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A CONSCIOUSNESS OF REALITY

In her diary, Virginia Woolf left behind the most truthful record of what a writer's life is actually like.

By W. H. Auden

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It is, probably, already too late to hope that someone will write a definitive history of Bloomsbury, that fascinating cultural milieu which formed itself around 1910, exercised its greatest influence during the twenties, and came to an end with the death of Virginia Woolf. There is an excellent account of the intellectual influences from which it was born in a posthumous essay by Maynard Keynes; for its later history we shall have to rely upon the memoirs of David Garnett, which are now appearing in England, and the journals of Virginia Woolf, of which "A Writer's Diary" (Harcourt, Brace) is, we hope, only the first installment.





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Bloomsbury was not a “school” in any literary sense—there is no common Bloomsbury style or subject—nor was it centered on any one salon, like the Holland House set of the nineteenth century, or the Garsington set, to which many of its members also belonged. It included novelists, critics, painters, college dons but, curiously, no important poet (if one counts Virginia Woolf as a novelist) or composer. Nearly all its members had been to Cambridge and came from distinguished upper-middle-class families; i.e., without being aristocrats or large landowners, they were accustomed to efficient servants, first-rate meals, good silver and linen, and weekends in country houses. In rebellion against the rhetoric and conventional responses of their Victorian parents, hating dogma, ritual, and

hypocritical expressions of unreal feelings, they, nevertheless, inherited from the Victorians a self-discipline and fastidiousness that made bohemian disorder impossible. “I have,” writes Virginia Woolf—and most of them could have written the same—“an internal, automatic scale of values; which decides what I had better do with my time. It dictates ‘This half hour must be spent on Russian,’ ‘This must be given to Wordsworth.’ Or ‘Now I’d better darn my brown stockings,’ ” and it is characteristic that the word she should find to express her critical reservations about “Ulysses” is “underbred.” Politically a little to the left of center, they all shared a deep distrust of Parties and the State, believing passionately in the supreme importance of personal relations: “If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country,” wrote E. M. Forster, and during the spring of 1940, when invasion seemed imminent, Virginia Woolf refused to be distracted from writing her life of Roger Fry: “It’s the vastness, and the smallness, that makes this possible. So intense are my feelings (about Roger); yet the circumference (the war) seems to make a hoop round them. No, I can’t get the odd incongruity of feeling intensely and at the same time knowing that there’s no importance in that feeling. Or is there, as I sometimes think, more importance than ever?”

It was, I feel, a very happy idea to confine the selections from her diary to her reflections on her own career as a writer. Henry James in his notebooks, letters, and prefaces may have said more interesting things about literary technique, but I have never read any book that conveyed more truthfully what a writer’s life is like, what are its worries, its rewards, its day-by-day routine. Some readers, apparently, have been shocked to find how anxious and sensitive Virginia Woolf was about reviews, and how easily commendation of others could make her envious, but most writers, if they are honest, will recognize themselves in such remarks as “No creative writer can swallow another contemporary. The reception of living work is too coarse and partial if you’re doing the same thing yourself. . . . When Desmond praises ‘East Coker,’ and I am jealous, I walk over the marsh saying, I am I,” and even in her reflection on her father’s death: “Father . . . would have been 96 . . . and could have been 96, like other people one has known: but mercifully was not. His life would have entirely ended mine.”

Some of us keep up an air of stoic indifference to reviews, some avoid distress by refusing to read them, but we all care, and for good reasons. Every writer who is original is often doubtful about the value of a work; praise from a critic whom he respects is a treasured reassurance, silence or blame a confirmation of his worst fears: “So I’m found out and that odious rice pudding of a book is what I

thought it—a dank failure.” Then there are those critics who have made up their minds, for reasons of jealousy or fashion, about his work before they have read it, and the readers of those critics—rival contemporaries or the ambitious young—who are glad to hear that his work is bad: “I dislike the thought of being laughed at: of the glow of satisfaction that A., B., and C. will get from hearing V. W. demolished.” In Virginia Woolf’s case, the fact that she was a woman was a further aggravation. She belonged to a generation in which a woman had still to fight to be taken seriously as a writer. For her, therefore, good notices and brisk sales meant financial independence and masculine admission of her sex as a literary equal; when she writes, “I’m out to make £300 this summer by writing and build a bath and hot-water range at Rodmell,” she is thinking of the satisfaction it will give her, as a wife, to contribute substantially to the family budget.

Sensitive as she was to attacks, she was never too vain to deny any truth there might be in even the most prejudiced: “The thing to do is to note the pith of what is said—that I don’t think—then to use the little kick of energy which opposition supplies to be more vigorously oneself. . . . To investigate candidly the charge; but not fussily, not very anxiously. On no account to retaliate by going to the other extreme—thinking too much.”

These selections from Virginia Woolf’s diary begin in the last year of World War I, when, in spite of it, England still seemed to be pretty much the same country it had been before 1914, and end, a few days before her death, in the darkest days of World War II, when her London house had been destroyed by bombs and the future of England was problematic: “A kind of growl behind the cuckoos and t’other birds. A furnace behind the sky. It struck me that one curious feeling is, that the writing ‘I’ has vanished. No audience. No echo. . . . We live without a future. That’s what’s queer: with our noses pressed to a closed door.”

At the beginning, her literary reputation is just established—“I get treated at great length and solemnity by old gentlemen.” During the twenties, she is universally admired; then, in the thirties, the wiggings start—she is bourgeois, oversensitive, out of date, and so on—and then she dies before she could become (what may well be the most painful fate of all) a sacred cow of whom everyone speaks in tones of hushed and bored reverence, but not before she has finished “Between the Acts,” which, in my opinion, is her masterpiece.

With the exception of a description of an eclipse of the sun, which is as beautiful as any of the best pages in her novels, and an occasional comment, usually rather malicious, on people she knew, these selections are devoted to her thoughts upon the work in hand. Like every other writer, she was concerned about what particular kind of writer she was, and what her unique contribution could and should be. "My only interest as a writer lies, I begin to see, in some queer individuality; not in strength, or passion, or anything startling. Peacock for example: Borrow; Donne. . . . Fitzgerald's Letters." This is true if strength and passion are taken to mean what they conventionally mean when speaking of novelists. What she felt and expressed with the most intense passion was a mystical, religious vision of life, "a consciousness of what I call 'reality': a thing I see before me: something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky; beside which nothing matters; in which I shall exist and continue to exist. . . . How difficult not to go making 'reality' this and that, whereas it is one thing. Now perhaps this is my gift: this perhaps is what distinguishes me from other people: I think it may be rare to have so acute a sense of something like that—but again, who knows? I would like to express it too." Moreover, as is true of most mystics, she also experienced the Dark Night when "reality" seemed malignant—"the old treadmill feeling, of going on and on and on, for no reason . . . contempt for my lack of intellectual power; reading Wells without understanding. . . . society; buying clothes; Rodmell spoilt; all England spoilt: terror at night of things generally wrong in the universe."

What is unique about her work is the combination of this mystical vision with the sharpest possible sense for the concrete, even in its humblest form: "One can't," she observes, "write directly about the soul. Looked at, it vanishes; but look at the ceiling, at Grizzle, at the cheaper beasts in the Zoo which are exposed to walkers in Regent's Park, and the soul slips in." In preserving this balance, her sex was probably a help; a man who becomes interested in the Ground of Being all too easily becomes like Lowes Dickinson—"Always live in the whole, life in the one: always Shelley and Goethe, and then he loses his hot-water bottle; and never notices a face or a cat or a dog or a flower, except in the flow of the universal." A woman who has to run a house can never so lose contact with matter. The last entry in Virginia Woolf's diary is typical: "And now with some pleasure I find that it's seven; and must cook dinner. Haddock and sausage meat. I think it is true that one gains a certain hold on sausage and haddock by writing them down."

Though she took extraordinary pains over each book, she was a born spontaneous writer who never seems to have known periods when she was without a fresh idea; even while she was in the middle of

writing one book, she got ideas for the next, and her output shows a greater variety than she is sometimes credited with. Each book set its particular problem and provoked in the author its particular psychosomatic reactions: "While I was forcing myself to do 'Flush' my old headache came back—for the first time this autumn. Why should 'The Pargiters' ['The Years'] make my heart Jump; why should 'Flush' stiffen the back of my neck?"

Within the years covered by this diary, Virginia Woolf wrote what her husband believes to be, and I agree with him, her three best books, "To the Lighthouse," "The Waves," and "Between the Acts," and the fortunate reader is able to follow the writing of each. Here, for example, is the history of "The Waves":

1926 [She is finishing "To the Lighthouse"]:

SEPTEMBER 30. It is not oneself but something in the universe that one's left with. It is this that is frightening and exciting in the midst of my profound gloom, depression, boredom, whatever it is. One sees a fin passing far out. What image can I reach to convey what I mean?

1927 [the year of "Orlando"]:

FEBRUARY 21. Why not invent a new kind of play; as for instance: Woman thinks . . . He does. Organ plays. She writes. They say: She sings. Night speaks. They miss.

JUNE 18. A man and a woman are to be sitting at a table talking. Or shall they remain silent? It is to be a love story; she is finally to let the last great moth in.

1928:

NOVEMBER 28. The poets succeeding by simplifying practically everything is left out. I want to put practically everything in: yet to saturate. . . . It must include nonsense, fact, sordidity: but made transparent.

1929:

JUNE 23. I think it will begin like this: dawn; the shells on a beach: I don't know—voices of cock and nightingale; and then all the children at a long table—lessons. . . . Could one not get the waves to be heard all through?

[*On September 10th, she begins writing.*]

SEPTEMBER 25. Yesterday morning I made another start on "The Moths," but that won't be its title. . . . Who thinks it? And am I outside the thinker?

DECEMBER 26. I wish I enjoyed it more. I don't have it in my head all day like "The Lighthouse" and "Orlando."

1930:

JANUARY 12. I can now hardly stop making up "The Waves." . . . What is essential is to write fast and not break the mood.

MARCH 17. The test of a book (to a writer) is if it makes a space in which, quite naturally, you can say what you want to say. As this morning I could say what Rhoda said.

APRIL 9. It is bound to be very imperfect. But I think it possible that I have got my statues against the sky.

APRIL 29. The greatest stretch of mind I ever knew. . . . I suspect the structure is wrong. Never mind.

[*She begins her second version of "The Waves."*]

AUGUST 20. "The Waves" is I think resolving itself into a series of dramatic soliloquies.

DECEMBER 22. . . . merge all the interjected passages into Bernard's final speech and end with the words O solitude.

1931:

[*On January 20th, she gets the idea, in her bath, for "Three Guineas."*]

FEBRUARY 7. I wrote the words O Death fifteen minutes ago, having reeled across the last ten pages with some moments of such intensity and intoxication that I seemed only to stumble after my own voice, or almost, after some sort of speaker. . . . Anyhow it is done; and I have been sitting these fifteen minutes in a state of glory, and calm, and some tears. . . . How physical the sense of triumph and relief is! . . . I have netted that fin in the waste of water which appeared to me over the marshes out of my window at Rodmell.

I do not know how Virginia Woolf is thought of by the younger literary generation; I do know that by my own, even in the palmiest days of social consciousness, she was admired and loved much more than she realized. I do not know if she is going to exert an influence on the future development of the

novel—I rather suspect that her style and her vision were so unique that influence would only result in tame imitation—but I cannot imagine a time, however bleak, or a writer, whatever his school, when and for whom her devotion to her art, her industry, her severity with herself—above all, her passionate love, not only or chiefly for the big moments of life but also for its daily humdrum “sausage-and-haddock” details—will not remain an example that is at once an inspiration and a judge. If I had to choose an epitaph for her, I would take a passage from “The Waves,” which is the best description of the creative process that I know:

There is a square: there is an oblong. The players take the square and place it upon the oblong. They place it very accurately; they make a perfect dwelling-place. Very little is left outside. The structure is now visible; what is inchoate is here stated; we are not so various or so mean; we have made oblongs and stood them upon squares. This is our triumph; this is our consolation. ♦

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