

Virginia Woolf

A Biography II

Q.Bell

August 8-10, 2016

When Leonard Woolf married Virginia Stephen he had no idea really what he let himself in for. That she was a highly strung woman he must of course have known, but that she would be liable to severe bouts of madness no one had informed him of. But he had no option than to take it in stride. Shortly after the marriage her book aptly titled 'The Voyage Out' came out. She was terrified as how it would be received by the public and the critics. The strain provoked a mental breakdown of a severity and extension she had never experienced before. Drastic measures were taken, and indeed there was a suicide attempt in the form of an overdose. The attempt was discovered in time, a quick pumping of the stomach and the danger was averted. There was a long convalescence and eventually a recovery of sorts, but not complete, the episode left a permanent mark, in fact it brought about an irreversible change. It is not clear what was the nature of her insanity. The author hints at a manic-depressive condition. Apart from brief periods of euphoria there seems to have been no marked mania involved, and the depressions seem less to be of an indigenous nature than a consequence of the harrowing experience of madness itself. At least at its culmination she seems not to have lost her sense of insight that she was in fact mad. The author speculates that perhaps Freud might have cured her, something which was possible to suggest at the time of writing (the book was published in 1972) , but would not be seriously considered today. But he also admits that psychoanalysis could only treat a neurosis not a full-blown insanity. Whatever the experience was harrowing for anyone involved. The fact that she was sexually frigid, whatever the course, seems in comparison a minor problem for the fresh bridegroom. At least her carnal desire did not involve men, to what extent she was a real sapphist is up to speculation. True she had had in her youth crushes on older women, one a certain Magde the wife of one of her cousins, another a six foot two tall woman by name of Violet Dickinson, with both of whom she at periods conducted intensive correspondences often on a very silly level. And then above all there was Vita Sackville-West the wife of the diplomat Harold Nicolson, and an experienced lesbian, with whom carnal involvement would have been the case if there ever was one; yet the relation seemed mostly to have been on the sentimental level. The final verdict by her nephew seems to have been that she was after all in love with her husband at least depending on him as on no one else. When she finally committed suicide in the spring of 1941, she wrote two letters, one to her husband and one to her sister. Not surprisingly the marriage produced no issue. Virginia jealous of her sister would not have minded them, but her husband, after consultation with doctors decided against it. What did he get out of the marriage? Could it be that he considered his wife a genius and saw it as his mission to support her in her quest, along with the fascination of being close and connected to such a phenomenon?

The remaining almost thirty years of her life were rather similar and hence can be summarized briefly. First and foremost it was her literary work, her fiction. Her debut occurred after her marriage and hence with her marriage name, which one is tempted to think of very fortunate. As an artist name 'Virginia Woolf' seems definitely superior to 'Virginia Stephen', or is it mere hindsight that gives such an impression? The struggle of each novel lasted for years accompanied by severe misgivings and periods of inactions and postponements. The writing was one thing, the rewriting another, as well as the tedious process of final polishing and proof-reading. The author makes no attempts at discussing the novels at all, apart from intermittent hints as to biographical connections, what he does is to present a chronology of the writings, which is not that easy as very little of it finds its way in her letters and diaries. Crucial though was her dread and anguish at the reception of each new work. How would it be received by friends, the public and the critics? It all seems as if it is just going to be a question of praise, which if you think of it seems a bit anti-climactic considering all the efforts which have gone into it. Can you not receive praise in easier more straightforward ways? If receiving praise and appreciation is what you are really after. We see here a difference between an artistic contribution and a scientific one. The latter is part of a chain and its worth and interest depend on how it connects to other contributions. You do not ask about say a mathematical article whether it is good or not, it is part of a conversation, and its worth is reflected in how it will influence other articles, if the suggestions in it will be taken up and developed by others. Thus you do not articulate and if necessary feign interest you show it by acting on it. An artistic contribution is different, in a way it is an end in itself whose sole purpose is to elicit wonder and admiration, and if fails to do so, it fails altogether. While a scientific contribution is objective, an artistic one is subjective, it is an expression of your personality, your sensibilities, your intuition, your intelligence, in short the basic features of yourself which you put on display. To disapprove of a work is to disapprove of its creator. Thus, given the sensitive and neurotic nature of her frail psyche, it is no wonder that she was anguished and lapped up every trace of appreciation greedily as well as being devastated by any suggestion of censure and disapproval. In fact every launch of a new work was liable to precipitate another bout of mental breakdown.

Now in addition to the literary activity that formed the core of her life, there was also lighter assignments such as journalism, mostly in the form of book reviews, which she had already begun long before her marriage. At times she produced a lot of those, no doubt cutting into the time of more 'serious' work, on the other hand, those as well as her epistolary and journal activity may have simply filled up the lulls of her fictional writing, keeping in shape by doing a kind of doodling. In addition to her writing there was the publishing business - the Hogarth Press (so named after the house they lived at in suburban Richmond) - she ran with her husband. This enabled a convenient outlay for publishing her and other avant-garde works by their extended circle, in fact but for the exception of two novels published by her half-brother Gerald Duckworth's firm, all her fiction was published under the Hogarth signum. It had all started as a hobby acquiring a printing press and learning the basics of the craft on the job, but became more and more of a big business usurping time and effort and requiring assistants with whom they seldom got along. There was continued talk about selling it, but apart from bailing out her half

at the end, this was never accomplished during her lifetime.

Now the routines of the days were fairly regular unless interrupted by social life, at times excessively active, or long bouts of illness physical as well as mental, both being more or less conflated. She maintained a love for the country, and as noted in a previous review, she always saw to it that they had a country residence, not in Cornwall but in Sussex, fairly close to that of her sister Vanessa. She loved taking long country walks, up to seven or eight miles, involving jumping over ditches or climbing barbed wires. In the 30's she started to resent the growing pollution of the country side in the shape of cheap bungalows and industrial development. As to eating she was always very picky, but she enjoyed a good cigar. To maintain a household in those days you had to have servants, and those were often live-in ones, which rattled her nerves. One particular proved to be a sustaining presence regularly giving notice only to repent. Eventually they would settle for outside servants who came to do the job and then left in the evening. Times were changing, it was progressively becoming harder and harder to hire domestic help at the onset of the First World War as so many other opportunities for employment would arise, and there were also a leveling of incomes between the classes. And then there were diversions such as continental travel, but not very much of it. Across the channel obviously, down to the French Riviera, where her sister used to stay at Cassis. And also visits to Italy and Greece, and a foray into Spain but not much more. And as to more distant ones none. In particular none to the States. The world was bigger back then.

As noted above there were periods of intense social activity, especially when they resided in London (after a prolonged sojourn in the suburbs she lobbied for a move into central London initially opposed by her husband as being too exciting and tiring for her). She was noted for a certain idiosyncrasy of dress, shared by her sister. They often dressed beautifully but never elegantly the author remarks and at least Virginia found the shopping for clothes irksome. Socially she could be both excruciatingly shy and awkward when being out of her element (the author supplies such an excursion with disastrous results) as well as dominating and bubbling over when among friends. She did get a reputation for being formidable, sharp of tongue, often cutting in her remarks occasionally gratuitously malicious not seldom letting her imagination running away with her bordering on the incoherent and the incipiently insane. But not even in the country was she free from social incursions although those sojourns were meant to give her peace of mind. When sick, complaining of headaches, or when suffering a bout or slowly recovering from it, the standard treatment was rest and isolation.

Leonard Woolf was a poor man, at least by the standards of her circle. After abandoning his colonial career as an administrator he had to look for jobs and landed not particularly prestigious ones hardly commensurable with his capacity. He wrote fiction as well, publishing a book on his experience in Ceylon suitably fictionalized along with more factual works and he became involved in the Webb circle and became politically active in the Socialist movement, activities to which his wife became drawn in, if only peripherally. Unlike her he was born for such engagements expert at handling and talking at meetings. Then of course the press took up a lot of his time, and it did, one surmises produce a profit. Virginia's fiction did not sell very much at first, which may not be surprising, but soon she acquired a reputation and sales went up producing in addition to praise also a

nice income, in fact at the end of her life she was quite wealthy at least compared to her earlier married life and suffered no want and could shop without caring about the outlays¹.

In the end she killed herself after a short period of euphoria. This was at the second year of the war, which no longer worried her that much. Worries about the impending war had been strong and being well aware of the vulnerability of Leonard Woolf as a Jew in the case of a German invasion had led to plans for a joint suicide. Plans which in the face of more imminent dangers once the war had begun predictably faded. Certainly it was not despair of the state of the world that prompted her, this is seldom the case. This time she drowned herself in a nearby river, most likely she may have made a failed attempt to do so before, because this time she seemed well-prepared having filled her deep pockets with heavy stones.

August 10-11, 2016 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

¹ Her husband set up a budget for during the initial years, indicating a rather frugal existence with the medical bills incurred by Virginia belonged to the major outlays.