrose, and St. John Hirst; Rachel Vinrace, Richard Dalloway, and Clarissa Dalloway; Rachel, Helen, and Terence Hewet; Evelyn Murgatroyd, Oliver, and Perrott; and (to a lesser extent) Susan Warrington, Mrs. Paley, and Arthur.

Early in 1909 she accepted Lytton Strachey's proposal of marriage only to have him withdraw the offer almost immediately. Strachey probably saw the engagement as the solution to his complicated emotional life. He discovered, however, "that he was alarmed by her sex and by her virginity; he was terrified by the notion that she might kiss him." She, however, wanted very much to be married although her only previous experience of male carnality had been the erotic advances of her half-brother George Duckworth. According to Bell and to the Stephen sisters' letters, there were "fondlings and fumblings in public . . . and these were carried to greater lengths . . . [in] the night nursery." Strachey's homosexuality, therefore, might have been reassuring to her: as a husband he would not make sexual demands upon her. The quixotic nature of St. John Hirst's and Terence Hewet's affections have been fashioned upon Lytton Strachey to some degree and the relationship between Rachel and Terence, in its earliest written version, seems to resemble that of Virginia Stephen and Strachey.

Early in 1910, she believed that she was coming to the end of *Melymbrosia*. From March 1910 through early September of that year, Woolf experienced yet another breakdown, perhaps because she was completing a version of her novel. <sup>16</sup> In late June, she entered the nursing home at Twickenham for six weeks and her letters from there ridicule her insanity (#531). Experiences like this provided the model for the delusions of Rachel Vinrace at the end of the novel. Work on *Melymbrosia* was postponed until her recovery.

Early in 1911, she wrote Violet Dickinson: "I'm very much excited by the thought of going back and writing the work of imagination" (#549). The work continued in fits and starts. In April 1911 she was revising for perhaps the sixth time. The By June of 1911, she was once again in despair: "I could not write, and all the devils came out—hairy black ones. To be 29 and unmarried—to be a failure—childless—insane too, no writer" (#570).

On 3 July 1911, Leonard Woolf dined at Gordon Square with the Bells, seeing Virginia who came there after dinner. A few days later, she wrote him, addressing him as "Dear Mr. Wolf" and invited him for a weekend at her cottage in the Sussex South Downs (#571). During the last few months of 1911, the two saw a great deal of each other. Leonard Woolf found himself falling in love.

During 1912, Leonard Woolf pursued his suit of Virginia Stephen with greater and lesser degrees of response from her. She was now living at 38 Brunswick Square in London with Maynard Keynes, Duncan Grant, Adrian Stephen, and Leonard, too, in a household arrangement allowing each privacy while they shared expenses. Her uncertainties about Leonard were many and she expressed them in letters to him and her sister Vanessa. In May, shortly before they were engaged, she wrote him:

Of course I can't explain what I feel. . . . The obvious advantages of marriage stand in my way. I say to myself. Anyhow, you'll be quite happy with him; and he will give you companionship, children, and a busy life—then I say By God, I will not look upon marriage as a profession. . . . Then, of course, I feel angry sometimes at the strength of your desire. . . . And then I am fearfully unstable. I pass from hot to cold in an instant. . . . All I can say is that in spite of these feelings which go chasing each other all day long when I am with you, there is some feeling which is permanent, and growing. You want to know of course whether it will ever make me marry you. How can I say? I think it will. . . . Again, I want everything—love, children, adventure, intimacy, work. . . . So I go from being half in love with you, and wanting you to be with me always, and know everything about me, to the extreme of wildness and aloofness . . . and then—is it the sexual side of it that comes between us? As I told you brutally the other day, I feel no physical attraction in you. There are moments-when you kissed me the other day was one-when I feel no more than a rock. And yet your caring for me as you do almost overwhelms me. . . . We both of us want a marriage that is a trememdous living thing,

always alive, always hot, not dead and easy in parts as most marriages are. We ask a great deal of life, don't we? Perhaps we shall get it; then, how splendid! (#615.)

On 29 March 1912, two months before she accepted Leonard's proposal of marriage, Virginia Stephen began the first volume of the Holograph of *The Voyage Out*. She was working on episodes describing Rachel and Terence responding to their growing intimacy as she herself was responding to her growing attachment to Leonard. In the published version of one of the episodes, Rachel Vinrace ponders the effect of her relationship with Terence:

What had happened to her she did not know. Her mind was very much in the condition of the racing water to which Helen compared it. She wanted to see Terence; she was perpetually wishing to see him when he was not there; . . . agonies were strewn all about her day on account of him, but she never asked herself what this force driving through her life arose from. She thought of no result any more than a tree perpetually pressed downwards by the wind considers the result of being pressed downwards by the wind. (222, 271.)

The ambivalence that Virginia Stephen felt was finding expression, not only in her letters, but also in her fiction. Between 29 March and 21 December when she began the second volume of the Holograph, she revised Rachel's delirium and death, altering these episodes substantially from their earlier versions. She was revising scenes describing how ambivalent Rachel and Terence are about loving one another, and Rachel's death, which can be interpreted as an escape from marriage through death, while she herself was preparing to accept Leonard Woolf's proposal of marriage!

Leonard and Virginia Stephen were engaged to be married on 29 May 1912. He has described the event in *Beginning Again*:

. . . I had lunch with Virginia in her room and we sat talking afterwards, when suddenly Virginia told me that she loved me and would marry me. It was a wonderful summer afternoon and we felt that we must get away from London for a time. We took the train to Maidenhead and I hired a boat and rowed up the river to Marlow and then we came back and dined at the riverside restaurant in Maidenhead. We both felt that in those 10 hours from after lunch to midnight when we got back to Brunswick Square we had