

FROM THE LIGHTHOUSE TO MONK'S HOUSE

*A Guide to Virginia Woolf's
Literary Landscapes*



KATHERINE HILL-MILLER

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For Fred and Chris

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Introduction

'I do not know whether pilgrimages to the shrines of famous men ought not to be condemned as sentimental journeys. It is better to read Carlyle in your own study chair than to visit the sound-proof room and pore over the manuscripts at Chelsea.'

Virginia Woolf, 'Haworth, November, 1904'

'So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places.'

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 1925

Although Virginia Woolf worried about descending into sentiment when she visited the homes of famous writers, she enjoyed her literary tours immensely. She visited the Carlyles' home in Cheyne Row, Keats's house in Hampstead, the Brontës' parsonage at Haworth. She saw Swift's epitaph at St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, and concluded that Young Street, Kensington, expressed Thackeray's spirit perfectly. She admitted that literary pilgrimages were a guilty pleasure: she liked to choose a darkish day, 'lest the ghosts of the dead should discover us'.¹ But it was generally a pleasure that sparked her imagination, that gave her some new ideas about the writer and his work, and that forged a sense of her connection to the ghostly presence of vanished great minds. That sense of connection was a result of her delighted response to place.

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And Virginia Woolf's delight in places is precisely the subject of this book: how she reacted to places, how she transformed places in her works, and how her lively evocations of literal places lie at the heart of some of her most important pieces of writing.

In fact, the first essay Virginia (then Stephen) wrote for publication was a travel piece. In 1904, when Virginia Stephen was twenty-two, she stayed for ten days in Yorkshire with Madge Vaughan and her husband, Will. Will Vaughan was Virginia's cousin through her mother's line and worked as headmaster of the Giggleswick School near Settle. Virginia was recovering from the bout of mental illness that had followed her father's death in February of 1904 and, following her doctor's usual orders to retire to a quiet spot, she left London to holiday in the country. While Virginia was at Giggleswick, she and the Vaughans made a pilgrimage to the Brontë family home at Haworth Parsonage. On the way to Haworth, Virginia carefully noted the countryside: the earth sheathed in 'virgin snow'; the houses lining the edge of the moor; the little clump of trees just outside the Parsonage itself. Once at Haworth, Virginia was deeply moved by the sight of Charlotte Brontë's thin muslin dress and small shoes, since their survival conjured up Charlotte Brontë's very presence: 'The natural fate of such things is to die before the body that wore them, and because these, trifling and transient though they are, have survived, Charlotte Brontë the woman comes to life.'² She was equally moved by Haworth's ancient churchyard, with its invasion of graves and crush of tall headstones. Like any good tourist, Virginia dutifully sent postcards to her friend Violet Dickinson. And then she sat down to write an account of her expedition for Mrs Lyttelton, editor of the Women's Supplement of the *Guardian*. After all, Virginia Stephen already knew that she wanted to support herself as a writer, and Haworth Parsonage seemed a good place to start.

This account of Virginia Woolf's first publication encapsulates several of the themes that came to characterise Woolf's life: her battles with mental illness; her tendency to alternate city life with country life; her lively sense of imaginative connection to people and authors who lived and died long before her time. It also suggests patterns that came to characterise Woolf's career as a writer: her determination to support herself by her pen; her habit of turning every experience she encoun-

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tered into words; her gifts for visual detail and suggestive description. Most importantly, the story captures her delight in the expressive powers of a place, especially when that place was associated with an author.

To say that the idea of place is important to Virginia Woolf is to say the obvious: connection to a place is an inescapable fact of the human condition, and places are therefore an element or theme in the work of every novelist who ever picked up a pen. But the idea of 'place' occupies a special position in Woolf's work. Near the end of her life, when Woolf sat down to write her autobiography and to consider her development as a writer, she returned to very specific places and invested them with the power to expand – or to contract – the human spirit. In her essays about places, the idea of place acts as a fulcrum for the creative imagination. A place is the element that anchors memory. A place is continuous and solid, and therefore has the power to connect people to their pasts, and to the lives of people who have worked and died before them. Woolf discovers a sort of immortality in places, and it is in the idea of place that Woolf's fierce attachment to the natural world meets her urge towards transcendence: 'place' is the most solid of things, yet certain places inspire Woolf to a nearly mystical vision into the heart of reality.

Throughout her work, Woolf casts 'place' as being crucial to the activity of the creative imagination in a variety of ways. To begin with, an artist can't work until she has found her place – that is, until she has grounded and positioned herself in some fundamentally important way. For Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, this positioning means finding the right spot in the Ramsay family's garden to complete her painting – a spot that looks towards Mrs Ramsay sitting in the window, but that also looks outward, over the sea and towards the lighthouse. For Orlando, finding her place means grounding herself in her vast home, furnishing it and making it her own, and then (finally) completing the poem that has lain close to her heart for three centuries. In *Between the Acts*, Miss La Trobe must ground herself in the continuity of the English countryside – and then in a pub – before she can write her next play; in *A Room of One's Own*, Mary Beton must acquire a room of her own with a lock on the door before she can write poetry. Even Clarissa Dalloway, who

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is an artist of human emotions rather than paints or language, must find her place before she can create: Clarissa walks the streets of London and finally returns to her Westminster home, where she throws the party during which she discovers herself.

In Woolf's eyes, 'place' is also crucial to the creative imagination as a stimulus: places provide material for the writer, or reveal some crucial fact that results in creative insight. In her essay 'Great Men's Houses', for example, Woolf's visit to the Carlyles' home at 5 Cheyne Row in London reveals a central fact that explains their famously difficult marriage and Carlyle's famously idiosyncratic habits: 5 Cheyne Row had no running water. As Woolf puts it, she enters the house and sees in a flash 'a fact that escaped the attention of Froude, and yet was of incalculable importance – they had no water laid on'.³ Being at 5 Cheyne Row spurs Woolf to imagine how the lack of running water devastated the marriage and destroyed the wife: every drop of water had to be pumped, boiled and carried up three flights of stairs for Carlyle's bath; the stairs seemed 'worn by the feet of harassed women carrying tin cans';⁴ Jane Carlyle ended her life with hollow cheeks, and with a look of bitterness and suffering in her face. As Woolf puts it, 'Such is the effect of a pump in the basement and a yellow tin bath up three pairs of stairs'.⁵ Woolf's entire imaginative excursion about the Carlyles and their marital difficulties is a revelation occasioned by 'place' – when Woolf sees the Carlyles' home first hand, her visit results in creative insight into their life and marriage.

Woolf also insists that places stimulate the creative imagination simply by providing material. This idea is the main thrust of her essay 'Street Haunting', in which the narrator leaves her London house late on a winter's afternoon to walk to the Strand to buy a pencil. The fact that the narrator is in search of a pencil indicates that she is in search of material, and she finds her material in abundant supply on the crowded streets of London. As she walks along in the crush of people, her identity shifts in response to the place: she sheds her indoor self and becomes 'part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one's own room'.⁶ When she enters Oxford Street, the objects in shop windows send her on long imaginative flights. A window filled with furniture makes her

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'build up all the chambers of an imaginary house and furnish them at one's will with sofa, table, carpet'.⁷ The window of an antique jewellery store holds a lovely string of pearls, and she imagines how her life would change if she wore them: 'It becomes instantly between two and three in the morning; the lamps are burning very white in the deserted streets of Mayfair ... There are a few lights in the bedrooms of great peers returned from the Court, of silk-stockinged footmen, of dowagers who have pressed the hands of statesmen.'⁸ When she stops in a second-hand bookshop close to the Strand, the place makes her feel a vivid imaginative connection to 'the unknown and the vanished whose only record is ... this little book of poems'.⁹ And as she heads for home, the places she passes evoke the people she has seen, so that she describes the imaginative release the streets of London give her: 'Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others.'¹⁰ By the close of 'Street Haunting', London's places have given the narrator an abundance of material; they have stimulated her to feats of literary creativity; they have connected her to vanished minds; and they have transported her beyond herself, into a state of union with other lives.

It is this last idea – place as a stimulus to experiences of connection, continuity and union with something beyond the confines of the single self – that is most important to Woolf's work. Woolf writes vividly about the importance of this aspect of 'place' in her essay 'The Moment: Summer's Night'. And since the concept of 'the moment' is so central to Woolf's work – the experience of 'the moment' appears in some form in all Woolf's novels, and is central to her autobiographical essays and to her ideas about the purposes of fiction – it is important to understand how experiences of 'place' lie at the heart of 'the moment'.

'The Moment: Summer's Night' is set in a garden in the country as night falls, with several people sitting outside at a table. (The literal location is no doubt Monk's House, the Woolfs' country home at Rodmell.) Woolf opens 'The Moment: Summer's Night' by recognising that 'the moment' is composed largely of visual and sense impressions: the feel of tired feet expanding into worn slippers; the cool evening breeze blowing gently over warm skin. But 'the moment' is not only a

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fleeting sensation; it is also something rooted and durable, and that timeless aspect of 'the moment' derives from place:

But this moment is also composed of a sense that the legs of the chair are sinking through the centre of the earth, passing through the rich garden earth; they sink, weighted down. Then the sky loses its colour perceptibly and a star here and there makes a point of light. Then changes, unseen in the day, coming in succession seem to make an order evident. One becomes aware that we are spectators and also passive participants in a pageant. And as nothing can interfere with the order, we have nothing to do but accept, and watch.¹¹

As Woolf sees it, part of the experience of 'the moment' is the sense of being completely rooted in a place – the sense that the legs of one's chair are weighted into the garden and sink to the centre of the earth. And this sense of being firmly tied to a place results, in turn, in a vivid feeling of historical continuity and connection – the feeling that the place connects the viewer to all of human life that unfolded on that spot before him. It is as if human life were arranged in a pageant, and being rooted to a place makes one 'aware that we are spectators and also passive participants in a pageant'.

As 'The Moment: Summer's Night' unfolds, 'place' assumes other roles in the experience of 'the moment'. It ties together the 'knot of consciousness'¹² around the table – that is, it connects the four people who sit together in the dark. Their talk leads to an imaginative flight about the lives of the villagers next door: one of the people speculates that the husband beats the wife every Saturday night. And then the dark place in the garden assumes a different, expectant aspect. The cows begin to low in the fields; the trees become heavy dark shapes – and the place and the dark combine to send the narrator outside herself, into an experience of union with something far transcending the single self:

Then comes the terror, the exultation; the power to rush out unnoticed, alone; to be consumed; to be swept away to become a rider on the random wind; the tossing wind; the trampling and neighing wind; the horse with the blown-back mane; the tumbling, the foraging; he who gallops for ever, nowhither travelling, indifferent; to be part of the

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eyeless dark, to be rippling and streaming, to feel the glory run molten up the spine, down the limbs, making the eyes glow, burning, bright, and penetrate the buffeting waves of the wind.¹³

This nearly mystical experience of transcendent union with things beyond the self is another staple of Woolf's work: her characters often crave a similar release from the confines of the self, and her journals and other autobiographical works contain descriptions of similar visionary experiences. The experience may take the form of a transcendent, momentary union with nature, or of a vision of something indisputably 'real' in the landscape around her. Sometimes – especially in her diaries – Woolf lacks the language to describe something so ineffable, and simply calls this intense vision 'it'. But these transcendent experiences of connection to something beyond the human personality, and of a resultant sense of the expansion and release of the self, always begin with some significant experience rooted in a specific place, and always produce the sense of connection to something timeless.

'The Moment: Summer's Night', then, defines 'place' as the nexus for two characteristically Woolfian experiences: a person's vivid sense of connection to the lives and minds of people who have gone before, and a person's sense of fusing with things outside the self, allowing an escape from the narrow confines of individual personality into something timeless. Both of these aspects of 'place' appear consistently in Woolf's novels. In *Orlando*, when the heroine lives in her vast house, she feels an intense connection to the building that sums up the lives of the people who have lived and worked there before her; she then makes herself part of the vast creative procession by adding her own anonymous touches to the house. In *Between the Acts*, Miss La Trobe's village pageant – rooted in the locales of Pointz Hall – vividly evokes the audience's connection to the procession of village life that unfolds on the stage, and that extends back to a time when prehistoric beasts roamed the grounds. In *A Room of One's Own*, the narrator understands that the quadrangles of Cambridge were once prehistoric swamps, until generations of kings and people worked to build a tradition (exclusive though it is) that connects the living past to the present. In *To the Lighthouse*, the characters' attachment to Mrs Ramsay and her place

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results in a moment of timeless vision as they sit gathered around the dinner table. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa's connection to place allows her to move beyond herself and to formulate her 'transcendental theory', in which she becomes part of the trees around her, and in which she can live on forever in the places that complete her.

From the Lighthouse to Monk's House examines five places and five books. Each chapter examines the way Woolf portrays a literary landscape in terms of her consistent ideas about the importance of places; but each chapter also tells the story of a place and the story of a work in her life. Chapter One, on *To the Lighthouse* and St Ives, examines Woolf's childhood summers in St Ives, and the effect of those golden summers on her subsequent writing; it also examines the way Woolf uses *To the Lighthouse* to realign herself and her work in relation to her parents – an act Woolf later defined as 'psycho-analysing' herself. Chapter Two, on *Mrs Dalloway* and London, discusses Woolf's love of London and the way London landscapes give Clarissa and Septimus timeless experiences of connection to things outside themselves; it also tells the story of Woolf's periodic battles with mental illness, and the way those struggles are reflected in the novel. Chapter Three, on Knole and *Orlando*, focuses on Woolf's love affair with Vita Sackville-West; it also examines the way Woolf came to portray Knole as an emblem of imaginative connection to the past, and discusses *Orlando* as an act of homage to Vita. Chapter Four, on Cambridge and *A Room of One's Own*, tells the story of Woolf's uneasy relationship with Cambridge University as one source of her feminism; it also discusses her portrayal of the historical continuity that Cambridge represents – a historical tradition that systematically excluded women. Chapter Five, on *Between the Acts* and Rodmell, discusses Woolf's loving relation to Monk's House and examines how the Sussex countryside gave her an enduring and consoling sense of connection to the past; it also tells the story of the early days of World War II, Woolf's last bout with mental illness, and her suicide in the River Ouse.

Each chapter of the book is divided into three sections. The first section tells the story of a place in terms of Woolf's life: how she felt about it, what she said about it, how it had an impact on her personality. The second section discusses the way Woolf uses the place as the

basis for a work, and evokes and transmutes its physical geography and history. The third section guides the traveller on a tour of the place, interpreting specific aspects in terms of Woolf's life and work. *From the Lighthouse to Monk's House* is aimed at the audience Woolf cherished most – those whom Dr Johnson described as 'common readers' – and is an unabashedly hybrid work that combines literary biography, literary criticism and travel. I hope that *From the Lighthouse to Monk's House* will bring Woolf's landscapes and novels alive for the armchair traveller; I also hope that those readers who make the literary pilgrimage to Woolf's places will discover in these pages – and in the places themselves – some new insight into Woolf's work.

During her long career as a journalist, Virginia Woolf had occasion to write reviews of books like this one – books that, at least in part, described literary pilgrimages. Once, in a disapproving mood, she concluded that a book failed miserably because 'a writer's country is a territory within his own brain; and we run the risk of disillusionment if we try to turn such phantom cities into tangible brick and mortar'.¹⁴ Woolf began her essay on the Brontës and Haworth Parsonage with an apology based on similar principles: 'I do not know whether pilgrimages to the shrines of famous men ought not to be condemned as sentimental journeys. It is better to read Carlyle in your own study chair than to visit the sound-proof room and pore over the manuscripts at Chelsea.'¹⁵ But on other occasions, Woolf confessed that she herself had made such journeys, 'dozens of times', and even identified with the literary pilgrim who looked up 'earnestly at a house front decorated with a tablet', trying to 'conjure up the figure of Dr Johnson'. As Woolf put it, 'We cannot get past a great writer's house without pausing to give an extra look into it and furnishing it as far as we are able with his cat and his dog, his books and his writing table'.¹⁶ Or, to put it another way – as Woolf put it in *Mrs Dalloway* – 'to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places'.¹⁷

