Michael Giffin

The Woolfs from Above and Below

Literature

Virginia Woolf's translation into the literary canon wasn't because her understanding of the modernist ideology, or her contribution to the modernist aesthetic, was universally evident and accepted. Her canonisation had a strong political dimension; it involved factional controls of interpretation; the sexual politics around it meant women like her had to be talked up while men like D.H. Lawrence had to be talked down; and it's been widely noticed the critical writing around it lacked subtlety. While Virginia's place in the canon is secure—and that's a good thing—the dust has settled and more measured assessments of her stature, as author and critic, are being made.

During the lead-up to her canonisation, Virginia was portrayed as a victim of patriarchy—since constructing her as a martyr to the feminist cause was strategic and useful—but the evidence is revealing a more complex picture. Peter Alexander's *Leonard and Virginia Woolf: A Literary Partnership* (1992) looked at the dynamics of the Woolfs' marriage with an emphasis on their literary influence on each other. Alison Light's *Mrs Woolf and the Servants* (2008) looks at how the Woolfs treated their staff. This is important territory, much of it new. Both studies are more sympathetic than they might otherwise have been and each is balanced in different ways. Alexander has been criticised for challenging Virginia's claque but we should be able to approach the Woolfs without ignoring their faults.

Alexander's justification for his study is his belief—shared with Leonard—that Bloomsbury never really existed; his contention that Virginia's achievements aren't sufficient to sustain her present reputation; and his conviction that overvaluing Virginia distorts the view of her loose-knit circle of acquaintances, whose gifts ranged from slight to considerable. Alexander's intention is to answer a question not asked, or not asked with sufficient persistence, before: What literary influence did the Woolfs have on each other? Virginia stimulated Leonard to write fiction in the first place, and Leonard used some of his fiction to characterise the personal and public difficulties of their relationship. Leonard's literary influence on Virginia was more complex, because her fiction was more subtle. Alexander's context is whether the Woolfs were really modernists, with a firm grasp of the modernist ideology and aesthetic, since it isn't self-evident Virginia was a modernist—some argue she's a child of her Victorian upbringing with a conservative approach to art—although Leonard's rejection of the Victorians and everything they stood for retained its virulence to the end of his life.

Virginia Stephen had an outwardly happy and privileged upbringing. Her father, Leslie, a Cambridge don, had been ordained a priest before gaining his inheritance, losing his faith, and embarking on a literary career. He directed her education and formed her tastes; she was privately tutored and never went to school or university; there were large gaps in her learning; to give one example among many, her father knew a lot about Christianity but raised his children to be ignorant of it and to despise it, but in her mid-fifties, while reading the Bible for the first time, her attitude shifted rapidly from contempt to awe, and she felt cheated at having been deprived of it earlier. Alexander believes that the story of child sexual abuse from her half-brother is a distortion of her adulthood and he gives convincing reasons why. She inherited her mental illness from her father's side of the family; it made her intolerant of mental abnormality in others; the intellectually disabled filled her with horror and she believed they should be killed. She never accepted her mother's or her father's death. She was pathologically shy, thought people were looking and laughing at her, and was obsessed with suicide. She needed constant care all her life. She was prudish about sexual matters, and, while many of her friends were homosexual, she was homophobic: at least

behind their backs.

Leonard Woolf's family had established themselves as London tailors but, in Leonard's words, his father was "educated out of his class" and became a wealthy barrister. Sidney was a tough and intellectually intolerant man with a strict moral code. Leonard modelled himself on his father, whose death was the central event of the young man's life. As Sidney had been careless with money, the family descended from prosperity to comparative poverty after his death. Leonard received a classical education at St Paul's School, West Kensington, where he became a muscular and disciplined intellect but also developed a "mask" to protect himself from the sense of being resented and disliked, which plagued him all his life. At Trinity College, Cambridge, he became an Apostle and a fiercely anti-Christian atheist. His bubble of hubris burst when he didn't do well in his tripos and had to prepare for the civil service exam. He did badly in the exam and was forced to accept a position in Ceylon, where for six years he made himself pleasant to his superiors, was an efficient colonial administrator, and worked extremely hard. He was lonely, became increasingly dubious about the value of what he was doing, and cynical about the role of the British in Ceylon generally.

Leonard and Virginia's marriage wasn't a love match; it was arranged as a mutual necessity. It relieved him of the need of a career and worries about money. It bound him to the upper middle class; and also to the Apostles: the only group he felt at home with. Virginia needed a husband to look after her but there were barriers to accepting him: she found him fascinating and forbidding but alien; he was heterosexual and therefore intensely threatening; she thought he was physically unattractive and told him so; she was a ferocious snob who saw him as neither of her class nor a gentleman, an opinion she would maintain all her life; he was Jewish, and, like many of her upbringing, she hated Jews simply because they were Jews. Complicating all this, neither one of them were sensualists, although Leonard was more sexual than Virginia. When he proposed, everyone urged her to accept him, including her doctor, but she vacillated. What convinced her? Alexander argues that, because they were both determined to be writers, Leonard's approval of her work softened her attitude: she needed reassurance about herself, and a man whose intellect she could respect.

It became clear on their honeymoon that, despite Virginia's desire for children, her frigidity couldn't be overcome and was linked to her mental illness. Leonard had to give up any idea of sexual satisfaction, which he did because he believed Virginia was a genius, but he went one step further and decided she shouldn't have children, against the advice of nearly everyone including her doctor. Alexander wonders whether this was an error of judgment on Leonard's part, but perhaps he was convinced his wife was too unstable for motherhood. There were other bitter pills for him to swallow. Virginia despised his family, their religion, their manners, their furniture, their loudness, their closeness, and she particularly disliked her mother-in-law. Leonard adapted by withdrawing from his family—he didn't even invite them to his wedding—and he internalised his wife's anti-Semitism to the point of satirising them in one of his novels. Virginia dismissed the fact that his family's feelings were hurt by the novel, arguing that "feelings, after all, aren't very important". Her dismissal of other people's feelings is unfortunate here, as it is elsewhere, given that both her criticism and fiction advocate feeling over reason.

The first few years of their marriage were difficult. Virginia had several extended episodes of mental illness. She blamed Leonard's not letting her have children; however, his strength, which became clearer to her the more she tested it, was the rock on which she rebuilt her life. Their future lay in attempts at social engagement. They became Fabians and began the Hogarth Press. He was closely engaged with the real world, was obsessed by factual detail, and had great skill in handling people and situations; she lacked polish and tact, had impaired social skills, was forever in danger of saying the wrong thing, and was physically clumsy and untidy: all unfortunate traits in a snob. Her imagination was always causing her trouble; it obscured her view of reality; and reality was often a disappointment or an embarrassment to her. Alexander believes this last point is worth insisting on, because the unique character of Virginia's writing can be traced to her bookish existence; after her marriage, contrasting internal and external reality—which she never reached a firm conclusion about—became an abiding theme in her writing. Much of life was closed to her, either because she knew little of it, or because her experience of it had been so painful it couldn't now be explored. The details of existence—the stuff of life for so many artists—scarcely impinged on her.

Virginia was aware that she didn't know how other people lived or what they thought or felt. One would expect, with maturity and experience, that her knowledge of the world and her ability to deal with it would increase. But it didn't. The only activity that deeply impinged on her consciousness was the working of her imagination. Her imagination filled her life; practical details were unreal to her. Real people were cardboard figures to her; having asked them questions about themselves, she rapidly created a fantasy life for them which was more interesting to her than their real lives. Something about her imagination prevented her from accepting—or even

registering on any but a superficial level—the reality of other people's existences. Complicating this, while Virginia was well read in letters she knew little about history or philosophy or theology, and she was largely ignorant of the social or economic or political character of the contemporary world. She suffered from a narrow range of interests, and a lack of engagement with large areas of human activity, which lead her into intellectual territory she wasn't particularly suited to. All this compromised her legacy as a modernist.

Why hasn't Virginia's literary criticism dated well? Many of her critical remarks are judicious and strikingly expressed; she wrote with a cultivated confidence and flair which belied her insecurity; her judgments often compel with an appearance of common sense but they aren't trustworthy; her prejudices, and tendency to patronise and dismiss, diminished their influence. She admired Jane Austen but thought her coarse; Charles Dickens was an actor whose work was meretricious; James Joyce's method was "centred in a self which, in spite of its tremor of susceptibility, never embraces or creates what is outside itself and beyond"; D.H. Lawrence's idealism and unrest came from his middle-class origins and he lacked "the final power which makes things final in themselves"; T.S. Eliot's reputation was inflated and he was overrated as a poet; Bernard Shaw's plays were "mere daily trash" and if left on a desert island with them she'd rather scale monkey puzzle trees; she admitted to not having read more than ten words of Ezra Pound but her "conviction of his humbug" was unalterable; E.M. Forster's gifts were "baffling and evasive"; Aldous Huxley had a good mind but insufficient imagination; Henry James was too refined, used his brains and not his body, and couldn't take liberties; Robert Graves was half-baked, stammering and stuttering, but perhaps improved his own quarter of Oxfordshire.

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Virginia's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, was published by Gerald Duckworth, her half-brother, the one who is supposed to have molested her; she self-published the rest of her novels through the Hogarth Press. What did her critics and peers and friends think of her work? Katherine Mansfield felt *Night and Day*, an exercise in classical realism, reeked of intellectual snobbery; E.M. Forster felt none of its characters were convincing; Frank Swinnerton felt this was because Virginia thought in terms of intuition, her method was vague and speculative: that of an inactive dreamer. T.S. Eliot felt *Jacob's Room* required very careful reading, which brought her a paradoxical fashionability. Her friends didn't respond well to *Mrs Dalloway*; the critics noticed it borrowed and reworked James Joyce's pattern in *Ulysses*, which undermined her negative opinions of Joyce. E.M. Forster felt *To the Lighthouse* was her best work to date, with stronger characterisations, and a more confident and solid engagement with life, but he felt *The Waves* was her greatest novel in spite of a few overwritten passages; Rebecca West felt *The Waves* was "Pre-Raphaelite kitsch", which Peter Alexander feels is jealous nonsense akin to Virginia's dismissal of Joyce. Alexander himself feels *The Waves* is Virginia's most explicit affirmation in fiction of what she once described as her philosophy of life: the perception that life isn't chaotic but is a rhythm or a pattern which united all life, all human beings in a kind of group consciousness: the consciousness that all are part of a gigantic work of art.

Alexander agrees with Leonard's overall assessment, expressed after her death, that Virginia wasn't a great novelist. She couldn't construct or develop a plot and could only fitfully provide a convincing background against which her characters could move; with the exception of the vivid figures from her childhood, she couldn't bring to life any character other than those which are clearly aspects of herself. However, Alexander believes Virginia was a great artist, even if she wasn't a great novelist: an interesting distinction not everyone will easily grasp or readily accept. Her chief gift was for inspired self-analysis; she was deeply introverted; she's saved from a mere egotism, and from a sterile aestheticism, by the fact that hers was a rich and fascinating mind.

For his part, Leonard's mind was in many ways a perfect counterpoise to his wife's quicksilver instability. He lacked her sensitivity, her butterfly quickness, her imagination, and her felicity of phrase, but his firm command of external reality gave him the power to support her psychologically and materially. Without Leonard we would not have had Virginia, or at least not more of her than her first novel. Theirs was a triumphant marriage; one of the most remarkable in English literary history.

Servants don't usually feature in accounts of Virginia's life. The more idealised visions of her go hand-in-hand with a romantic view of the novelist as a solitary genius, or a free-spirited bohemian creating a new kind of life. Virginia was neither of these; she was highly dependent; without her

servants as well as Leonard she couldn't have survived, let alone written novels. Alison Light's illuminating study of the Woolfs' domestic life is conducted within a broader and equally-illuminating history of domestic service in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century England. This is often called "history from below", which is harder to research than "history from above" because whatever sources that exist are submerged. Even simple information Light needed to establish a servant's identity—such as a surname, or even a first name instead of a pet name—was hard to find: although servants were indispensable, they were meant to be invisible in the present and to history.

Light's aim was to restore these servants' identities and give them the dignity and respect they deserve. She was appalled by the way Virginia spoke of some of her servants in her diaries and wanted to learn more about why. Her purpose was not to debunk or devalue Virginia or her writing but to argue that the figure of the servant, and of the working woman, haunts Woolf's experiments in literary modernism and sets a limit on what she could achieve in the genre. She wanted to return these servants to Virginia's story not only for their own sakes but because their relationships with her were as enduring and intimate and intense as any in her life.

Light had personal reasons, too. First, her maternal grandmother, Lilian, had been a live-in servant for a time, and she believed the book would get to the bottom of Lilian's grim memories and negative feelings. While she began her research thinking of service as exploitation, writing it up brought home how various different servants' experiences were; so she's tried to see service in terms of what it had to offer servants and what they made of it. Second, her own life underwent a sea-change during her research, as her first husband slowly died of cancer. Her experience of caring for him as he wasted away before her, and his death, made her think and feel differently about the place of dependency and mourning in Virginia's life:

> I can only gesture here at what this meant. I am still trying to make sense of it ... I also came to think that the capacity to entrust one's life to the care of others, including strangers, and for this to happen safely and in comfort, without abuse, is crucial to any decent community and to any society worth the name.

After her father's death in 1904, Virginia had a long episode of mental illness. Once her doctor pronounced her "normal" eight months later, she set up a new household with her sister Vanessa and two brothers Thoby and Adrian. She took the "family treasure" with her, Sophia Farrell, who had been the Stephens' cook for eighteen years. The next few years were domestically unstable: Vanessa married, Thoby died, Virginia and Adrian found it difficult living alone with each other, and Virginia and Leonard married in 1912. Sophia didn't stay with the Woolfs permanently and over the years she was shunted between them, the Bells, the Stephens, and the Duckworths. But Sophia was Virginia's anchor in the past—in the Victorian model of household and "the old game" of domestic service—and Virginia had a more familial relationship with Sophia than she had with any of her other servants: she sent Sophia £10 a year after her retirement in 1931; they kept up a mutually-reassuring correspondence throughout the 1930s; Virginia understood Sophia's need for dependence; Sophia understood Virginia's need to preserve the memory of an Edenic time before her mother's death. Sophia outlived Virginia by a few weeks; she died of cancer. The £10 a year remained unspent. Sophia wanted to leave the money to a niece instead. The letters from Virginia, not the money, were the real treasure; all the thankyous Sophia had written in reply over the years, saying how useful the money was in these lean times, turned out to be her own piece of fiction. Light's point here is that Sophia was an author, too, in her own way.

Sophia was a relic of a bygone age. Times were changing, socially and economically and politically; this altered the structure of households and the nature of service. Before Light goes on to reconstruct the Woolfs' domestic life between the wars—in their city and country households—she discusses at some length the reciprocal obligation model of service championed by the Christian philanthropist Mrs Edith Sichel, who dedicated her life to rescuing poor and disadvantaged girls and placing them in service: one of whom became a servant of the Woolfs. Virginia reacted violently against the "imperial tread" of such philanthropists who "dabble their fingers self-approvingly in the stuff of others' souls". Every shred of her being revolted against the idea of interference in other people's lives; after all, she had been constantly subject to the schemes and regimes of others herself: relatives, doctors, nurses, well-meaning religious ladies supervising her convalescence. But Light makes an intriguing rhetorical observation about Virginia here: "Not having a philanthropic relationship to the poor was to make being a mistress difficult. And could one be a writer and not dabble in the stuff of other people's souls? An author without authority?"

According to Virginia, her household was "the easiest place in the world" for servants, and there was some truth in this. The household was informal. There was no uniform. Servants weren't called by their surnames. Virginia was Mrs Woolf not Ma'am. No one dressed for dinner.

There was no table linen. While a dinner bell was rung, food had to be brought in, and plates had to be cleared, fetching and carrying were kept to a minimum. Virginia didn't supervise her servants while they worked—as her mother would have—and their manners and even their morals would have appeared unbelievably lax to most of Virginia's class. Nor were the servants expected to attend church, which was still the norm. Virginia's milieu was sociable and fun.

Like servants throughout the ages, those who worked for the Woolfs saw how the other half lived, and it expanded their horizons. If they were sometimes envious and resentful, they were also grateful and appreciative. But these are two sides of the same coin. They rewarded their employers by becoming snobs; since for all its liberalism the Woolfs' milieu was possessive and insular and exclusive; this tribal behaviour was hardly unique; everyone in Britain could find someone to look down on whether they were a master or a servant.

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Light draws interesting parallels between the modernisation which supported the new model of service and the Woolfs' resistance to modernisation. Their friend Roger Fry, a sometime lover of Virginia's sister, planned his modern estate "Durbins" practically, installing the latest conveniences. Electricity and central heating meant his servants' work was cut in half. The kitchen and scullery and cook's sitting room were in the upper part of the house not the basement. Rugs would have to be beaten but the parquet only needed an oiled mop; the oak furniture showed fewer finger-marks than the Victorian's rosewood or mahogany; there was much less to dust and polish; water-closets were installed and even the servants had a separate lavatory. There were hardly any stairs. Fry installed a dumb waiter, which allowed meals to be served and cleared without the need for waiting at table. When two of his servants went to work for the Woolfs they found stone floors, no running water, fireplaces that required fuel, and earth-closets; the Woolfs presumably refused to countenance the expense of putting in water-closets; and who emptied the sewage was a serious issue among the servants since it affected their earnings and self-respect.

While the Woolfs weren't poor they worried about extravagance and counted pennies; Leonard kept the accounts and encouraged frugality; Virginia always knew the price of an egg. Theoretically, they believed the conflict of class interests was the greatest of curses and should be abolished: "Yet no one suggested that by paying their char a pittance they were keeping the class system alive and well, or helping to pauperize the poor." In spite of the Woolfs' Fabian principles, a sense of "us" and "them" between them and their servants was unavoidable.

A whole chapter is devoted to Nellie Boxhall, who lived with the Woolfs for eighteen years; ten of those years as their sole live-in servant. The relationship between Virginia and Nellie is an extraordinary psychological study of "the new game" of service in a social and economic and political order very different from the one Virginia grew up in; on both sides there were misapprehensions of obligations and clashes of expectations; they were mutually dependent in ways misunderstood or unrecognised at the time, although Virginia spent an inordinate amount of paper and ink analysing their relationship in her diaries, and getting it fundamentally wrong. Nellie was temperamental; always threatening to leave; always retracting her notice. Virginia couldn't see beyond Nellie's temper, or her class, or grasp that her grievances about her workload, and the difficult conditions under which she was expected to work, might have some foundation: apart from the usual cooking and cleaning, the Woolfs had many visitors and entertained a lot.

The mistress didn't see herself as a mistress—the author never claimed her authority—instead she had proclaimed a new order in which everything was informal and relationships were one-to-one rather than hierarchical. So what could be the problem? Virginia couldn't grasp that, whereas the servants of the past, like Sophia, understood the rules of "the old game", the servants of the present were given mixed messages and the rules of "the new game" were always changing. Over the years Nellie was periodically wanted and not wanted, needed and not needed, indispensable and dispensable, depending on the Woolfs' ever-changing domestic scenarios. This instability, and the inevitable sense if vulnerability it caused, was seen to be Nellie's problem; as Virginia once said of her: "The poor have no sense of humour." Long after Virginia died, Nellie got the chance to have the last word, in a BBC radio program aired in 1956. Nellie's memories of Virginia were rosy and more charitable than much of what Virginia had written about her.

In her essay "Sketch of the Past" (1939), Virginia reflected on the immense forces society brings to play on each individual; society changes from decade to decade and from class to class. She recognised her biographical dilemma thus:

> well, if we cannot analyse these invisible presences, we know little of the subject of the memoir; and again how futile life-writing becomes. I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream.

This is perceptive, and Light's point, woven throughout the fabric of her study, is that if Virginia can't describe the stream of her outer life—what she called the life of her body; what other people call real life—what does that tell us about her descriptions of her inner life: the stream of her consciousness; the life of her mind? As the 1930s progressed, and the 1940s approached, the dissonance between Virginia's outer and inner lives must have become more urgent.

Live-in servants gave way to the daily charwoman; class politics were coming closer to home; political ideologies from abroad, which elevated the need of the group above those of the individual, threatened the very idea of the private or separate inner life so essential to Virginia's idea of art and culture; democracy meant letting others in, and her fear of being invaded by other classes coincided with her fear of invasion from Germany: both were real; both were imminent. Virginia's last novel, *Between the Acts*, which anticipates the war, was in fact written during the Battle of Britain; German bombers flew over her home; German bombs exploded close to her. Her earlier episodes of mental illness were often associated with completing a novel, but surely the war exacerbated her descent into the final illness that led to her suicide.

During her last weeks, which coincided with the widespread expectation that Germany was about to invade England, Leonard prescribed housework as therapy. Virginia took to scrubbing floors, and one day she spent two hours beating carpets; she watched the flakes of dust continue to flock down onto the books she had just dusted: "I'd no notion," she wrote to a friend, "having always a servant, of the horror of dirt." Soon she would put rocks in her pockets and drown herself. Within a year of her death Leonard fell in love with another woman; many servants went off to assist with the war wherever they could; after the war the idea of service, even as a new game which replaced an old game, had virtually disappeared.

When read together, Alexander and Light complement each other as correctives to much of what has been written about the Woolfs. What else do we need to know?

First, a comprehensive study of Virginia's mental illness still hasn't been made and might be useful, especially if it's located in the broader context of what was known about mental illness at the time. We still don't know why most of those around her—including Virginia's doctor—felt her mental health would have benefited from motherhood, or why her sister Vanessa, who received the same upbringing, and was exposed to the same men, was a better-adjusted person who never became mentally ill. Since Virginia's writing was inseparable from the psychology of consciousness, and the linguistic turn, the influence of her mental illness on her fiction and criticism must have been significant if not normative.

Second, a comprehensive study locating the Woolfs in a broader Anglosphere might be useful, since their strengths and weaknesses, and their changing world, weren't uniquely English. There were Woolf-like people, and domestic servants, in the Antipodes and North America, and we lose a broader perspective when we focus on them as a purely English phenomenon.

Third, a comprehensive study comparing our world with Virginia's world, whether we call it Bloomsbury or not, might be useful, since the more one reads about the Woolfs, their servants, and their circle—and how they all engaged with each other—the more they seem like us: our selves, our families, our neighbourhoods, our workplaces, our places of worship. We may not like what we see in this mirror but the occasional salutary gaze could tell us something we need to know.

Michael Giffin reviewed Nick Spencer's ***Darwin and God*** *in the June issue.*