Tintinnabulations

Virginia Woolf used to complain of Christians' ringing their church bells on Sunday mornings, disturbing good people at their work. The irony of this remark stems from her self-identification as an outsider in British society—not only as a non-Christian, the wife of a Jew, a pamphleteering left-wing pacifist, the uneducated "daughter of an educated man," a woman writer in an intellectual world of male homosexuals, but also as the creator and upholder of severe and radical moral and aesthetic standards in a society that valued and to some extent still values far more the patriarchal mythmaking of Joyce, Lawrence, and Eliot.

The Bells, Quentin and Olivier, and Nigel Nicolson have been ringing so loud a paean to "their" Virginia Woolf that her own voice has been drowned in the process, not to mention the voices of critics who have captured a Woolf other than the one the Bells have cornered and tamed behind bars in the Bloomsbury zoo. She haunted other streets besides those, as their own publication of the letters and diaries abundantly proves. Exhibited as she is among the Bloomsbury painters, literary lions and tigers, and exotic birds, she serves the same function as the monkeys and apes do in any zoo. We go to see them and manage a peek at the adjoining cages on our way in and out.

Quentin Bell is not only the biographer of Virginia Woolf. He is an art critic and a son. He has wished to promote the reputation of the painters Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant and of the critic Clive Bell. He is clearly not the nephew Woolf imagined playing North to Eleanor Pargiter in The Years, who saw the family as the enemy of art and freedom. He naturally prefers his mother to his aunt. It is difficult having a genius in the family, and Vanessa Bell emerges as the heroine of his biography of Virginia Woolf, excelling in the womanly arts that
always escaped her more angular sister. Woolf certainly admired these qualities, needing mothering more than anything else from friends, relatives, and husband. While Quentin Bell seems to have found her satisfactory as an aunt, he resented her meddling in politics and says so vigorously, describing her as an antiquated spinster among her male juniors in the 1930s, when she produced her strongest antifascist work. Yet, thanks largely to him, his wife, and the editors of the letters, we now can see her with eyes other than those of an art critic or a nephew.

Visually, her novels have little in common with the painters of her circle, though critics have given much attention to this subject. One of Woolf's essays first appeared in an issue of The Dial that contained a painting of an army barracks by Georgia O'Keeffe, with a flagpole curved and bent in the center. The two odd innovative "outsider" women artists have a great deal more in common than the wit of their antipatriotic, antipatriarchal protests. Another avenue not explored is her non-English, non-Bloomsbury love of music. When a fine critic like Allen McLaurin in The Echoes Enslaved takes it, the view one sees of the novels commands considerably more interest.

Since we are all attached to our families, Bell is not to be blamed for being as a biographer less a good nephew than a good son. He should hardly be surprised, however, if, following his lead, critics regard a great novelist and major intellectual figure as merely the object of a cult or as the scapegoat establishment figure on whom to hang guilt for criticizing the poets of the 1930s. In two recent general books both Elaine Showalter and Samuel Hynes have taken their cues on Woolf from Quentin Bell's biography. In A Literature of Their Own, Showalter finds the "adoption of a female aesthetic" for Woolf a "betrayal of her literary genius," and her suicide "one of Bloomsbury's representative art forms." Bell has given her all the materials for an ugly discussion of anorexia, menstrual shame, obsession with the father, the poor Duckworth brothers as monsters, and female versions of madness. Showalter has made Virginia Woolf into a case study of female failure, and her books "the sphere of the exile and the eunuch"; she follows Bell's lead in seeing Woolf's vision as "deadly"
and "disembodied." Hynes has managed to write a book on "Literature and Politics in the Thirties"—the decade of *The Waves, The Years, The Common Reader,* and *Three Guineas,* all of which contributed to the moral and political debate—and yet to present her only as the embodiment of Auden's scolding mother figure.

By stressing how alien to him was Virginia Woolf's kind of femaleness and by de-emphasizing or disapproving of a lifetime of political engagement, Bell has provided two different sets of symptoms from which the literary doctors may make their diagnoses. One leads to the production of a female cult and its subsequent denunciation by a new generation of Queenie Leavises. The other leads to her exclusion from the literary/historical canon on the grounds of "aloofness" or "having no great cause at heart," as Forster claimed. In fact, her political and moral beliefs, antiauthoritarian and antiheroic as they were, compared to those of Yeats or Pound or Lawrence or even Auden, are among the very few that bear close scrutiny. A consistent socialist, pacifist, and feminist, she presented ideas that survive unscathed and undated—which is more than one can say for most of her contemporaries.

It is time for a new biography. Bell's has been widely read and highly praised. With a few notable exceptions: Ellen Hawkes's "The Virgin in the Bell Biography" speaking for feminists; Michael Holroyd, speaking as a professional biographer who sees a missed opportunity for the subject to write in collaboration with the biographer, rendering the book mere external history, so "protective" of a certain view of Virginia Woolf that she has "slipped through his fingers"; and Rebecca West, speaking as a friend and contemporary female artist. Dame Rebecca sees Bell as responsible for "the conversion of biography from a form of literature to a blood sport. Virginia Woolf's official biography is to me a scene of carnage."

The new biographer ought to be neither bloodthirsty nor blood-minded. But she should be perhaps an artist in her own right, considering the problems of female artists on their own ground. And it ought to be a critical biography, so that life and work are one. She might concentrate on that Victorian household in which men were so emphat-
ically men and women women, in which Leslie Stephen's alpenstocks lay about, and maps of the Alps, marked with the peaks he had conquered, hung on the walls, in which Julia Stephen reigned as "half madonna, half woman of the world," demanding of her daughters that they be beautiful as a duty to the family. What was it like, this new biographer might ask, only to feel attracted to manly, unsuitable men, to have to "gallop" away at the first sexual stirrings, to try to find a mate among the Cambridge intellectuals and "apostolic bug­gers"? In a literary world populated by the kind of male homosexuals who disliked the female body as well as the female mind, and said so, no wonder Woolf turned for solace and strength to a community of women writers and reformers living and dead, for whom she wrote and worked and studied, to whom she sent her articles and stories. The new biographer ought to take another look at the Duckworth brothers, the villains of the official biography, and see how they brought Ibsen into the house when Virginia was in her teens, his radical ideas and dramatic form becoming a permanent influence on her style as well as her ideology.

The biographer might look again at the sustaining and ambivalent relations with other women writers and artists, from Violet Dickinson to Dame Ethel Smyth, and find there a structure that shapes the whole life around the search for a mother. "Thinking back through our mothers" as a literary philosophy then coheres with everything from the maternal role of Leonard Woolf to the love letters to Vita Sackville-West. This imaginary biographer would examine more carefully the political and moral ideas of the fiction and essays and would try to net the "frozen falcon" as she listened to music and tried to imitate its structures in words. Why, she would ask, did words always seem erotic to Woolf? Why did she fuss so about chastity? Was she haunted by her name throughout her life? Once married did she see herself as simultaneously savage and pure—a Diana out of Meredith's imagination, living the Persephone/Demeter myth in the twentieth century?

The new biographer will have to look at more than the hypotenuse of the Clive/Vanessa/Virginia triangle by reading their letters to her. What awful guilt led her to please her sister by acting as go-between
to that unpleasant man, his mistress, and his wife? Woolf seems to have slipped once, and volume 3 of the *Letters* suggests that she was made to pay for it for the rest of her life. She was a trial to her sister, no doubt, but could she get attention and affection only by cultivating Clive and then tattling? And then, there is the suicide and the sanity of the notes on approaching insanity, and the repetition in her letters to Leonard of the exact words that her mother had used to describe her first marriage to Herbert Duckworth and that the relieved hero uses at the death of Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out*. The suicide notes are the work of a great artist and a good generous woman, following the advice of her doctor to "reassure Leonard" and absolve him of any guilt. This brave new biographer is going to have to deal with all the theories from madness to menopause, with the family, the official version, with Woolf's attitude toward war and fascism and anti-Semitism, with the requests for ethical arguments against suicide in the letters to Ethel Smyth, with the reports of her doctor, Octavia Wilberforce, and, finally, with her radical mysticism. It will not be easy.

The publication of the *Diary* provides a major tool, and one is grateful to Anne Olivier Bell for the patience and effort of providing it. But here the Bloomsbury view again prevails, and we never get a naked Virginia Woolf; she is always dressed in a jacket designed in the Omega Workshop. With the *Diary* the problem grows more serious, with Bells ringing all over the page to drown out the voice of Virginia Woolf. They disapprove, they want to set the record straight. They scold and scold and ring and ring. The diarist's voice is muffled, wrapped in footnotes of cotton wool: One can hardly hear the voice, often so shrill and high-pitched, so critical or intimate, which she saved for her diary. The only way to read volume 1 of the *Diary* is to cover up the footnotes. They creep up and up and threaten to devour the whole page; like the Sunday church bells, they distract the ordinary reader and the scholar alike from reading; and they betray an uncommon case of editorial antagonism. The editor's apologia for the method explains the length, not the hostility. Quentin Bell's introduction may be seen as a brief Revised Authorized Version of the life. Although he is now willing to venture a critical judgment that the
diary is “a masterpiece,” the profoundly patriarchal point of view remains. One would never know from this description that Woolf had a mind at all, let alone one of the greatest artistic minds of the twentieth century.

Bell has given her an extended family setting that branches out a bit beyond Bloomsbury. But where is that solitary, strange, antisocial woman who valued privacy so highly that she made it the first principle of her aesthetic? One sees all her nests, their furniture in detail with learned labels on every stick and straw. But where is the Virginia Woolf who wrote novels—that great blue heron of a writer, in flight, alone? She once complained that biography, like sculpture, was all head and shoulders, that one would never know from the biographies of great men “that they had a body between them.” The Bell view of Virginia Woolf is from the opposite angle and shows her only from the neck down and in the bosom of her family. This is often the trouble with biographies of great women; one never knows what kind of heads graced their feminine shoulders, and sometimes one can hardly see them at all in the family album. Much of Woolf’s best writing attacked private property and the family, and she considered herself an outsider to it all.

The notes lean heavily on the “plunge into madness,” “suicidal mania,” “fearful tempests of lunacy,” which pander to the taste of certain kinds of readers. There is a characteristic entry in the Diary about Pippa Strachey that includes a discussion of women’s suffrage and a disagreement between the conservative feminist and the radical over Virginia’s support of cooperative housekeeping. “The talk was hampered by the suspicion that she was a jingo” is Woolf’s most telling sentence. It brings alive all those issues which tore apart the British feminist movement, the left-wing pacifists opposing the conservative patriots. But the equally characteristic footnote ignores Woolf’s concern over Phillipa Strachey’s jingoism and defends her as a “force at the centre of the constitutional woman’s movement.” Virginia Woolf’s opposition to this kind of bourgeois feminism is left unnoted, though it would contribute at the very least to an understanding of the differences between Sally Seal and Mary Datchet in Night and Day.
Another thing one learns from the *Diary* is how distinctly Covent Garden and the concert halls of London were her Cambridge.\(^\text{10}\) While the men had debated philosophy or the Greek view of life with G. E. Moore, she continued, in her alert way, to listen to Mozart and Wagner. The failure of the editors to discuss Woolf’s politics creates the impression that she had none and raises another curtain of darkness before a British audience already trained by the Leavises to think of her as a snob. No wonder J. I. M. Stewart says, “She was not an intellectual woman” and “Those lower classes continue to appear through mists of prejudice and dislike.”\(^\text{11}\) Here was a woman tormented by her desire to preach and teach, forcing herself to write without lecturing, controlling a desire to follow a nature akin to the Leavises themselves—“all that is highest and driest in Cambridge.” Fascinated by reformers of all types, she saw their smug superiority toward the poor, the easy satisfactions of meddling missionaries. Her criticism of reformers and politicians, suffragettes and Thirties poets, derives not from snobbery but from an intimate knowledge of her own reforming heart’s desire to dominate. She was an insider to labor and left politics, not a “lady” who looked on them with disdain. She called the Labour Party “that timid old sheep” because its policies were not radical enough for her. To ignore the evidence of meetings, discussions, 1917 Club teas, Co-operative Working Women’s politics, when it is on the page, is equivalent to assuming that Shaw was not a socialist because he spent as much energy attacking his fellow Fabians as promoting their policies. There is nothing so romantic or radical as oneself when young, and Quentin Bell’s fury is aroused because *Three Guineas* did not endorse his own brand of “united front” politics. How can an old aunt compare with a brave young man?

But Virginia Woolf spent most of her adult life alone, working, thinking, writing. Hence she was able to write so many novels, essays, letters, diaries. This simple fact seems never to occur to people who cannot root out from their minds that old turnip that women only care about personal relationships. Insisting on seeing her in society where she was out of her element, they miss the genius altogether and see only an eccentric woman. One would have to work very hard to find
in *Ulysses* the broad scope of social criticism and moral and historical vision that fills the pages of *Mrs. Dalloway* or *The Years*. “Patriotism” and “family feeling,” always the object of her wit and anger, take their revenge as the Bells tie her tightly to the family tree with a label that says “British Victorian Female Spinster.”

Samuel Hynes had to make her into a matriarch to fit his myth, Quentin Bell a spinster. The facts are not enough for the male myth-mongering mind; someone of such stature must be either a virgin or a mother. That she was an ordinary married woman who produced books instead of babies is too prosaic an existence except to those who live it. Some readers of the *Diary* have found Virginia Woolf malicious. But the kind of malice one finds here is that of Hedda Gabler’s deliberately mistaking Tesman’s aunt’s hat for the maid’s. Bored and angry at the conventions of dishonesty in bourgeois family life, the high-strung intelligent artist lashes out in rather predictable ways. Most of the harm she really does is to herself. The *Diary* is buttressed by a prodigious amount of research, but there are a few lapses. Woolf wrote that she must one day write an essay on “The Eccentrics.” The footnote traces essays on the individuals mentioned but fails to note one of this title.12 Woolf wrote, “Surely the world has been right in conferring biographies where biographies are due? Surely the shower of titles and honours has not always descended on the wrong heads? That the world’s estimate has been perverse from the start, and half her great men geese, are themes too vast to be disposed of in one short article.” But then one might be better off reading the *Diary* as she did herself when writing of Pepys: “Not a confessional, still less a mere record of things useful to remember, but the storehouse of his most private self, the echo of life’s sweetest sounds. . . . When he went upstairs to his chamber it was to perform no mechanical exercise, but to hold intercourse with the secret companion who lives in everybody.”13 While some readers may feel that she kept a diary for the same reason Gwendolyn did in *The Importance of Being Earnest*—“to have something sensational to read in the train”—and Freudian critics may find intercourse with her secret companion to have been a substitute for intercourse with a real husband, others will
find a great writer talking to herself as frankly and fearlessly as she could talk to no one else.

Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, as editors of the *Letters*, have been far more modest and discreet in their footnotes, though the introductions express similar views on Woolf's madness and lack of interest in politics. Some readers may be a little surprised at Nicolson's censure of Virginia Woolf's flirtation with the "lecherous" (her word) Clive Bell, since Nicolson's own moral judgment allows him to call the marriage of his parents, Vita and Harold, "perfect." He does not find the letters interesting until Virginia Stephen begins to write "seriously" to men. But volume 1 has a rarely preserved portrait of a female artist in the making, love and work intensely intertwined in her relations with women who encouraged her to write, read, and think and gave her the nourishment of womanly love and literary criticism, which she was to seek and find in female friendship all her life. Bloomsbury fades into insignificance as an "influence" next to the radiance of Woolf's relationships with Margaret Llewelyn Davies, head of the Co-operative Working Women's Guild, Janet Case, her Greek teacher, Violet Dickinson, Madge Vaughan, and her aunt Caroline Stephen, the Quaker whom she called "Nun." It was this aunt who encouraged her to discipline her mind, to make herself into a historian, and provided her with the £500 a year for a room of her own. Much as she mocked the purity of her aunt's life, her own resembles it far more than it resembles Lytton Strachey's. Her future biographer will find more in Caroline Stephen's *The Light Arising: Thoughts on the Central Radiance* than in *Eminent Victorians* to explain the mystical vision of Woolf's greatest works.

In volume 1 of the *Letters*, Woolf writes to Violet Dickinson, "I saw Miss Ll. Davies at a lighted window in Barton St. with all the conspirators round her and cursed under my breath." What she cursed was her own exclusion from their visionary political work for women's suffrage and cooperative socialism. Margaret Llewelyn Davies become a lifelong friend, and her socialism and feminism as an ideal is enshrined in Mary Datchet's lighted window in *Night and Day* and Eleanor Pargiter's sunflower in *The Years*. When Woolf left off cursing
and began to bless, and when a central radiance began to permeate her own prose, twentieth-century British literature took a great leap out of the patriarchal fog, for the myths and images that rise in all her work tell us the opposite of what our culture tells us—that light and rationality are female, darkness and chaos male. When Nigel Nicolson writes, "She needed the harness of a disciplined political brain, like Leonard's," he misses a point that Leonard himself probably did not miss. She did indeed see herself as a spirited racehorse, but she also saw herself as a donkey. What she needed was a good warm stall and regular feeding, so that fine self-disciplined political and artistic brain could race free in the wind over the downs. What harnesses she needed she had already learned to fashion for herself, being the daughter of a man who deprived her of the discipline of a formal education among her peers. Many critics have waxed lyrical about the pleasures of having the freedom of Leslie Stephen's library. They do not mention the pains of Leslie Stephen's temperament. Female relatives served only one purpose to Leslie Stephen: they were supposed to sympathize. And his enormous appetite for sympathy left little time for the education of daughters. One of Woolf's own trusty harnesses was reading Greek with Janet Case. The discipline of writing and rewriting, which she taught herself, will astonish those who study her manuscripts. We can see that her own standards are higher than those university training might have given her. But she was never sure. With the anxieties of any self-made, self-educated artist, the hurdles she erected for herself to jump were higher than mere examinations, and her fiction is the better for it.

In 1920 Woolf called Stevenson a bad writer because his letters were so boring: "A writer's letters should be as literary as his printed works." By volume 2 of the Letters (1912–22) her letters promise not only to be "literary," sparkling with wit and alive with imagery, but to interest the social historian as well. All her life she encouraged her women friends to keep and read and edit and publish the letters and diaries of their mothers and their aunts so that another view of history might be kept alive—just in case biographies were not conferred where biographies were due.
Nicolson, in his introduction to volume 2 of the *Letters*, makes clear that he thinks Virginia Woolf was an "elitiste," not a snob. He assumes that if one hates poverty one hates the poor, and he misinterprets, as many others do, the socialist intellectual's desire to bring the poor up to her level rather than show her solidarity by sinking to theirs. Failing to understand *Night and Day* or *Jacob's Room* as novels of social protest—as the socialist feminist artist's reply to the patriarchy's Great War—he assumes she was more interested in personal relationships than in the politics of war. But antipatriotism, anticapitalism, and anti-nationalism as she expressed them are just as political as their positives. Volume 2 takes us into her marriage, madness, the founding of the Hogarth Press, and the publication of her first three novels. She expands her talent for friendship beyond the feminine and the family but still begs for Vanessa's love; and the reader knows that Leonard and the doctors will decide that the cradle her beloved Violet Dickinson sends for a wedding gift will never rock a baby of her own. (In 1927 she wrote to Ethel Sands, "I'm always angry with myself for not having forced Leonard to take the risk in spite of the doctors.")

In 1913 she wrote to Ka Cox while on a political tour, "Nothing—except perhaps novel writing—can compare with the excitement of controlling the masses. . . I see now why Margaret and even Mary MacArthur get their Imperial tread." Some of her mongoose-mandrill letters to Leonard are here, but what is remarkable in them and also in her later letters to him is that she is not the beloved responding to an active lover; she is the active partner. One discovers interesting things: how much she liked Hardy and disliked Dickens; how she asked Lytton Strachey if there really was any sense in Henry James, finding his novels "faintly tinged rose water, urbane and sleek, but vulgar and pale as Walter Lamb." She finds that the war fills her compatriots with "violent and filthy passions" and wants to know if the French are any better; she calls Rupert Brooke "a fully grown person among mummies and starvelings"; she reads *The Times* during the war—"this preposterous masculine fiction"; she grows steadily more feminist. Beatrice Webb turns up "rather like a moulting eagle," and Shaw as a pathetic egoist.
Woolf’s flamboyant wit sets off her puritanism well, and her talk moves easily from toilets and sanitary napkins to Clytemnestra and Conrad. She is proud that her hairpins fall in the soup at elegant dinner parties and concerned that the women at her branch of the Co-operative Working Women’s Guild are upset at the discussion of syphilis. She writes to Ottoline Morrell about Joyce, “The poor young man has only got the dregs of a mind compared even with George Meredith. I mean if you could weigh the meaning on Joyce’s pages it would be about 10 times as light as on Henry James’. Even though Eliot has prepared her for “heavy” intellectual content, she finds “the bucket is almost empty,” and expects to be “struck down by the wrath of God” for such dissent from the universal acclaim. One does get, as in this paragraph from a letter to Janet Case in 1922, a sense of what their lives were like:

We’ve been sitting in the dark and listening to the Band and having a terrific argument about Shaw. I say he only influenced the outer fringes of morality. Leonard says that the shop girls wouldn’t be listening to the Band with their young men if it weren’t for Shaw. I say the human heart is touched only by the poets. Leonard say rot, I say damn. Then we go home. Leonard says I’m narrow. I say he’s stunted. . . . There’s not a single living writer (English) I respect. . . . How does one come by one’s morality? Surely by reading the poets. And we’ve got no poets.

The British edition of volume 3 (1923–28) is called A Change of Perspective and runs from Mrs. Dalloway to A Room of One’s Own, through Orlando and the love affair with Vita Sackville-West. It contains fascinating letters to the dying Jacques Raverat, as good as earlier ones to Gerald Brenan. The female friendships continue and deepen: Vanessa Bell, Margaret Llewelyn Davies, Janet Case, Violet Dickinson. Vita Sackville-West is in and out; Jane Harrison, the great classical scholar whose work had a profound influence on Woolf’s symbolism, is mentioned a good deal. Ottoline, Dorothy Brett, “Todd,” the editor of Vogue, the painters Ethel Sands and Nan Hudson, form new female
circles. The memory of Katherine Mansfield is revived, and Edith Sitwell and Rebecca West make striking impressions. More and more, Virginia Woolf concentrates on loving her own sex. It seems perfectly natural that she should fall in love with Vita, and just as natural that she should fall out again. Exciting as the adventure was, Vita lacked both the mind and the maternal selflessness as a lover that Virginia sought in female friends. Having satisfied her curiosity in the satin sheets, Virginia soon returned to her customary austerity—Vita's values, traditional and conservative in luxurious style, being very much at odds with her own radical ascetic commitment to the future.

The letters to Jacques Raverat are superb, as one artist to another she respects, and full of extraordinary feeling. Her own romantic memory of the Raverats as the ideal young lovers—Does he appear as Renny in The Years?—is revealed, as well as an explanation of her unwillingness to write about her husband. She had assumed they were anti-Semitic and so never mentioned him. A whole ocean of feeling pours out in this brief remark, making the reader pause to wonder what social sacrifices life with Leonard required her to make, how she bore them, and how she protected him. She early outgrew the prejudice of her class. But it is not clear which word in her description of him as a “penniless Jew” to her friends when she was about to marry held more weight in her rebellious pride. It is not race or class prejudice but her own wicked eye and ear that capture for his sister Vanessa a visit from her Jewish mother-in-law. She had had years of experience as an unsatisfactory daughter-in-law and had been made to feel how inadequate books were as a substitute for babies. Since it was Leonard who insisted she was too “insane” to have children and who sought out other opinions when Savage, the family doctor, claimed it would “do her a world of good,” there are some painful ironies here. The monologue she records rings true. Mrs. Woolf tells “Len” he should have gone to the bar and then says Radclyffe Hall’s book is corrupt, but she likes it. (Virginia disliked the book but defended Radclyffe Hall’s right to write a lesbian novel.) Mrs. Woolf: “We did not do such things at my boarding school. Leonard: We did at my boarding school. It was the most corrupt place
I have ever been in. And you let me go there when I was twelve without knowing a thing. Mrs. W: But I had given you good principles, Len. Len: You had given me no principles at all.” Mrs. W. then changes tactics, reminding him that she used to bring his socks to bed with her so she could start darning them the minute she woke up. This is the same ear that records a quarrel with Clive Bell or a scene with Ottoline Morrell. Her own victories over anti-Semitism are explained in letters to Ethel Smyth and should appear in the next volume.

“An elderly bugger is always something of a priest,” she writes of E. M. Forster reading Dante. (But she was reading Dante, too. Maybe an aging lesbian is something of a priestess.) Her description of Edith Sitwell as “like a clean hare’s bone that one finds on a moor with emeralds stuck about it” is perfect, and again more like Georgia O’Keeffe than Duncan Grant. She writes to Vita about her own “shingled head” as “like the hind view of a frightened hen partridge” and wants to know what Vita is going to do about menstruating on her twelve-day walking tour in the Persian mountains. She begs information about face powder. A box promptly arrives, and Virginia thinks she can rise to powder but not to rouge. Women’s worries, when expressed with Woolf’s wit, drop all the veils of taboo as trivia. She thought during the late 1930s that perhaps in fifty years’ time men could be educated to tolerate free speech in women novelists. Her letters have some lessons of their own, and, painful though men may find them, women will burst out laughing.

In 1927 she praises Vanessa’s paintings: Virginia and Vanessa are now both “mistress of our medium” and must “buttress up this lyricism with solidity.” She answers Saxon Sydney-Turner’s criticism of her use of “vapid” and “insipid” by explaining that her sense of words derives from the number of syllables. “One writes, I suppose, by ear, not dictionary.” Steeled in trusting her own critical responses, she reads Udolpho, cannot understand why Mrs. Radcliffe is considered a laughingstock, and declares she will “lead a Radcliffe relief party.” To Vita she writes, “Style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can’t use the wrong words”—which is a little more profound than calling Edmund Gosse a “little grocer” when he
criticized Vita's writing. She writes to Roger Fry of her genuine difficulties over Gertrude Stein, whose *Composition as Explanation* she was publishing: "For my own part I wish we could skip a generation—skip Edith and Gertrude and Tom and Joyce and Virginia and come out in the open again, when everything has been restarted and runs full tilt, instead of trickling and teasing in this irritating way. I think it's bad for the character too, to live in a bye stream, and have to consort with eccentricities," by which she means that T. S. Eliot is behaving like "an old maid who has been kissed by the butler." The only patronymic is Joyce.

This mixture of the profound and the hilarious is to be found in all her letters. If it were only by her brain she could give pleasure to others, then she shared the language of her thoughts. She was remarkably clearheaded about moral principles, and one of the funniest and most serious episodes is her debate with Logan Pearsall Smith about writing for *Vogue*. "He says it demeanes one. He says one must write only for the Lit. Supplement and the Nation and Robert Bridges and prestige and posterity and to set a high example. I say Bunkum. Ladies clothes and aristocrats playing golf don't affect my style; and they would do his a world of good. Oh these Americans! How they always muddle everything up! What he wants is prestige: what I want, money." She sent him an article written for the *Nation* but printed in *Vogue* to see if he could tell the difference. But she pointed out that having one's articles cut by the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* was much worse for a writer than being printed in a fashion magazine, "perhaps worse than the vulgarity, which is open and shameless, of *Vogue*. . . . Todd lets you write what you like, and its your own fault if you conform to the stays and the petticoats." Thinking of *Vogue* as an organ of free speech is a little startling, but Woolf had been constrained by the maidenly stays of the *Times Literary Supplement* for years. (It is a shame that her letters to Bruce Richmond do not survive.) That *Vogue* should have given a great writer money as well as freedom merely proves Woolf's instinct that women can be trusted in important things.

Virginia Woolf's *Letters* are among the finest of the twentieth cen-
tury, for light and speed and beauty of language and image, for a moral strength and intellectual vigor unmatched by her contemporaries. These qualities would make them singular enough in modern letters, but their enduring value lies in their lack of ego. They were written to please the recipient and do not, like most letters of great men, nag, whine, or complain. She really did manage to stamp out the hated "I, I, I," a small miracle in the age of ego.

**Moments of Being,** some of Woolf’s unpublished autobiographical writings edited by Jeanne Schulkind, is doubtless the most exciting of recent publications, for the Bells are silent, and Woolf’s voice rings true, on her childhood, her parents. Here one finds in a couple of sentences the most extraordinary expression of a “Marxist” aesthetic imaginable. (It is there in all her essays, but the Leavis-trained reader has been taught to ignore it; and it would put any Thirties poet to shame.)

We—I mean all human beings—are connected with this: that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. 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.

No highbrow or snob could express such a radical democratic concept of art. It matches Marx’s definition of history. The political implications of her thought, buried by her critics, ought now to come to light. We know now that Leonard Woolf, while claiming to publish the last best version of each article in *Collected Essays,* printed a flippant early *Yale Review* version of the essay on the cooperative working women. The final version, edited with the help of the working women themselves, differs considerably as printed in *Life As We Have Known It.* The capacity to contain the most brilliant economic and historical analysis in plain language ought to be studied by all who are concerned with the relation of propaganda to art.

The publication of *The Pargiters,* the novel-essay portion of *The Years,* is a major event. Earlier, a large selection from the novel,
removed at the last moment in galley form, was published in the *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*'s special issue on *The Years* (Winter 1977)—a distinguished journal that died and rose again as *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*. As it stands, *The Years* was Woolf's most popular novel, her strongest antipatriarchal political work, a testament to her vision of the artist as charwoman to the world. Leonard's lack of faith caused her to abandon the documentary form, or she would have produced a contribution to the modern genre of antifascist art, the best example of which is Rebecca West's *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*. One rarely has the opportunity to see the artist as her own critic in such detail. She is a historical critic and "patiently explains" with facts and dates all the details of the oppression of Victorian women and, significantly, the formation through "self-mastery" of the character of the British male with his idealization of and contempt for women. The documents, in their psychological and aesthetic aspects, show us how class-conscious her feminism was. Her hero is Joseph Wright, the working-class editor of the *English Dialect Dictionary*. She took scenes from his biography and found him refreshingly respectful to women.

Few recent critical books are up to the mark when weighed against the excitement of Woolf's own words. There are two novenas to the nine novels—which will please devout students—an English one by Hermione Lee and an American one by Avrom Fleishman. Allen McLaurin's *The Echoes Enslaved* remains the most original and suggestive. The Woolf issue of *Women's Studies* (1977) contains some fascinating new work from the Santa Cruz Woolf Conference and the continuing MLA Seminar. Thomas S. W. Lewis has collected a volume of recent essays, all except one previously published. John Lehmann has published a book of photographs interspersed with gossip called *Virginia Woolf and Her World*, and Lucio Ruotolo has modestly and faithfully edited Woolf's comedy *Freshwater*, a funny spoof of the Victorians in which the characters are Tennyson, Watts, the Camerons, and Ellen Terry; it ought to have been illustrated by Mrs. Cameron's photographs. A further selection of Woolf's critical essays and two unsuccessful sketches have been edited by Mary Lyon as *Books and
Very few essays remain uncollected, and there ought to be a complete, scholarly edition, including a check of Leonard Woolf's edition against the manuscripts, where they exist. There are some fine essays in this collection. In one on Coleridge as a critic she says, "The same desire to justify and protect one's type led him no doubt to perceive the truth that 'a great mind must be androgynous.'" Was she justifying and protecting her own type when she defined the great artist's mind as androgynous in *A Room of One's Own*? She was, at any rate, identifying consciously with Coleridge and perhaps not intending to have the statement hardened into doctrine.

For their edition of *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin ought, perhaps, to have waited for the publication of the diaries and letters, for often one does not find the particular review that enraged or delighted her. More of Rebecca West's should have been included, in particular the brilliant review of *A Room of One's Own*. Where is G. M. Young's fulminating in the Sunday *Times* over *Three Guineas*, and *Time and Tide* 's reply? One wishes the unsigned *Times Literary Supplement* reviews had been identified. Queenie Leavis and the "scrutineers" are represented in full force. The review of *Three Guineas* is a sad example of the "token woman" attacking her own sex and defending the institutions of the patriarchy from Woolf's attacks. Mrs. Leavis calls *Three Guineas* "Nazi dialectic without Nazi conviction." In "Profession for Women" Woolf warned that women must become the Sapphos and Jane Austens of their new professions, the cardinal rule being that they open the doors for women to come after them. Mrs. Leavis' defense of the closed doors from safe inside is embarrassing and instructive, for the battles Woolf fought have still not been won.

Common readers are convinced of the political relevance of Virginia Woolf's fiction. There remains the task of a new critical biography, not only to confer biography where biography is due, but to do Virginia Woolf justice—to collaborate with her in the writing as she collaborated with history and demanded collaboration of her readers. It will have to be someone who can say as a critic, "There is no Leavis; there is
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no Bell; we are the words and music."

Aarhus, Denmark, January 1978

The above appears to have been written many years ago and from another country. In less than a year a Danish perspective from which English social and literary attitudes appeared antiquated has been altered to an American perspective in which the quaintness of Quentin Bell looks virtuous in comparison to his successors. One is in the position of the child whose three wishes were granted, leaving her worse off than before. Wishes are not horses. They are not even donkeys, and, despite the new books, we have ridden no closer to the heart of Woolf country. In fact, the Bloomsbury zoo has a lot more appeal than the Sussex barnyard view of Ian Parsons' and George Spater's pet Woolves in *A Marriage of True Minds*. This is a silly book, and the authors have "admitted" so many "impediments" that they ought to have found another title. Chief among the impediments is the observation that Leonard Woolf used his wife's proofs and manuscripts as toilet paper. This is worth mentioning, since the new biographers are ingenious in their explanations for Virginia's supposed phobias about eating and excretion.

The whole business could be settled with common sense and a historical imagination. Leslie Stephen died of cancer of the bowel. He was very thin, ate very little, tortured the successive women who ran his household about money spent on food, and berated his wife about inadequate toilet facilities.

His suffering was genuine, and he tried to minimize it by eating little; wanting company in his misery, he saw to it that his necessities became his family's virtues. Abstemiousness was next to godliness in Hyde Park Gate. Virginia nursed him as he died, and the competent discharge of these duties was a matter of pride. But it is no accident that she later described patriarchal culture in *Jacob's Room* as "that whole bag of ordure" threatening to spill out on the pavement. While she tried to disengage herself from her family, the suffragettes' militancy was being punished by the forcible feeding of women in prison.
The horrors of the situation and its similarity to rape were not lost on Virginia Stephen. At the time, her contribution was limited to meetings and licking envelopes for the Adult Suffragists, but *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* were more permanent gifts to the feminist cause. When she worried about water closets and rebelled against the forced feeding prescribed by Leonard's doctors, it must have seemed to her that she was as much a political prisoner as the suffragettes, punished for having expressed anger at the patriarchs.

The new biographers do not recognize the political nature of Woolf's plight, nor do they see that the universal appeal of her novels rests in her ability to transform private suffering into a public appeal for a redeeming socialist-feminist ethic. It is all very well to see Septimus Smith as Virginia Woolf, as Roger Poole does in *The Unknown Virginia Woolf*, and *Mrs. Dalloway* as a personal vendetta against Leonard Woolf's conspiracy with the psychiatric establishment. But the novel's enduring value, however personal the experience that prompted it, is its objective relating of the psychiatric establishment to the political establishment, its indictment of the class system, patriarchy, and imperialism, and its uncanny ability to condemn capitalism for destroying the lives of two unlikely figures at opposite ends of the scale, consumed by guilt at their repressed homosexuality. Many writers have been able to create themselves in fiction. Virginia Woolf's genius was not in making Septimus Smith out of herself but making him, as Florence Howe always says, out of a boy she taught at Morley College for working men. This alliance between all women and working men against the common enemy as a recurrent theme in Woolf's work is stubbornly resisted by the critics. Poole's Laingian view sees her as a private prisoner of one particular patriarch, Leonard Woolf. However fashionable Poole's method, the result is the same: Woolf and her work are diminished, reduced to the personal. She is a victim, not a survivor.

The woman lived for almost sixty years and produced an extraordinary amount of work. She is not to be pitied, but admired. Mr. Poole ought to remember that neither Septimus nor Clarissa demands our pity in the novel. Both are heroic in their refusal to bend to the beastly
goddess of the bourgeoisie, Proportion, Divine Proportion. It is Mrs.
Dempster, the recurring charwoman/Greek chorus figure, who asks
"pity for the loss of roses." The suppressed sexuality of the suffering
protagonists is never seen as a more serious source of alienation than
is the backbreaking physical labor of the working classes.

There is a lot of nonsense about the novels in Poole's book, a naive
reading of Mrs. Ramsay as Julia Stephen, assuming both were perfec-
tion. Jane Lilienfeld and others have shown that the poignant power
of the mother figure lies in the ambivalence of her presentation and
the ambivalence of the reader's perception of her as both the Good
Mother and the Terrible Mother. James is not Virginia; Cam, the
abandoned fisherwoman, may be. (And, since Camilla is the name of
Leonard Woolf's heroine in _The Wise Virgins_, one is on safer ground
there in the girl who felt rejected, solacing herself with imaginary
stories.)

Poole pounces on a point long discussed by American feminist
critics: that Virginia Woolf (and Septimus) heard the birds speaking
in Greek when under stress. To Roger Poole, since Leonard and his
friends among the Apostles were Greek scholars, we have evidence
that the voices reminded her of her inadequacy and show emotional
suffering at exclusion. If he had somewhat more respect for Woolf's
intelligence, he would see an intellectual problem at the root, prompted
by memories of George Duckworth's fondling her over her Greek
lessons. Virginia Woolf studied Greek with Janet Case for many years,
and she felt the way a slave or an immigrant feels at conquering the
language of his master. Music, mathematics, and Greek were all-male
disciplines, closely guarded proofs of the genius of Western patriarchal
culture. Virginia Woolf mastered two of them and made the heroine
_of Night and Day_ into a "secret geometrix." She did not wallow in
self-pity but reacted with rage at the exclusion of women and workers
from culture as private property. "Trespass," she advised. And her
example in shaping her novels as Greek plays and the attempt at
creating a collective narrative voice in choruses was a political and
intellectual problem, not an emotional one, and in those terms she
solved it. The interesting point about the birds' speaking Greek is that
It was not "Greek" to her. She understood the masculine obscenities and their direct connection to King Edward. There was a method in her madness, and we might call it Marxist-feminist.

Virginia Woolf was no fool, and Poole is wrong to blame Leonard for faults she would have blamed on the system that produced him and made him insecure. American feminist critics long ago gave up blaming Leonard for Virginia's sufferings. One can wish that he were a splendid lover, generous enough to overcome her guilts, able to give her the child she longed for, sensitive enough to respect her distaste for too much food and milk, her fear of "rest homes." But, realistically, he was the only heterosexual male in her circle who was her equal in mind and morals, and these were the things that really mattered to her. Poole's dichotomy between the rational man and the intuitive woman is false and reductive, for she was blessed with both reason and intuition in abundance.

There is an American domestication and diminishing of Virginia Woolf's life that is even less palatable than Poole's—*Woman of Letters* by Phyllis Rose. The form is British, and it used to be called "potted biography." But Woolf stewed in these juices has none of the succulence of Mrs. Ramsay's *boeuf en daube*. If the sauce is feminist, as author and editor assert, I must give up my claim to literary taste. For it is sauce for ganders, not for geese. The recipe seems concocted in the kitchen of a *Ladies' Home Journal* and written in appropriate style. Rose's Virginia Woolf is a mad housewife with a gift for writing stories. There is an interesting chapter on Lytton Strachey and an original reading of "forcing the soul" in *Mrs. Dalloway*. The dismissal of *Night and Day* and *The Years* is a clue to dependence on standard criticism. Ideas and readings from recent feminist critics have been absorbed, yet carefully avoided in the footnotes. If the aim was to reach more common readers, the method surely should have included a study of Woolf's ideas and the development of her mind.

*Virginia Woolf: Sources of Madness and Art* by Jean O. Love domesticates and diminishes the Woolf in a more "scientific" style. It is a sly and subtle book, sure to please the Bells, for the author continues their method of questioning Virginia's veracity. The story
of the Duckworths is repeated several times, and each time the author asks again, "Is she telling the truth?" Common sense again comes to the rescue. What the Duckworths did was far worse than she could ever have written down and read before the mostly male Memoir Club. In self-analysis she was surely only able to touch the surface of her sufferings. By suggesting that Woolf was a liar, Love betrays a condescending attitude toward her subject that will allow one to dismiss the work as well as the woman. Love regards Woolf's retreat into memories of the past as a symptom of her "madness." But memory makes us moral. And memory as the mother of the muses was Woolf's most reliable imaginative source of power as an artist.

The reader is hampered by the author's paraphrase and interpretation of unpublished material. The footnotes often supply no quoted evidence for this version of character and events. Perhaps she was prevented from extensive quotation by the family. But the reader is asked to take a great deal on trust from an author who does not trust her subject. Leslie Stephen is presented as a tyrannical monster of self-pity, bellowing with rage to cover up quivering insecurity about his masculinity. But he comes off rather well in the end, for Love blames his mother for all his faults. Julia Stephen is painted as an "absent mother" off on her nursing expeditions and neglecting her family, rather like the current popular psychologists' explanations of the breakdown of the family caused by working mothers who neglect their latchkey children. There is a crude Freudian interpretation of the Stephen family's animal names and games. Do not all families do this, or do I blush for myself alone? Worse is the discussion of Virginia Woolf's youthful desire to create a utopia and her literary experiments in imagining a new world. This Love describes as her "naive cosmography." The underlying assumption is that the writing is merely personal self-expression and has no public moral or political motive. It was a dangerous game she was playing, Love assumes, keeping her out of touch with reality. Apply this method to Blake or Shelley, and what are the results?

Surprisingly enough, the most interesting new book is Mitchell Leaska's *The Novels of Virginia Woolf from Beginning to End*.24
despite a "new Bloomsbury" afterword by John Lehmann, which asserts yet again that "his" Virginia Woolf was not political. This book was singled out for special savagery by a reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement*. Since Virginia Woolf is consistently presented in that publication as "the queen of gossips," this represents hostility to the seriousness with which Leaska treats the texts of a novelist he clearly regards as one of the finest modern minds. He respects her intelligence, is thoroughly steeped in her essays, and has studied the development of the manuscripts. Leaska is wise, original, and imaginative as a critic. And I say this despite my own reservations about the psychological method, which is based on Leon Edel's study of Henry James. There is not one reading that the historical critic will take as gospel, but each essay is rich with original insight into the spiritual, social, and literary complexity of Woolf's thought. Further, he is far more sensitive than either Love or Rose to the presence of sexuality and violence in the novels. His ingenuity in research is based on sympathy and respect. While their books diminish writer and woman, Leaska's enlarges her. Hence the reader is led to feel awe for the writer of genius, quite the opposite effect from the Poole, Rose, and Love conspiracies of author and reader to feel superior to her.

The second volume of the *Diary* is mercifully less obtrusive in its editing and is worth buying immediately for the reprinting of "The Intellectual Status of Women" from the *New Statesman* in 1920, written for the general reader. It is disingenuous of the editor to claim that this has been "overlooked," since it has been standard fare in the feminist classroom and often quoted by feminist critics: "It seems to me indisputable that the conditions which make it possible for a Shakespeare to exist are that he shall have had predecessors in his art, shall make one of a group where art is freely discussed and practised, and shall himself have the utmost freedom of action and experience. Perhaps in Lesbos, but never since, have these conditions been the lot of women."

The two most interesting subjects here are first, the death of Katherine Mansfield and the immediate canonization in Woolf's memory of the woman she despised for her sexuality and deplored as a shallow writer
into a saint and a virgin with a white wreath, a woman she had loved, and a writer who would have been Woolf’s only prose competitor. Second, is the writing of *Mrs. Dalloway*, essentially Woolf’s thoughts during revision. Here one finds the source for Peter Walsh’s knife, and the answer to the question, “When did she read *Clarissa*?” It would have been wise, I think, for the editor to have included the notes for *Mrs. Dalloway* from the Berg Collection, notes scribbled in reading notebooks, as well as those on Greek and the use of choruses and dramatic form. One of them contains the question, “Can one admit rhapsodies?”

We are, in the end, grateful for the work of Quentin and Olivier Bell for providing these documents and remain hopeful that a new biographer with some of Woolf’s literary taste, historical imagination, and moral vision will make full use of them. The misreadings of the critics and the muddled condescensions of the biographies are, alas, due to her sex. One may echo her challenge to Arnold Bennett:

I have often been told that Sappho was a woman, and that Plato and Aristotle placed her with Homer and Archilocus among the greatest of their poets. That Mr. Bennett can name fifty of the male sex who are indisputably her superiors is therefore a welcome surprise, and if he will publish their names I will promise, as an act of that submission which is so dear to my sex, not only to buy their works but, so far as my faculties allow, to learn them by heart.26