

Virginia Woolf

A Biography - I

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The book has been in my library since the 70's and suddenly I am seized with a desire to read it. How come? I glimpse one of those BBC/PBS productions obviously set in Edwardian England on TV. Names like Lytton and Duncan are bandied around. This can only mean Bloomsbury, a source of unending fascination to succeeding generations. I am reminded of the book, take it down, start reading it and am delighted. Reading for pure pleasure for a change.

Why this fascination, mine and others? Virginia Woolf is a cult writer, and the reason for her being so are not entirely obvious. I first heard of her in connection with the Burton-Taylor movie 'Who is afraid of Virginia Woolf?' and thus at one of the parties I was invited to through the machinations of my host family during my first term at Harvard I claimed that she was American scandalizing a young woman, no doubt an English major. I was quickly set right on the spot, and subsequently I received a modicum of literary education. I tried to read something of her, but found it excruciatingly boring¹. Later on I read 'Day and Night' which made scant impression on me, a few years later I read 'Orlando' with indifference and some fifteen years ago I read 'To the Lighthouse' maybe with somewhat more of an impact, if not a particularly engaging one. Then my reading of her essays ('The Common Reader' and 'The Second Common Reader') was more rewarding. Nevertheless I acquired in the late seventies, six volumes of her correspondence and two volumes of her diary, which have since then taken a permanent space in my bookcase. This speaks a certain amount of intrigue, whether mostly for the fascination of the writer's craft or simply the snobbishness of highbrow tendencies I cannot properly judge.

Yet the fascination is not so much with her, as with the larger canvas of which she is but a part - Bloomsbury. And this grew out of a more primordial passion stemming from my teens. It was Bertrand Russell and his set of smart friends - the Apostles ' that fired my imagination. As a teenager I found myself rather socially isolated with no one really to talk and socialize with, and thus the idea of being set in a social circle of clever people my own age seemed to me to be simply exhilarating. To be a student at Oxbridge seemed as close to paradise you could expect this side of death. And maybe it would have been. The period of late Victorian and early Edwardian times struck me as very romantic, just as the corresponding period in Sweden of Elsa Beskow struck me sentimentally. The period of my grandparents childhood in rural settings without cars and flying machines. The notion of the English setting was further elaborated on, and the fascination fortified, by the novels of Aldous Huxley (and to a lesser extent those of E.M.Forster) which I devoured in my late teens. The intellectual companionship, the cleverness, the salons out at country

¹ It was 'Between the Acts' as I recall back in 1975

estates. What more could you wish for? So one thing led to another, and the spectacle of the Bloomsbury circle naturally found a context to which I was already in many ways familiar. Soon, I do not know how soon, names such as Lytton Strachey (whose 'Eminent Victorians' made Russell laugh so loud in prison that he was admonished for inappropriate behavior²), Duncan Grant, Clive and Vanessa Bell, and not to forget Maynard Keynes became household ones. The fascination was not so much with the individuals as with the group as such, the social setting I envied and admired and would not have minded being part of. And I guess the same goes for everyone else intrigued by the phenomenon. Thus the pleasure of reading such a biography can be succinctly summarized. It is the pleasure of gossip. Ad gossip there is galore, most of the them were highly articulate and prone to writing at lengths, be it letters, diaries, biographies, indeed one is almost able to charter the chronicle day by day. Everyone writing about everyone else and it becoming the feed for commentaries, discussions, quarrels, break-up and reconciliations. Would you make a study of it you could drown in the riches of the sources. And to what avail really?

The author starts from the beginning meaning with the forefathers almost exclusively on the Stephen side. A cavalcade of lawyers slowly but surely making their way through diligence and talent, especially as lettered men. Such an introduction in a biography is normally rather tedious, before you can take an interest in a grandfather you have to have a vested interest in the grandchild itself, the ostensible subject, once that has been established you may be properly interested in the grandfather as well. But nevertheless the author manages to make it rather engaging. In fact his basic attitude to the subject is one of engagement, to him Virginia Woolf is not merely a subject for a biography whom he approaches through written documents and testimonies of strangers, but a living aunt of whom he has direct personal memories. This gives to his project an authority that is usually lacking in a biographer, allowing him to get away with things we normally resent in published biographies, such as interpretations of what the subject may have felt or thought, drawing, as we surmise, rightly or wrongly on hidden sources not in the nature of being documentable.

The setting is idyllic. An elderly father and a younger mother, yet old enough to have had, just as her husband, not only the experience of a previous marriage but a brood to go with it. In toto there will be eight children, one of them a Stephen mentally handicapped and in an institution. To that add a host of servants necessary for the running of a household. England at that time (and of course not only at that time) was stratified by class, roughly in three layers, upper middle and lower. Of those the middle one was the most class conscious, understandably clutching at the upper classes its feet dangling above the abyss of the lower ones, and at least one further tripartition was made, (in fact Orwell speaks about an even further layer in pinpointing his own location within the stratification), and the Stephens were comfortably part of the upper middle class, despite the concerns and worries the head of the family had about his financial security. In short the family enjoyed the fruits of privilege without having to have fought for it themselves. The children did not attend school but was tutored at home, while the sons were sent off to Cambridge this was denied the daughters to their consternation. Much of the tutoring was actually done

² I read and reviewed it in a previous volume and honestly I could find little comic relief, maybe because the book has dated, meaning without the proper context it withers.

by the parents with mixed results. The father Leslie a wrangler himself in mathematics had very little patience for the shortcomings of his daughters, whose skills in arithmetics would throughout their lives be shaky at best, and in practice next to non-existent. Half-hearted attempts were made to impart a modicum of Greek and Latin and some Modern language, such as French, but with non-satisfactory result. What education the sisters, especially Virginia obtained, was through their readings out of their father's library, and Virginia herself was an avid reader³. Lacking formal education as well as being jealous of her brother's sojourns at the university she would suffer for the rest of her life from a perception of being uneducated. And of course in many ways she was, scientifically and politically. But she did of course try to make up for it.

Childhood was idyllic, the two sisters being very close, living in a big house in fashionable Kensington, with annual excursions to a house in the country, at St.Ives in Cornwall to be exact⁴. Those sojourns in the countryside belonged to the happiest childhood memories of Virginia involving free roaming around, modest explorations and adventures, and plenty of fresh air, which has always been seen as wholesome and conducive to health. To have two dwellings, one in the city and one in the country, would be a matter of course for her during her adulthood. And the desire for long country walks would stay with her. And so disaster struck in 1895, their mother died, leading to the first intimation of Virginia's many mental breakdowns in her adult life. She was just entering her teens. The place of the mother was taken by their older step-sister Stella, twenty-six at the time, to which in addition was added the burden of being the crutch of the bereaved father, whose need for support and reassurance was insatiable. The step-daughter eventually escaped the demands put on her by her step-father, by marrying an insistent suitor two years later but the happiness of release and matrimony was cruelly cut short, soon thereafter she succumbed to death as well. Vanessa, the older sister now had to shoulder her burden, which she did competently without too much emotional engagement, having always preferred her mother to her father, with Virginia the case being the other way around. The death of the mother had led to the selling of the house in Cornwall, a steady fixture during their childhood, to be replaced by temporary rentals in the country. The girls were growing up and were considered pretty, and indeed the picture of Virginia on the front cover of the book showing her at the age of twenty-one indeed presents a fragile and pensive beauty. Their half-brother George descending from the mothers side of the family, a Duckworth, was of a very different tone than the more intellectual Stephens. The Duckworths did indeed carry a slightly higher social distinction than the Stephens, and their half-brother was very much concerned to make it in high society, an ambition that he generously wanted to share with his half-sisters, but which they refused to have any part in. Their interests were in brains and they gravitated more and more to a bohemian lifestyle, whose eccentricities now would strike us as mild, if even that, while at the time were thought highly unconventional not to say scandalous. George showed much kindness and was very solicitous towards his sisters, but maybe too much so, crossing that barrier that separates kind affection from lust. In

³ A list of the books she read during a six-month period during her early teens is included, the list of titles is impressive both for the contents as well as the quantity, on the average one book a week, a steady pace she no doubt maintained for the rest of her life when health allowed it

⁴ Russells daughter Katheryn recalls in the memoirs of her father happy trips to Cornwall as well

short accusations of molestation from childhood throughout adolescence are brought forward by the author permanently damaging his reputation at least to literary posterity⁵. How much damage this actually did is hard to gauge, in the case of Vanessa, marginal, in the case of Virginia maybe deep and lasting.

The sisters were obviously snobs, although their snobbery found more subtle and sophisticated outlets than that of their half-brother. To be smart counted for almost everything, and among their darling brother Thoby's Cambridge friends they eventually found objects worthy of attention, admiration and ultimately attraction. The interests of the two sisters diverged, Vanessa, the elder one, was attracted to painting, while Virginia, as most voracious readers dreamt about a literary vocation, always reading and writing letters and biding her time.

The inevitable happened, their father got sick, was diagnosed with cancer and given not much time to live, but nevertheless held on until early 1904. After his death the children, now young adults, were on their own with life about to open up. Maybe the ideal time in your life to become orphaned, the parents having fulfilled their biological duty of reproduction and rearing stepping out of the way. The house in Kensington was sold and instead another one acquired in the much less fashionable Bloomsbury, and the rest is history one may be tempted to write. That is true but not quite. Anyway the sisters were now free to pursue unfettered the bohemian lifestyle to which they felt drawn, however, their early years of freedom being marred by the unexpected death of their brother Thoby from typhoid fever acquired during a trip to Istanbul in 1906. But that did not mean a severance from his Cambridge friends, shortly thereafter Vanessa gave in to the courtship of Clive Bell, one of the few solidly heterosexual men of their circle, and as a consequence started to enjoy conjugal pleasures in a way she may have been unprepared for. The union would result in two boys, the younger one the author of this biography, while under its roof a third child, a daughter, would later on emerge, but with a different father, Vanessa true to her bohemian principles had moved on (as this suited the sexual proclivities of her husband perfectly, the marriage continued if only in form not substance). But what about Virginia, would she drift into the role of a spinster? There were no real shortage of suitors, although her sexual frigidity did not invite physical passion (her brother-in-law carried on an open flirtation with her for years, but unlikely to have been consummated in any tangible sense). Although such courtship gratified her she could not contemplate marriage with anybody whose brilliance would not surpass her own. There was one dear friend with whom she could actually contemplate marriage, and that was with Lytton Strachey. He was admittedly homosexual, but that was as far as she was concerned probably more of an advantage than a drawback. He actually proposed to her once, but got cold feet and withdrew his offer. Although Virginia probably would have accepted it, had it been renewed but Strachey had lost interest. Instead there appeared on the scene another character from the Cambridge days, another Apostle, Leonard Woolf who after his graduation had done very competent administrative work in Ceylon and was on temporary leave back in England. Would there be a match? Virginia was elusive, his

⁵ Nigel Nicolson in his preface to the collected letters of VW begs to differ thinking that the charges are exaggerated. The standard picture of Duckworth shows an affable but simple man well in accordance with a smooth and charming social climber.

Jewishness made him foreign. He had to come to a decision soon, his leave was coming to a close. Could he contemplate leaving for Ceylon without Virginia, but if he resigned and she would nevertheless refuse him? He applied for an extension on the grounds of private affairs, but was not granted one, unless he became more specific. He was reluctant, resigned, got a leave, and in all the mess back and forth, Virginia consented, according to her nephew the wisest decision in her life. And that makes for the second and final chapter of her life which is pretty much divided into two parts of equal duration of being Miss Stephen and Mrs Woolf respectively. And this is the topic of the second half.

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