

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

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Who's interested in Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)? Because she was a feminist, pacifist, and activist, perhaps progressives and liberals should be interested in her and her work.

Now, Rob Kall may be disappointed that Virginia Woolf does not happen to explicitly thematize bottom-up versus top-down change. To be sure, as a feminist, pacifist, and activist, she did work for change in the world of her time. So did the world of her time change so dramatically that she no longer speaks to the world of our time?

In Virginia Woolf's time and in our time, women are generally at the bottom, figuratively speaking. Few women in her time received a university education, but that has changed. In addition, women in her time were not allowed to vote, but that also has changed.

In theory, bottom-up change would presumably have to involve women and tend to favor women.

If Hillary Rodham Clinton emerges as the Democratic Party's presidential candidate in the 2016 election, then we will undoubtedly hear more about women being generally at the bottom, figuratively speaking, even though not all women are at the figurative bottom. For example, to spell out the obvious, Hillary is not at the figurative bottom. But her mother was.

Now, President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) was known for his concern for the "little guy," even though he himself was not a "little guy" (a sexist expression). In our American experiment in democratic government, it appears that significant political change typically involves a measure of top-down action, but preferably top-down action taken by politicians who are genuinely concerned about social justice, as FDR was -- and as Hillary may be.

To advance the kind of change Virginia Woolf favored in her time, she published, among other things, two collections of her own essays titled *The Common Reader* (1925, 1932) to help advance bottom-up change. Even though she herself did not have a university education, as her two brothers did, she really did think that people should cultivate their aesthetic sensibilities in order to promote bottom-up change -- even if this meant taking charge of their own education and cultivation by becoming autodidacts. As far as she was concerned the men at the "top" of British and European prestige culture at the time tended to be pompous philistines. So at first blush, she may sound like a snob. No doubt she was opposed to the philistines and philistinism in her time.

At the time, modern English literary studies was just emerging as a university field of study at Cambridge University under the influence of F. R. Leavis and I. A. Richards. The Canadian Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), for example, studied under Leavis and Richards in the 1930,

completing his doctoral dissertation and the history of the verbal arts and Thomas Nashe in 1943, when World War II was still going on. Commercial radio and movies were also emerging. So I see Virginia Woolf's collections titled THE COMMON READER as aimed at a broad educated public – amateur readers and autodidacts, not the then emerging class of professional literary scholars such as Leavis and Richards.

Disclosure: As an undergraduate majoring in English at St. Louis University, where McLuhan had taught English in the late 1930s and early 1940s, I was initiated into the approach to close reading that Leavis and Richards pioneered at Cambridge University. However, even though two of my later professional publications grew out of my independent study of Virginia Woolf, I am not a Virginia Woolf scholar. So I would describe myself as being a “common reader.”

My two professional publications that grew out of my independent study of Virginia Woolf are (1) “The Female and Male Modes of Rhetoric” in the journal COLLEGE ENGLISH, volume 40 (1978-1979): pages 909-921; and (2) “Secondary Orality and Consciousness Today” in the book *Media, Consciousness, and Culture: Explorations of Walter Ong's Thought* (1991, pages 194-209).

I also see Virginia Woolf's two volumes titled *The Common Reader* (1925, 1932) and her novels as emerging in the waning years of print culture 1.0. By 1960, the communications media that accentuated sound, as radio does, had reached a certain critical mass that Walter J. Ong, S.J. (1912-2003), describes as secondary oral culture – or oral culture 2.0, for short. Over the last half century or so, our contemporary oral culture 2.0 had deeply influenced our cultural conditioning and as a result, print culture 2.0 has emerged. No doubt oral culture 2.0 and print culture 2.0 will dominate Western culture for years to come.

Now, over the last half century or so, Virginia Woolf has been lionized by certain literary scholars – the successors of Leavis and Richards. In general, literary scholars tend to be the custodians of print culture 1.0, except for those few literary scholars who are aware of oral tradition.

However, as far as I know, the literary scholars who have lionized Virginia Woolf over the last half century or so have not connected with the literary scholars who have begun taking oral tradition into consideration, and vice versa. The connection would be Virginia Woolf's essay “Anon.”

In the scholarly world, Albert B. Lord's book *The Singer of Tales* (1960) and Eric A. Havelock's book *Preface to Plato* (1963) call attention to the singing of tales such as the Homeric epics. Over the last half century or so, certain literary scholars have begun taking oral tradition into consideration – oral culture 1.0. See, for example, the 550-page anthology *Teaching Oral Tradition*, edited by John Miles Foley (MLA, 1998).

As Lord and Havelock and others point out, the Homeric epics were sung as songs. In the Hebrew Bible, the Psalms and the Song of Songs are for singing. St. Francis of Assisi's “Canticle of Brother Sun” is a medieval song. In Virginia Woolf's essay “Anon,” which she

wrote when she was writing her novel *Between the Acts* (1941), she invokes the oral world of song – oral culture 1.0.

Brenda R. Silver published Virginia Woolf's two essays "Anon" and "The Reader" along with an introduction and commentary in the journal *Twentieth Century Literature*, volume 25, numbers 3/4 (Autumn/Winter, 1979): pages 356-441. Around the same time that Virginia Woolf was writing the novel *Between the Acts* (1941), she wrote those two essays for a projected book that she did not live to complete.

Volume 6 of *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Stuart Clarke (2000), contains Virginia Woolf's essays "Anon" and "The Reader."

In our contemporary oral culture 2.0, songs abound on the radio and in other forms of communications media that accentuate sound.

Mark Hussey, who is now an administrator at Texas A&M University, is also the author of the book *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (1986).

Hussey is not wrong in suggesting in the subtitle of his above-mentioned 1986 book that the so-called philosophy expressed in Virginia Woolf's novels can be characterized, figuratively speaking, as singing the real world.

For a relevant discussion of expressing a so-called philosophy in oral culture 1.0, see David M. Smith's perceptive 1997 essay "World as Event: Aspects of Chipewyan Ontology," which is reprinted in the 360-page anthology *Of Ong and Media Ecology: Essays in Communication, Composition, and Literary Studies* (2012, pages 117-141). Smith is an anthropologist who lived and worked with the Chipewyan people in western Canada. Many of his professional publications center on their narratives.

In his above-mentioned essay, Smith borrowed Ong's expression about the world-as-event sense of life. See Ong's article "World as View and World as Event" in the journal *American Anthropologist*, volume 71, number 4 (August 1969): pages 634-647.

Ong contrasts the world-as-event sense of life in oral culture 1.0 with the world-as-view sense of life that emerged historically in ancient Greek philosophic thought as exemplified in the works of Plato and Aristotle.

Concerning the world-as-view sense of life expressed in ancient Greek philosophy, see Andrea Wilson Nightingale's book *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in Its Cultural Contexts* (2004).

Virginia Woolf was not an oral singer of tales in oral culture 1.0. Nor did she write any scripts for plays, as Shakespeare and other playwrights did, nor for radio programs (in oral culture 2.0) – or for movies. Instead, she was a writer of tales for publication in print culture 1.0. In addition, she was a prolific writer of essays, book reviews, letters, diaries, and even biographies. She and

her husband Leonard Woolf were also publishers; they owned and operated Hogarth Press. In her day, she was a public intellectual, as was G. K. Chesterton, for example.

Virginia Woolf's Periodic Breakdowns

Periodically, Virginia Woolf suffered breakdowns. As a result, she could be the famous face in ads for a public-awareness campaign about bipolar disorder and/or suicide prevention and/or complicated grief.

No doubt her fear of another breakdown contributed to her decision to commit suicide in 1941.

In her breakdowns, powerful forces in her psyche overpowered her ego-consciousness. At times in her breakdowns, she heard voices. In the Hebrew Bible, individual persons who hear voices are known as prophets. In other instantiations of oral culture 1.0, shamans experienced what we today refer to as auditory and visual hallucinations.

In the controversial book *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1977), Julian Jaynes claims that our pre-historic ancestors in oral culture 1.0 heard voices.

For a more recent relevant discussion, see Daniel B. Smith's book *Muses, Madmen, and Prophets: Rethinking the History, Science, and Meaning of Auditory Hallucinations* (2007).

In any event, Virginia Woolf had multiple breakdowns over her lifetime and recovered from them and went on her way writing. We should remember and celebrate her resilience.

Now, Beatrice Bruteau (1930-2014; Ph.D. in philosophy, Fordham University, 1969) identified what she refers to as the paleo-feminine era in the human psyche and the new feminine era in the human psyche. Each is typically expressed as what she refers to as communion consciousness.

Concerning the paleo-feminine era in the human psyche, see M. Esther Harding's book *Woman's Mysteries: Ancient and Modern* (1971) and Erich Neumann's books *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (1954) and *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (1955).

Concerning the new feminine era in the human psyche, see Edward C. Whitmont's book *Return of the Goddess* (1982).

The paleo-feminine era in the human psyche dominated in oral culture 1.0. It is characterized by what Ong refers to as the world-as-event sense of life.

Virginia Woolf's mature novels (in print culture 1.0) express communion consciousness, which characterizes oral culture 1.0 and oral culture 2.0 as it has emerged at least from the time of commercial radio in the 1920s onward in Western culture.

In the book *The Duality of Human Existence: An Essay on Psychology and Religion* (1966), David Bakan, a Jewish faculty member in psychology at the University of Chicago, identifies the

duality of human existence as involving agency and communion. (But of course he was not the first to use those two terms.)

In her 700-page textbook *The Psychology of Gender*, now in its fourth edition, Vicki S. Helgeson in psychology at Carnegie Mellon University summarizes her own research projects on agency and communion.

By definition, persons who develop both agency and communion optimally are psychologically androgynous persons.

In his 1995 book *Virginia Woolf A to Z*, Hussey discusses psychological androgyny (pages 3-6).

In Virginia Woolf's elevated but non-psychotic manic moments, the communion dimension in her psyche was in the ascendancy. Up to a certain point, the ascendancy of the communion dimension is not psychotic. But of course, it can become psychotic, as it did at times in Virginia Woolf's life. (By definition, being psychotic means losing contact with reality.)

Similarly, up to a certain point, one can experience a steep drop in the agency dimension but without descending into clinical depression. But of course it can descend into clinical depression. (By definition, clinical depression means losing contact with reality.)

In Virginia Woolf's experiences of clinical depression, the agency dimension in her psyche hit bottom, figuratively speaking.

Now, the Victorian Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote certain sonnets about his own non-clinical-depression. Literary critics have dubbed them the "terrible sonnets" – not because they are terrible poetry (they are not terrible poetry), but because they articulate terrible depths of non-clinical-depression.

For a perceptive discussion of Hopkins, see Ong's book *Hopkins, The Self, and God* (1986), the published version of Ong's 1981 Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto.

For one person's highly articulate account of her own psychotic manic experience, see Kay Redfield Jamison's book *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* (1995).

For informed discussions of non-psychotic forms of elevated manic tendencies, see John D. Gartner's book *The Hypomanic Edge: The Link between (A Little) Crazy and (a Lot of) Success in America* (2005) and Peter C. Whybrow's book *American Mania: When More Is Not Enough* (2005).

Virginia Woolf's Misandry

Virginia Woolf published two famous feminist manifestoes: *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938). In them, she also criticizes the pompous men at the proverbial "top" of British culture for their manifest misogyny, which she counters with her own pronounced misandry.

For a more irenic account of male agonistic tendencies, see Ong's book *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (1981), the published version of his 1979 Messenger Lectures at Cornell University.

Virginia Woolf's pronounced misandry grows out of her decidedly ambivalent view of her father – and her unresolved mourning of his loss.

In her admirably circumstantial biography *Virginia Woolf* (1999), Hermione Lee, who is now the president of Wolfson College at Oxford University, discusses Virginia Woolf's "complicated, lifelong rage against her father" (page 146). One element of her rage, Lee says, "was the experience of helplessness in the face of an egotistical exploitation of power" by her father (page 146).

No doubt many girls and boys can remember "the experience of helplessness in the face of an egotistical exploitation of power" by their fathers and/or mothers.

According to Lee, "[t]he other [element of Virginia Woolf's rage against her father] was a more practical resentment of the irrational meanness which not only made him [her father] a tyrant of housekeeping books but prevented him from paying for her education as he paid for his sons' education" (page 146).

Lee says, "Arguably – as she sometimes argued herself – he gave her a better education from his study than she would have had at school or college. And certainly she would not have been the writer she was, with the subjects she chose, if she had a formal education. But, with all these provisos, the fact remains that she was uneducated because he did not want to spend the money on her. She would come to resent bitterly the condition of her mind in her late teens" (page 146).

I don't think it is entirely fair for Lee to say that Virginia Woolf was "uneducated." As an autodidact, she was widely read. In addition, she was tutored in Greek and Latin by qualified teachers. But perhaps she was under-educated in certain ways. For example, she evidently knew little about evolutionary theory.

But I want to focus here on Virginia Woolf's "complicated, lifelong rage against her father," because I will argue below that her decision to commit suicide as the result of a deep psychological crisis involving her memories of her father and her resentment of him.

Now, as Lee notes, Virginia Woolf claimed that she experienced profound therapeutic relief regarding her long deceased mother as a result of the process of writing her deeply evocative novel *To the Lighthouse* (see Lee, pages 475-476). Her mother died in 1895, when Virginia was 13. Following her mother's death, Virginia had her first mental breakdown.

Lee quotes the following passage from page 81 of the 1985 edition of Virginia Woolf's autobiographical writings gathered together in the book titled *Moments of Being*:

“It is perfectly true that she [Virginia Woolf’s mother] obsessed me, in spite of the fact that she died when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four. Then one day walking around Tavistock Square I made up, as I sometimes make up my books, *To the Lighthouse*; in a great, apparently involuntarily rush . . . I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her.

“I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest” (quoted in Lee, page 475-476; ellipsis in Lee’s text).

Now, in the book *Preface to Plato* (1963), mentioned above, the classicist Eric A. Havelock describe the pre-philosophic thought expressed in the Homeric epics as involving imagistic thought. No doubt Virginia Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) involves imagistic thought. No doubt imagistic thought she uses in her novel resonated deeply with the collective unconscious in her psyche, most likely evoking the mother archetype in her psyche.

In the book *The Two-Million-Year-Old Self* (1993), the Jungian theorist Anthony Stevens, M.D., claims that archetypal wounding requires archetypal healing. No doubt Virginia Woolf experienced archetypal healing of the archetypal wounding of the mother archetype in her psyche as a result of the process of writing the novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

Most of us carry within ourselves archetypal wounding of both the mother archetype and the father archetype within our psyches.

But Virginia Woolf never claimed to have also received comparable profound therapeutic relief regarding her long deceased father, Leslie Stephen, the Victorian author and editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. He died in 1904, the year in which Virginia turned 22.

As a result, it strikes me that in the process of writing *Between the Acts* (1941) and the two essays “Anon” and “The Reader” Virginia Woolf precipitated the psychological crisis that led her to commit suicide. In that novel and those two essays, she was plumbing the depths of her personal unconscious and the collective unconscious in her psyche, just as she had years earlier in writing *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

As a precocious teenager, Virginia Stephen read widely in her father’s personal library. Even though her father arranged for her to be tutored in Greek and Latin by qualified teachers, she was outraged that he did not spend the money on her formal education that he spent on her older brothers’ formal education, as mentioned above.

But she also loved her father deeply. According to Lee, “Her father was the love of her life” (page 147). If Lee is right about that, then Virginia Woolf had major ambivalence about her father, which would undoubtedly impede the possible successful resolution of her unresolved mourning of his loss – unless and until she somehow resolved certain aspects of her ambivalence about him.

Symbolically, Virginia Woolf's father embodied and represented the entire literary world that she discusses in the essays "Anon" and "The Reader."

Symbolically, Virginia Woolf herself also embodied and represented the entire literary world that she discusses in those two essays.

In theory, Virginia Woolf might have experienced profound therapeutic relief regarding her long deceased father comparable to the profound therapeutic relief she had earlier received as a result of the process of writing her novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927). But her own personal and professional identity as a public "somebody" was deeply enmeshed with her strongly ambivalent memory of her father as a public "somebody."

Evidently, her memory of her mother had not involved the kind of strong ambivalence that her memory of her father involved.

In theory, had Virginia Woolf been able to withstand and somehow successfully negotiate the strong psychological crisis that she was undergoing, she would not have decided to commit suicide.

But what would it have taken for her to have withstood and successfully negotiated that psychological crisis that she was undergoing?

Symbolically, not only would she have to have deconstructed and torn apart her father and the world of mostly male "somebodies" as Osiris is torn apart and the pieces of his body are scattered around, but also she would then have to gathered up the scattered parts of her father's dead body of work and reconstructed her memory of him and his work and his life-world of mostly male "somebodies" – as Isis reconstructs Osiris, except for one missing symbolic part. Actually, Virginia Woolf had begun the task of reconstructing, or at least moving toward reconstructing, her sense of the past in her essays "Anon" and "The Reader."

Figuratively speaking, the spirit of Isis in Virginia Woolf's psyche did not enable her to reconstruct Osiris fully – involving her memory of her father and the mostly male world of "somebodies," and her own life-world as a public "somebody."

In short, Virginia Woolf's misandry expresses her unresolved mourning of her father.

However, after World War II, both Ong and McLuhan were able to discuss certain cultural shifts that Virginia Woolf discusses more briefly in her essays "Anon" and "The Reader." But their discussions of those cultural shifts did not precipitate the kind of strong psychological crisis in them that Virginia Woolf was undergoing around 1940 and early 1941, which led her to decide to commit suicide.

Figuratively speaking, the spirit of Isis in the psyches of Ong and McLuhan enabled them to reconstruct Osiris, except of course for the missing symbolic part – and thereby advance the project of reconstruction that Virginia Woolf began in her essays "Anon" and "The Reader."

In conclusion, in her essays “Anon” and “The Reader” Virginia Woolf articulated a perceptive critique of print culture 1.0 more than a full decade before Ong and McLuhan articulated their critiques of print culture 1.0.

It is sad that she did not live long enough to complete the book she envisioned incorporating those essays in. No doubt it would have been a challenging book.

Conclusion

I mentioned St. Francis of Assisi’s “Canticle of Brother Sun” above as an example of a medieval song. In it, St. Francis expresses what Bruteau refers to as communion consciousness.

On June 18, 2015, Pope Francis’ encyclical about the environment will be released. According to advance reports, he deliberately echoes certain expression that St. Francis of Assisi uses in his “Canticle of Brother Sun.”

No doubt Pope Francis’ encyclical about the environment will express his sense of communion consciousness.

In Virginia Woolf’s mature novels from *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) onward, she expresses her sense of communion consciousness in various ways.

But Virginia Woolf is not everybody’s cup of tea. You have to acquire a taste for her writing. Once you have acquired a taste for her writing, Hussey’s 1995 book *Virginia Woolf A to Z* is a wonderful resource to consult.

Recently, Hussey has served as the general editor of Harcourt’s annotated series of Virginia Woolf’s books. I hope that the annotated editions of her books that he has edited will help more people today to acquire a taste for her writing.

Arguably Virginia Woolf’s expression of communion consciousness in her mature novels can help readers today to cultivate their own sense of communion consciousness.