

*Linda Avril Burnett*

## Review Article

### Made Numb with Non-Being

*A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897-1909.* By Virginia Woolf. Edited by Mitchell A. Leaska. Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1990. Pp. xlv., 444. \$27.95.

These previously unpublished early journals cover some of the most trying years of Virginia Woolf's life. Begun in January of 1897, as Woolf was recovering from the breakdown she suffered after her mother's death in 1895, these seven diaries span the years 1897-1909, and include four volumes from the period 1987-1904, later tagged by Woolf "the seven unhappy years." In 1897, Woolf's half sister Stella died; in 1904 her father died, after which Woolf suffered another breakdown; and in 1906 her brother Thoby died.

The 1897 diary is the longest. Containing the account of what Woolf refers to as "the first really *lived* year of my life," it is concerned mainly with the day-to-day events of her life, such as visits to galleries and museums, outings to concerts and the theatre, shopping excursions, and calls on family and friends. In these entries, Woolf goes for daily walks, studies Greek, visits Miss Walker, the dressmaker, who "clipped and stuck pins" in her, watches Nessa and Thoby practice dancing in the drawing room, helps her family entertain a myriad of guests, and writes. Consider the following entry from August of 1899:

I cannot write prettily when my pen scratches & all joy in the art is lost to me. I love writing for the sake of writing, but when my pen is enfeebled it becomes a task & bother to me. The domestic Mary "a nice girl, but very empty Miss" investigated the mechanics of my pen . . . & something of its divinity has fled since.

In passages such as this one, Woolf, sounding like the precocious teenager she was, nonetheless makes it clear that she is already conscious of herself as a writer.

Woolf was also a voracious reader. She read history, biography, fiction, poetry—anything it seems, she could get her hands on. Her father's birthday gift in 1897, J. G. Lockhart's *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott*, is described as "10 beautiful little blue and brown gilt leathered backs, big print, and altogether luxurious. The nicest present I have had yet." In a later entry, she notes that she is concurrently reading this 10-volume *Life* with Dickens's *Old Curiosity Shop* and Thackeray's *The Newcombes*.

Often Woolf seems uncomfortable in social situations. In February of 1897, she notes that she had "a long dreary tea with the Milmans, dances were discussed afterwards, in which Miss Jan [Woolf's name for herself] did not take much interest." Later that month she writes, in reference to an evening out, "Poor Miss Jan utterly lost her wits . . . talked nonsense, and grew as red as a turkey cock. Only rescued from this by S. proposing to go away." Her room and her books provided a refuge; reading was her "greatest help and comfort." Thus she read to relax: "Read Mr. [Henry] James to quiet me, and my beloved Macaulay."

After 1903 Woolf's entries go beyond the recording of family life, becoming more literary. She practises writing essays, character sketches, travel pieces and commenting on what she is reading, consciously training herself for a career as critic and novelist. The following comments on Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* were penned in August of 1903:

He [Hardy] has taken a grim subject and stuck to it till the bitter end. It is . . . written with the purpose of showing how a girl may be as pure as snow, & do things that women may not do—how in spite of her purity, the judgment of a brutal world descends upon her, ruins her life, & sends her to the gallows. All this is set forth with an almost savage insistence; the writer is so sternly determined that we shall see the brutality of certain social conventions that he tends to spoil his novel as a novel.

This and other such entries show Woolf rehearsing for her later role as a reviewer. (Her first reviews were published in December of 1904.)

In these pages, Woolf also displays the same dry wit we later encounter in mature works such as *A Room of One's Own*. The following is a sketch from July of 1903 of her Greek teacher, Miss Case, who being "no sentimentalist" focussed on the grammar and not the aesthetics of literature:

I read a very lovely description of maidenhood in Euripides . . . how the maiden hangs like ripened fruit within the orchard . . . the passer by spies in—& does not hesitate to pluck. That was the sense of it, & at the end I paused with some literary delight in its beauty. Not so Miss Case. "The use of the instrumental genitive in the 3rd line is extremely rare" her comment upon Love!

Woolf goes on to admit she is being unfair, since "aesthetic pleasure is so much easier to attain than knowledge of the uses of the genitive."

What Woolf doesn't write about in these journals, however, are the breakdowns she suffered in 1895 and 1904. She also has no words after the death of Stella in 1897. Her entry of July 19th reads: "Georgie and Nessa came to me, & told me that Stella was dead—That is all we have thought of since; and it is impossible to write of." Succeeding entries do not refer to her grief. Like the entries after her father's death, they are perfunctory. Diary writing becomes an almost impossible task:

[t]his poor diary is lingering on indeed, but death would be shorter & less painful. Never mind, we will follow the year to its end, & then fling diaries & diarising into the corner—to dust & mice & moths & all creeping crawling eating destroying creatures.

The other thing Woolf does not comment on in these diaries is the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her half brothers. Actually, she did not write about this abuse until 1939. Then in "A Sketch of the Past," in an attempt to come to terms with a lifelong inability to look at herself in a mirror without feeling shame, she describes how Gerald Duckworth violated her when she was very young.<sup>1</sup> She follows her allegation with the remark, "I have no motive for lying about it."

Mitchell Leaska, however, does not believe Virginia Woolf. Furthermore, he goes to some lengths in his introduction to these journals—

journals which themselves say nothing on the subject—to state his case. Leaska notes that Woolf did not record her accusations "in this earliest of her journals, written when the molestations were alleged to have occurred." On the other hand, she did write here of outings with her half brothers and of receiving lavish presents from them. Moreover, the "fact that as an *adult* she entrusted her first two novels to Gerald for publication . . . is hard to understand if the effects of his abuse were as destructive and traumatic to her as has been claimed."

"As has been claimed," Leaska writes. Claimed by whom? Is he here just referring to Woolf's claims, or is he also referring to the claims of those "feminist critics [who] have unintentionally belittled Virginia by turning her into a pitiful maimed creature." And why does not Leaska name even one of these "feminist critics" or provide a concrete example of how a feminist critic has "belittled Virginia"?<sup>2</sup> Perhaps it is because Mitchell Leaska is too busy patronizing both Woolf and feminist critics to concern himself with the need for evidence.

But consider what he does provide. Citing only his own earlier work on Woolf's novels, he states that it is "highly probable" that Woolf harbored erotic fantasies about her father, and that it was "easier to lay the weight of these unmentionable crimes on the shoulders of her half-brothers than to acknowledge fully the shame [they] generated."<sup>3</sup> Next he acknowledges that all "this . . . is pure speculation." Then, after conceding that her brothers may have been guilty of "sexual interference," he writes: "But whatever the truth was, there is no verifiable evidence that the molesting went beyond fondling, distressing though this may have been to someone of Virginia's sensitive nature."

Leaska's tone is irritating; he seems so sure of himself. How does a scene from a work of fiction confirm displaced Oedipal desire in its author? Why does he find it hard to accept that George might have both treated Vanessa and Virginia to "the most gorgeous strawberry ices" and abused them. Why does he downplay what Woolf herself wrote later in life about her brothers? I think Marilyn Simones in her review of these diaries offers a feasible explanation for Leaska's comments. She finds his views "not surprising given that he serves as literary consultant to *Psychoanalytic Review*," and points to Freud's drive theory "that views women's reports of sexual abuse as 'figments of their imaginations based on their own sexual desires'" as their basis.<sup>4</sup>

Why doesn't Woolf write about her breakdowns, about her grief, about her abuse in these early journals? Woolf, herself, offers an explanation in "A Sketch of the Past." Sounding very Heideggerean, she remarks that in any day there is "much more non-being than being." She continues with the following passage:

A great part of every day is not lived consciously. One walks, eats, sees things, deals with what has to be done; the broken vacuum cleaner; ordering dinner; writing orders to Mabel; washing; cooking dinner; bookbinding. *When it is a bad day the proportion of non-being is much larger.*<sup>5</sup> (My emphasis.)

Here, very succinctly, we have Woolf's own reason for those writingless days. It is not only that some things are too personal or too painful to write about. It is that on those "bad days" filled with non-being, and "not lived consciously," Woolf would not have been capable of picking up her pen. For while Woolf believes that a "real novelist" such as Jane Austen or Trollope "can somehow convey both sorts of feeling," being and non-being, she admits that she has "never been able to do both."

## NOTES

1. Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (New York: Harcourt, 1976) 67-69.
2. One work Leaska should have cited is Louise DeSalvo's *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Abuse on Her Life and Work* (Boston: Beacon, 1989). DeSalvo accepts Woolf's allegations about her brothers. Moreover, she sees Woolf's breakdowns as repercussions of that early sexual abuse. DeSalvo used to be co-editor of *Psychoanalytic Review* with Leaska.
3. The work Leaska cites is his *The Novels of Virginia Woolf: From Beginning to End* (London, 1977) 198-99.
4. Marilyn Simones, "A Voyeur's Look at Virginia Woolf's 'Unhappy Years,'" *Montreal Gazette* 23 Feb. 1991: 13-14. Simones also reminds us that in 1896 Freud wrote that "at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are one or more occurrences [sic] of premature sexual experiences," and that he later abandoned this seduction theory in favor of the drive theory. Here she cites Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson's *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory*.
5. *Moments of Being* 70.