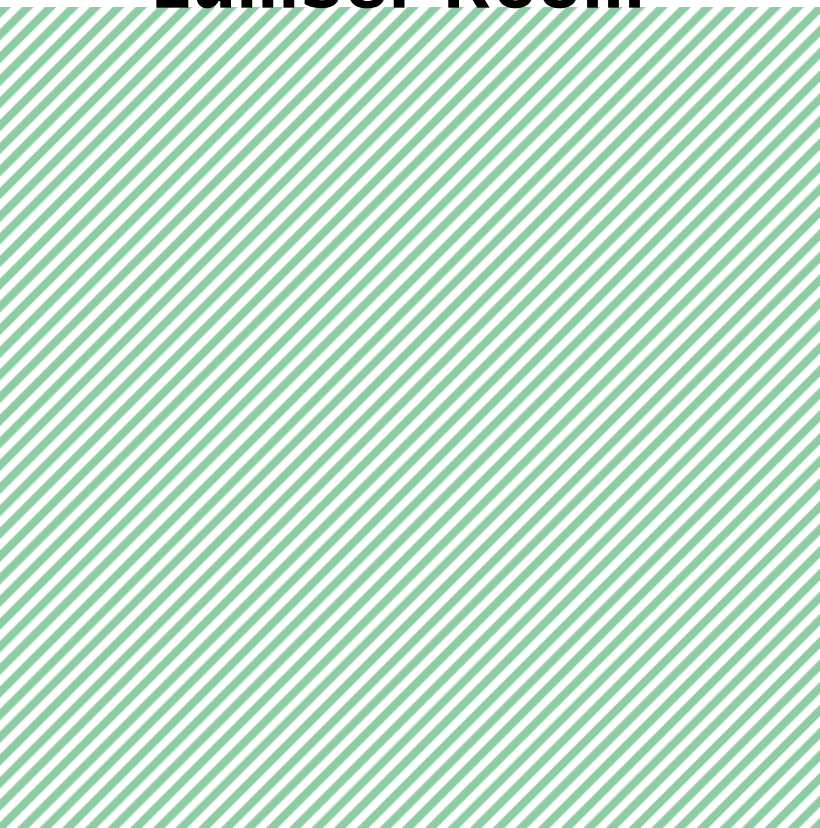


Virginia Woolf: Letters from the Lumber Room



—These letters are two-faced, Sasha says, where Virginia is praising Ethel and then ripping her to shreds behind her back.

—Two faces don't begin to cover it, I say. She has a hundred faces. Imagine a tomboy with smudges on her face, then a motherless teenage girl, then a precocious child growing overnight into a young lady. Every afternoon Virginia and her sister fill the tea cups and serve small talk along with cucumber sandwiches, dainty bites which have the same relation to food as their encounters with elderly men of letters have to real conversation. Virginia the future writer and Vanessa the painter are decorative young ladies among the Mandarins. They run the household, order meals, and oversee the seven servants who live in the basement, always present and therefore invisible. Leslie Stephen comes down for his tea. He may not take part in the conversation but he's a looming presence.

—A ghost enters with her father, Sasha says. Biographers, looking down, record the names of fine china at afternoon tea; their art is lonely. Virginia tells the myth of herself from outside. Somebody else's life, lived vicariously in reverse. The young lady has already drowned as she goes on pouring tea. When her mother dies, her father walks right past her out the door. She was his favorite child; now she ceases to exist. Virginia tries to design a landscape where there is no before and no after. That's the form of the inner landscape, it's about real experiences and the way the mind finds their meaning. Hunting for the metaphysical balance makes her a writer. Without relying on any school of thought.

—Home schooling, I say. She had lessons in Latin and Greek. The art of writing was her university, an instrument she played with great virtuosity and a life-raft on which she ran the rapids every day.

—Nevertheless Virginia depends on Bloomsbury, Sasha says, she's independent because a tiny clique of friends share her ironic humor, share a laugh in the minor key. That's the language she speaks in her fiction, an irony infused with dark notes. She contributes to their collective notoriety, their disdain for popular tastes. And adds a mystical strain, things seen in a trance. Her own kind of modernism, like playing cat's cradle with invisible threads, the four horsemen of the apocalypse—a fugue state, shell shock, madness. The hooves are bearing down on her. The more clearly the reader sees her ghostly words on the backs of rhythm, the spookier it gets.

—Amazing, I say. This volume of letters held together by rubber bands. How fresh the letters at the back of my mind still are, mental furnishings I haven't used in years. I once read and reread them again and again. Never noticed how brim-full of mischief they are. Ghosts in the lumber room.

—War just around the corner, Sasha says. But in her personal letters, unlike her diaries, almost no mention of war around the corner. Virginia writes about the flavors and

accents of daily life. There's a world of difference between a historian looking back at an unthinkable event after it's a fait accompli, and the reality of the disasters of war.

—Besides wit has its own economy, I say; Virginia never stops generating language as a gyroscope generates its own gravitational field. Her mind never stops spinning ahead of the disasters of the moment. And putting down crystalline tendrils into underwater beds.

—Come on, she plays games, Sasha says. The letters are coyly blunt and flirtatious when it suits her. Gossips about her sex life, inventing colorful details as she goes along. Love and sex are ripe for satire. She had an affair with Vita Sackville-West but the sexual attraction died years ago. In the nineteen thirties their letters reflect the closeness between old friends. Orlando remains—an act of love, splicing Vita and the body of English literature into one mock biography. She loves Leonard and demands her daily quota of kisses; real intimacy is enough—to be touched by another mind. Our language falls far short of the reality, she says. There are hundreds of genders as yet unnamed.

—Whatever her sex is, I say. Sometimes the strongest ecstasy for Virginia comes only at the moment when she discovers “what belongs to what,” and puts it into words. The things her father taught her about literary style. Her last meditation, “A sketch of the Past,” remembers those early years, when Leslie Stephen is in his study under high windows, a kind of ivory tower. The same elegiac note hovers over her novels, a lament that most of life is like cotton wool. Stuffing. Time passes in a sleep-walker's dance, but there are moments of being when one sees that behind the cotton wool there's a pattern. At such moments she perceives that “the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art.... But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.”

—She dashes off these words in her notebook at spare moments, Sasha says. If you asked her, she wouldn't even remember writing them. Just rhetoric, echoes of the Zeitgeist.

—Maybe so, I say, but only Virginia Woolf could boil it down this way. Touching on the craft of the artist, her wrestling with technique, her discipline of writing specimen pages every day, like playing scales and her life in relation to the tradition and the relation of the tradition to the whole universe. Such reach and so few words.

II

—Virginia's letters to Ethel are the real treasure, Sasha says, a direct line into her psyche at the most fraught of times. Hundreds of letters in the nineteen-thirties to a third-rate musician; Virginia calls her an uncastrated cat

but Ethel's really an old English bulldog, hanging on with dogged persistence to her self-importance as a composer. The intimate gossip in Virginia's letters, the confessions. Ethel's a safety valve, and Virginia's letting off steam, trying to stay afloat. Still, it's degrading

—Ethel's culture is a sort of Mobius strip, I say, conflating art and nature. Virginia unburdens herself to Ethel after seeing her friend Tom Eliot's "Murder in the Cathedral." The religious poetry and Eliot's public pose of moral superiority, she writes, make her feel as if "I rolled in the ash bin and somehow filled my mouth with the bones of a decaying cat." She boils down Leonard's reaction. "Tightness, chillness, deadness and general worship of the decay and skeleton." Virginia sticks by that. ("Certainly and emphatically there is no God.") But the depth of her bitterness is surprising.

—The letters are grindstones to sharpen her tongue on, Sasha says. Virginia loves the absurdity of treating the Philistine Ethel as a paragon of common sense and substance.

—So Virginia vents her malicious joy, I say. The recklessness, the aptness of the venom that spews out of her. She never needs to think of over-stepping a line with Ethel. There are few limits to the vulgarity of the general's granddaughter. She's a bore, but she's in love with Virginia. Her bad taste is an oasis. A channel for savage indignation of the Swiftian kind, an aphrodisiac. Virginia was branded early in her life and wears the marks on her flesh. A secret self—hard-bitten, bitter, violent, releasing the outrage which she reins in most of the time without even thinking. Less against the anti-Semitism in the air than that her Jew is not exempt. As World War II comes closer, she identifies with Leonard more and more. Casually remarks: "We're Jews."

—And calls Eliot "a green sick American eunuch," Sasha says. Remembering that the great poet once wrote lines like these:

My house is a decayed house,
And the Jew squats on the window sill, the owner,
Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp....
The rats are underneath the piles.
The Jew is underneath the lot.

Tom does not conceal his anti-Semitism and fascist sympathies. His long friendship with Leonard and Virginia is a common exception, so widespread that nobody notices the paradox. Nothing changes in the atmosphere as England, desperately placates the Nazis, betraying its own interests, as well as the Jews.

—But she appreciates Eliot's charm, I say, and handles the poet with kid gloves, in the manner she drank in with her mother's milk and perfected with her tea table training. You can hear her under her breath saying many of my friends had

nervous breakdowns after the Great War. She admires the poet's humanity of despair. "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons."

—Nevertheless, her resentment comes out, Sasha says. One of her photos shows Eliot in Virginia's garden. With his wife, reeking of ether and already worn into a stick figure by depression. A younger Tom, planning to divorce her. Virginia alarmed, feeling the down-draft of madness, an inner Juggernaut.

—She's sane enough, I say, choosing to confide in Ethel. What a plunge into the self. Her letters to Ethel sing as a familiar scent in the air transports one in time. Virginia's authentic voice. Not like the characters in her novels, who are unlovable and then become unknowable. No, it's an elusive voice singing on a summer night. It's Virginia herself who appears at the head of my imaginary stairs. Moonlight on the water rippling across the bay. And the lighthouse beams below. The thing itself folded into a dream.

III

—Talking about the past, Sasha says, she often sees it through the eyes of young Virginia Stephen. Time reverses itself again and again. *The Times* asks her for an essay on her father. Impossible to sum up Leslie Stephen in 1500 words, but she does a good job, not a breath about her true relation to her father, but graceful journalese, just what *The Times* wants.

—Then she tells the story to Ethel, I say, and dashes off a portrait, like a note in a bottle: "At the moment my head is full of him ... his extreme sincerity, also, unless I'm partial, he was beautiful in the distinguished way a race horse, even an ugly race horse, is beautiful—and he had such a fling with his hands, also he was a great [mountain] climber, also he was completely unworldly, also he begot me." A tiny tour de force. Virginia takes the story into her own hands; what an abandoned fling of herself.

—The truth is Leslie Stephen was ugly, plain-and-simple, Sasha says. Virginia says he made her life a torment, treated her and her sisters like miserable underlings. They were indentured servants and his death set them free.

—Do you think he's unforgivable, I say, even if Virginia forgives him?

—She contradicts herself as usual, Sasha says. Her father was an eminent Victorian. And he accepted the fact that gifted women should be as free as men to choose their own careers. That was rare in his day and in Virginia's day also. She praises him for it. At the same time she wears a mask. I agree with that. Does it make a difference?—does Virginia forgive him at the end of the day? Where do you stand?

—A letter from Virginia to Leonard makes him give up a sinecure in Ceylon, and sets their dance in motion; their lives fit together upside-down better than anyone expects.

—Sasha and I are facts. Virginia's letters reveal how little we know: how hard it is, the better we know ourselves, to separate fact from fiction. On May 1st, 1912 Virginia writes Leonard that the obvious advantages of marriage, "happiness, children, companionship, a busy life," stand in her way. The advantages make no sense on that day. Her fingers are so cold she can hardly hold the pen. "I'm fearfully unstable. I pass from hot to cold in an instant without any reason." He is possessed by an image like a mirage in the desert. They're both in a fog. She's a wild creature. No one catches her, any more than you can catch a rock, an alp, a mountain-side. Shuttles back and forth between one year and another as her motley selves come to life. "Your caring for me as you do almost overwhelms me. It is so real, and so strange. Why should you? What am I really except a pleasant attractive creature? But it's just because you care so much that I feel I must care before I marry you...." Leonard wants to know whether she will ever love him enough. Is their attachment strong enough or can she guess whether it will be permanent? "How can I say? I think it will because there seems no reason why it shouldn't." If time is reversible, no beginning and no end, all things are fixed and unpredictable. The curtain falling on stage doesn't reveal whether the same play will be presented again the following night.

—As for her letter to Leonard, Sasha and I say, it's a prelude to every novel she will write. Time obsesses her, elusive as life itself, since she dreams of throwing it away. Swayed by the moment itself, she writes: "Your caring for me as you do almost overwhelms me. It is so real and so strange."

—Sasha and I read these words, but who knows how many ghosts haunt Virginia, half submerged in the past. She looks at herself from the outside, spying on herself to find out how she feels. She imagines knowing Leonard intimately from within, as she does the characters in her novels. She reverts suddenly to earlier times, as if life is a myth, no beginning and no end. In her last novel a country pageant takes place in the open air with a view of the meadow and grazing cows, intermittent drizzle, and the audience, villagers and gentry, in a semi-circle. The last words of the novel are the beginning of a saga in another dimension: "Then the curtain rose. they spoke."

—And then? Sasha and I figure the real story begins when Virginia turns her life upside-down by marrying a Jew. Still proud of her lady-like connections, but grafting the two stems into one hybrid self, Virginia and Woolf. Indifferent to consequences. A woman founding a tradition of her own, though chained to her own double who tried to kill herself in the past and may try again.

Review

By Jessica L. Wilkinson

1) To write of the life of Virginia Woolf is to be confronted with an ethical question: how to represent the “truth” of this woman’s experiences, a woman who so expertly draped veils across her own life–narrative; who drew heavily on personal encounters but laced her pen with the ink of fiction; who was evasive in her diaries and letters and who toyed with masks and secret selves; who indeed requested, through a final note to her husband before her infamous suicide, that he destroy her papers? Put more succinctly, how does one write of a woman who seemed keen to guard the facts of her private life, or at least, to obscure their straight–forward expression?

2) A further dilemma: Woolf railed against the stiff biographical narratives of her forefathers, portraits that she likened to “wax figures” and “effigies that have only a smooth superficial likeness to the body in the coffin.”¹ She wanted to see writers troubling the boundaries of biography and fiction; flouting the tidy “male sentence” in favor of that more expressive of a woman’s syntax; promoting movement and change; testing the possibilities of a fragmented, collective vision.

3) In her essay “The Art of Biography,” Woolf says that “[b]iography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking glasses at odd corners.” It is a declaration that appears to drive Herbert Marder’s inventive refraction of the author through this dialogic sequence. Two personas, characterized as “facts,” discourse on aspects of Woolf’s life—as a young girl, as a married woman, as an author, and in relation to her unusual friendship with composer Ethel Smyth.

4) Biography ~ fiction—man ~ woman—straight ~ lesbian—alive ~ dead—past ~ present ~ absent—life ~ myth—voice ~ letter. Marder’s gesture: “a hundred faces.” Woolf adds: “from all this diversity it will bring out, not a riot of confusion, but a richer unity.”

1 Christopher Wiley notes that Woolf’s father, Sir Leslie Stephen, was editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and that, due to the abuse she suffered in the family home as a child, Virginia “connect[ed] the genre with Victorian patriarchal domination, and female oppression.” (5)

Biographies

Herbert Marder is a poet, painter, and emeritus professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he taught literature and rhetoric. He is the author of *Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf* (University of Chicago Press, 1968) and *The Measure of Life: Virginia Woolf's Last Years* (Cornell University Press, 2000). In 1970, Marder and his wife, singer Norma Marder, co-founded the New Verbal Workshop, an experimental ensemble conceived as a platform for exploring "speechmusic." For more than a decade, the New Verbal Workshop brought together an evolving personnel of trained performers and amateurs, who developed a repertoire of original compositions through collective improvisation. The ensemble also performed experimental music by distinguished contemporary composers Kenneth Gaburo and Ben Johnston.

Jessica L. Wilkinson is the founding editor of *Rabbit: a journal for nonfiction poetry* and a Senior Lecturer in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, where she teaches literary theory, short story writing, and creative writing. Wilkinson earned a B.A. (with Honors) in Media and Communications (English and Creative Writing) and a Ph.D. in Creative Writing, both at the University of Melbourne. Her published books of poetry include *marionette: a biography of miss marion davies* (2012), which was shortlisted for the 2014 Kenneth Slessor Prize, and *Suite for Percy Grainger* (2014), both from Vagabond Press. In 2014, she was awarded Peter Porter Poetry Prize from *ABR: Australian Book Review*. Wilkinson recently co-edited *Contemporary Australian Feminist Poetry* with Bonny Cassidy (Santa Lucia, Australia: Hunter Publishers, 2016). Other recent publications include "Experiments in Poetic Biography: Feminist Threads in Contemporary Long Form Poetry," in *Biography* 39: 1 (Winter 2016), and "Beyond Facts and Accuracies: Long Form Poetry as Biographical Method," in *Axon Journal* 7 (2014). Wilkinson serves on the advisory board of the International Poetry Studies Institute (Canberra).