

Phyllis Rose
**WOMAN
OF LETTERS**
A LIFE OF VIRGINIA WOOLF



PANDORA

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Preface

Let me state that without my notes Shade's text simply has no human reality at all since the human reality of such a poem as his (being too skittish and too reticent for an autobiographical work), with the omission of many pithy lines carelessly rejected by him, has to depend entirely on the reality of the author and his surroundings, attachments and so forth, a reality that only my notes can provide. To this statement my dear poet would probably not have subscribed, but, for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word.

Nabokov, *Pale Fire*

In beginning this book, which aims to place Virginia Woolf's works in a biographical context, I think for caution of Nabokov, whose brilliant mockery of such an endeavor serves as my epigraph. In trying to provide the "human reality" of a work of art, the commentator may impose upon it his or her own vision, turning, for example as in *Pale Fire*, a low-keyed nature poem into an epic about the exile of a Baltic king. To try to make connections between a writer's experience and his or her art is to risk transporting our own bees to other people's bonnets. Richard Ellmann, perhaps the best of contemporary literary biographers, acknowledges the risk when he uses the phrase "biographical speculations" to describe his work.

In setting itself the task of exploring what is variously called the "inner life" or the "imaginative world" of creative artists, contemporary biographical criticism may be seen—unsympathetically—as trying to create for itself an artificially workable gray area between the facts of a writer's life and his fictions. But in fact it is moving toward the recognition that a life is as much a work of fiction—of guiding narrative structures—as novels and poems, and that the task of literary biography is to explore this fiction.

The metaphors may vary—you can be at a fork or a crossroad in life, you can be like Dante in the middle of life's pathway, lost in a forest—but the need to shape expectations about experience does not: past, present, and future would be an unassimilable, perhaps an unlivable blur unless we projected upon it a structure of meaning to sift out certain moments as significant, some experiences as crucial. Each of us, influenced perhaps by one ideology or another, generates his or her own symbolic landscape, with its individual twists and curves, so that one person's fork in the road—to take a crude example, the fork between family and career—is no fork at all to another, but a two-lane highway, and one person's state of liberation is another's state of chaos and disintegration.

The highly personal configuration of significance by which a person views his experience I would call his personal mythology. Only autobiographers are forced to reveal their personal mythologies, and even some of them manage to avoid doing it, but Virginia Woolf's personal mythology, the set of stories she made up about her own experience, informs her correspondence, her memoirs, and many of her essays, as well as her novels. So in the parts of this book which deal exclusively with biographical material, I have been guided by what Woolf herself found significant, the myths she generated about her own experience.

My first two chapters, for example, rely heavily on memoirs Woolf wrote at various times which can be put together to form a more or less chronological coverage of her life until the first World War.* The narrative structure of these memoirs, which I follow and elucidate, seems to me more significant than any particular facts they reveal. Indeed, the details vary; there are inconsistencies. Woolf cannot resist telling a good story, or, on the next go round, telling it even better. At the end of one essay she describes how her half-brother, George Duckworth, entered her room one night to plague her with embraces. The light was out, she was almost asleep, and he told her not to turn the light on. In her next essay she recalls that episode again, only now she is in bed reading *Marius the Epicurean* when Duckworth comes in, and he turns the light out—a trivial change, perhaps, but the effect is more sinister. These chapters present the leading figures and events in the myth of her youth, material which served as the basis of much of her fiction. The focus of succeeding chapters will alternate between her life and her novels, seeking points of fruitful connection between them.

Books on Virginia Woolf tend to be of two kinds. Studies of her novels, even very recent ones, concentrate on their

* Published as *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (Sussex: The University Press, 1976).

form and technique. Emphasizing the autonomy of the text, eschewing context, they concern themselves with point of view, with "modes of subjectivity," with the way in which the novels' forms are generated by Woolf's interest in the subjective nature of life, rather than by traditional elements of plot and character. These formalist approaches have generally sustained the image of Virginia Woolf that was her own worst fear, that of the artist encased in the bubble of her own art. Her novels emerge from such studies as fictionalized meditations on Self and Other, Time and Flux, rather like Woolf's own parody of Mr. Ramsay discoursing on "subject and object and the nature of reality."

On the other hand, recent years have produced a flood of biographical information about the Bloomsbury group, led off by the publication of Leonard Woolf's autobiography. Michael Holroyd's work on Lytton Strachey should be mentioned here, Quentin Bell's urbane and masterful biography of Virginia Woolf, and Nigel Nicolson's *Portrait of a Marriage*.^{*} Quentin Bell defined the task he set for himself as historical—to record the facts of his aunt's life. The interest of the other books is partly historical, partly sociological. Although Holroyd has chapters on Strachey's works, his absence of perspective on them shows that his interest is really elsewhere, and his biography has aptly been described as a monument in the history of gay liberation rather than of literature. The Nicolson book, in addition to its unembarrassed presentation of female homosexuality, constitutes an extended—and provocative—argument for open marriage. Bloomsbury seems to be serving a contemporary audience as

^{*} Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, 2 vols. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1972); Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey: A Critical Biography* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968); Nigel Nicolson, *Portrait of a Marriage* (New York: Atheneum, 1973); Leonard Woolf, *Autobiography*, 5 vols. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1960-70). The Nicolson's were not really "Bloomsbury," but, outside of scholarly circles, the distinction has seemed a fine one, especially from this side of the Atlantic. More recently, The Hogarth Press in London and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich in New York have begun to publish, in yearly installments, Virginia Woolf's complete diary and correspondence.

a historical touchstone in the examination of its own sexual revolution, and while this may be valuable, it is a long way from literature.

This new spurt of biography has done little to revise the damaging image of Virginia Woolf for which E. M. Forster formulated a phrase in 1941: the Invalid Lady of Bloomsbury. Indeed this image has been reinforced. Leonard Woolf revealed in *Beginning Again* details of his wife's mental illness and his own efforts to cope with her problem. Quentin Bell tells about her sexual exploitation in childhood by her half-brother George Duckworth and about her later frigidity.*

Bell's biography will no doubt remain the definitive source of information about Woolf—and deservedly. All the more reason, however, that its bias should be clearly defined. Bell says little about Woolf's novels, and his willingness to describe her mental disturbances and ultimate suicide combined with an unwillingness to treat in the context of biography what was in fact the center of her life, her writing, creates the impression of a singularly unhealthy existence. Leonard Woolf emerges as the hero of his wife's life and a martyr to her insanity. Bell made use of Virginia Woolf's unpublished memoirs, journals, and correspondence in constructing his history of her life, but his exclusion of her essays and novels as evidence of her development left it to others to explore the ways in which Woolf's life fed her fiction and in which her fiction may illuminate aspects of her life. And so I have returned to the original sources used by Bell, but I employ them in a rather different way, as evidence of myth rather than fact.

In uniting a study of Woolf's life with a study of her works, I want to redress the biographical emphasis on her illness and suicide by showing the extent to which she took her life into her own hands. It is true that from one point of

* "A Sketch of the Past," her most extensive and revealing memoir, which implicates both her half-brothers in sexual abuse, was not available to Quentin Bell until after his book was completed.

view, her biography is an allegory of how not to live; she was intermittently insane and ended by drowning herself. But the fact that Van Gogh cut off his ear or that Woolf drowned in the Ouse, while undeniably part of the drama, is as little the point of the drama as the fact that Hamlet dies in a swordfight at the end of Shakespeare's play. In fact, the greater temptation these days is to assume that suicide is a proof of genius and to revere as "more creative" writers who have been neurotic on a spectacular scale. I think it unfortunate in more ways than one that some of the leading women writers of our century—one thinks of Plath and Sexton as well as Woolf—have killed themselves. Erica Jong calls this the "head-in-the-oven" school of women writers, and like her, I would prefer to see less emphasis on despair, more on resilience in the literary history of women.

Despite her illness, despite restrictions on her activity, Virginia Woolf was immensely productive. To say nothing of her novels, her literary criticism and essays, by themselves, constitute a major achievement. She was the most ingratiating and in some ways the most sophisticated spokeswoman that feminism has ever had. And in her journals, only a small part of which have been published in *A Writer's Diary*, she explored her life as it passed with a seriousness and sustained acuteness unmatched by any woman except Anaïs Nin, whose diaries are clearly her central work. A claim to reputation, slim but valid (look after all at the attention paid Horace Walpole), could also be based on her delightful and extensive correspondence.

Such creative achievement is a rare thing; in a woman—for reasons Woolf herself explored—it is even rarer, and to examine her life is to examine the dynamics of a miracle. Few of us may match her achievement, but to some extent, the problems of achievement for a woman are typical, so that the dynamics of a miracle may possibly shed some light on other lives.

Like everyone else, however, Virginia Woolf was unlike

everyone else. It would be easier for me, and in some ways more pleasant, to portray her completely as a feminist heroine, the victim of social and cultural forces which every woman who sets high standards for herself in a society like ours must face, and to this extent a model for us all. But the danger exists of overly normalizing a unique and complicated person. Born with unusual talent as well as an inherited tendency to madness, with a distinguished man of letters for her father and a charismatic woman, a great beauty, for her mother, she had extraordinary opportunities in childhood, but was also subjected to extraordinary pressures. To erase the squiggles of her life in order to make it conform to a clear and typical trajectory would be, at the very least, untruthful.

In this study I want also to readjust the critical perspective on Woolf's art, for I see in her novels not meditations on philosophical themes but personal treatments of vital and immediate problems of identity. Her concern with the position of women, intertwined as it is with her sense of herself, informs the novels, which tend to state contrasting impulses toward issues of selfhood: the urge to be a maternal Mrs. Ramsay, for example, and the urge to reject her in favor of independence and achievement; the urge to affirm life by creating social bonds like Mrs. Dalloway, and the urge to despair in isolation like Septimus Warren Smith. To see her as a novelist deeply concerned with social and cultural reality requires that one appreciate the feminist perspective in her books, taking "feminist" to refer to a political consciousness which began with reasoning, to borrow a phrase from E. L. Doctorow, from her own hurt feelings. I view Woolf's feminism as the crux of her emotional as well as her intellectual life. It is also the key to revising the image of her as an isolated and somewhat precious technician.

In one of those fascinating shifts which suggest how closely aesthetic judgments are linked to other kinds of awareness, we are currently witnessing a thorough revalu-

ation of Virginia Woolf. In the past, she was considered for the most part an elegant but finally a minor writer; she is well on the way to becoming major. Though her literary achievement can sustain this surge of scrutiny, what inspired it, I believe, was her feminism, which found in the contemporary spread of feminist consciousness a receptive audience.

Certainly in my own case the path of interest led to the novels from an initial, strong response to *A Room of One's Own* and certain passages in *A Writer's Diary*, like this one, which reflects upon feminine identity:

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.

This entry, written in 1928, astonished me when I read it for the first time in 1971. Its frank confrontation of a possible conflict between a woman's achievements and the lives of her loved ones seemed more daringly to the point than anything being written about women at that time, and although, since then, the theme has been sufficiently worked over, Woolf's statement of it remains fresh and direct.

Woolf's feminism expresses itself most tellingly in her essays and diary as a concern with the psychological effects of social structures, with the internalization of patriarchal authority even after the actual authority has weakened. She is particularly sensitive to shadowy internal prohibitions and emotional phantoms, like the one she imagines standing behind her as she wrote her first review, telling her not to deal harshly with a book by a man. Without minimizing social and cultural problems, Woolf suggests the extent to which the struggle for liberation is going on inside. Her novels, reread after *A Writer's Diary* and *A Room of One's Own*,

seemed continued revelations of the same concerns. At that point Woolf ceased in my mind to be an impersonal generator of elegant works of fiction and became a larger and more interesting figure—practitioner of an art which conceals art, elegant, to be sure, but more importantly the author of works written in passion which do not boast of their passion, and, indeed, often try to hide it. Although her novels can stand alone, their full emotional resonance only emerges when they are seen in a wider context, the context of Woolf's experience and of her beliefs.

Virginia Woolf's talent, spreading from a core of strength and vulnerability, of self-containment and resentment, of charm and anger, is so variously expressed that to consider her achievement as a novelist is not enough, and so, largely in token of the breadth of her accomplishment (and of my admiration), I call her in the title of this book a woman of letters. I also intend some ironies in that title, but they are not directed at Virginia Woolf. *Woman of Letters* was written in sympathy, by which I do not mean that it was written always in agreement with or approval of its subject; I mean that my goal throughout has been imaginative understanding of a figure who, as the years pass, seems less remote and less aloof, but whose deepest concerns—her art and her feminism—remain to be fully explored.

Middletown, Connecticut
November, 1977

P.R.

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If I were to articulate fully my gratitude to the people who have helped me in the writing of this book, I should vex everyone but myself and perhaps the recipients of my thanks. So I shall be spare and merely beg those of you named here to believe in the warmth of my gratitude.

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Perhaps by the time this is published, my son, Teddy Rose, will be old enough to recognize his name in print and to read the word "THANKS" which I write here for him, in small recompense for the vivacity that brackets my day.

Contents

- 1 St. Ives and Kensington 3
- 2 Bloomsbury 31
- 3 *The Voyage Out* 49
- 4 Lytton Strachey and Leonard Woolf 75
- 5 Transitions and Experiments 93
- 6 The Love of Women 109
- 7 *Mrs. Dalloway* 125

viii *CONTENTS*

8	<i>To the Lighthouse</i>	153
9	V. Sackville-West and Androgyny	175
10	The Thirties	195
11	Life without a Future	225
	Portrait: A Woman of Letters	249
	Chronology	267
	Notes	271
	Index	291

Illustrations

Virginia Woolf, 1939

(photograph by Gisèle Freund) vi

Julia Stephen, c. 1867

(International Museum of Photography,
George Eastman House) 6

Julia Stephen and Stella Duckworth, c. 1894

(Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, The New York Public
Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations) 14

Virginia Stephen and George Duckworth

(Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, The New York
Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations) 25