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“A HOUSE FULL WITH UNRELATED PASSIONS”
Bloomsbury and Psychoanalysis

Despite the fact that their life and work were connected by an invisible web of links, Virginia Woolf and Sigmund Freud met only once. My essay grew out of my curiosity for that one meeting. But let us proceed with order.

The most obvious connection between the Woolfs (or “the Wolves,” as Leonard and Virginia were called by their group of friends) and psychoanalysis was established in 1917. One day, as Nadia Fusini tells us in her biography of Virginia Woolf, Leonard and Virginia, who lived at Hogarth House in Richmond, passed by a shop window where a small hand press was proudly showcased. Virginia was just recovering from one of the darkest phases of her illness and her structural vulnerability to the judgment of others had dramatically increased. Perhaps Leonard thought, and rightly so, that Virginia would have doubly benefited from the opportunity to print her own work: first of all, she would have been spared the pain of submitting her work to the judgment of others for publication (a practice that always reduced her to a state of pitiful helplessness); secondly, Leonard hoped that by engaging in some manual work Virginia would have gained some peace of mind. Thus the Hogarth Press was born, and it was the first English publisher to print Freud’s works.

The first book by Freud that Leonard read was *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. He was impressed, among other things, by Freud’s literary skills. In his opinion, anyone wishing to have a first contact with psychoanalysis should have started with this work. Leonard wrote: “Whether one believes in his theories or not, one is forced to admit that he writes with great subtlety of mind, a broad and sweeping imagination more characteristic of the poet than the scientist” (qtd. in Orr 12).

The characterization of psychoanalysis as a literary rather than a scientific discourse became a leitmotif in England. The humanistic aspect of psychoanalysis was strongly emphasized within the psychoanalytic community. "Psychoanalysis is both art and science" (qtd. in Abel 16), wrote Ella Freeman Sharpe, a member of the British Psychoanalytic Society, a former English teacher and analyst of Virginia's brother from 1926 to 1927.

Here is another connection: Adrian Stephen, the last of Leslie's and Julia's four children, who was also affected by some structural fragility, left his studies of medieval history at Cambridge to become a BPS psychoanalyst. The same happened to his wife Karin, who came from studies in philosophy. James Strachey and his wife Alix had the same humanistic background. Indeed, we find here a web of tangled threads since Strachey, who was to be the English translator and editor of the complete works of Freud published by the Hogarth Press (the famous Standard Edition), was also the brother of Lytton Strachey, the Bloomsbury "mandarin" whom Todd Avery has described in another chapter of this book.

I said that the humanistic angle of English psychoanalysis was often stressed. In fact, as opposed to most other psychoanalytic societies, especially the soon-to-be-born American Society, the British Society had the largest number of non-medical analysts (an estimated 40% in the late Twenties) and represented a powerful source of attraction for a significant group of British members of the intelligentsia with a broad liberal arts education.

The humanistic angle of British psychoanalysis, visible in the essays of applied psychoanalysis published in those years by Ernest Jones (which included anthropology, literature, folklore and painting), turned the psychoanalytic discourse into a particularly appealing and accessible cultural idiom. In 1928, following the publication of Jones' book *The Talking Cure*, the *Daily Herald* wrote: "It is a splendid example of just how such a book should be written to make a scientific subject 'come alive' to a working man or woman of only average education" (qtd. in Pick).

This same feature was instead a negative one for Bronisław Malinowski who, in his anthropological critique of psychoanalysis, labelled it as "the popular craze of the day." Moreover, psychoanalytic

ideas were beginning to exert a direct influence also on the work of some of the Bloomsburies such as Keynes, Strachey and Woolf, but Virginia remained skeptical for a long time, if not, at times, decidedly hostile.

In one of her reviews, entitled "Freudian Fiction" (1920), Virginia argued that fiction appeared to her as a victim rather than as an attribute of psychoanalytic discourse: "The triumphs of science" Virginia wrote, "are beautifully positive. But for novelists, the matter is much more complex. [...] Yes, says the scientific side of the brain, that is interesting; that explains a great deal. No, says the artistic side of the brain, that is dull" (*Essays* 3: 196-97).

Woolf insisted that it was not her intention to challenge, say, the psychoanalytic interpretation of infantile experience. What she rejected was a certain colonization of the literary field that transformed characters into clinical cases by applying a dogmatic key that simplified things instead of complicating them. Personally, I cannot really blame her.

To this I would add that since art was for Woolf (as for Joyce) transcendent and impersonal, but autobiographical in its genesis, the integrity of the artist could not help but feel threatened by psychoanalysis. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the "talking cure" was not taken into account as a possible treatment of Virginia's severe mental suffering.

A much more understandable reason for not having done so is that, at the beginning, psychoanalysis consisted mostly in a cognitive exploration of the unconscious aspects of mental neurotic functioning. As such, it was far from being a proper therapeutic resource for the treatment of serious disorders such as the one probably afflicting Virginia. Besides, I believe that a person like Virginia could not accept the idea of relying on someone who would put himself in the position of a "subject supposed to know" and could reduce her to a psychopathological stereotype. In her precious little essay "On Being Ill" (1926), Virginia made this poetically clear:

We do not know our own souls, let alone the souls of others. Human beings do not go hand in hand the whole stretch of the way. There is a virgin forest in each; a snowfield where even the print of birds' feet is unknown. Here we go alone, and like it better so. Always to have sympathy, always to be accompanied, always to be understood would be intolerable. (104)

As for modern literature, I am not aware of a description of the narcissistic retreat of the self as an extreme defence against the impact of illness or death that is both as lucid and poetic as this one.

Virginia always maintained that her knowledge of psychoanalysis derived from superficial conversations and not from study; for most of her life, she remained seemingly uninterested in psychoanalysis as a discourse. At times, she showed hostility and even scorn: "All the psycho-analytic books have been dumped in a fortress the size of Windsor castle in ruins upon the floor." (Woolf, *Letters* 3: 119)

Despite this, and despite her claims to have read Freud only in her late years (according to the diaries, she started in December 1939, after the death of Freud), the most magnificent depictions of family life in *To the Lighthouse* as well as the representations of the nature of memory and its elusive workings are undeniably modelled on Freud's insights. What Woolf and Freud had in common was a deeply-rooted and passionate interest in the workings of the human mind: Freud expressed it through the analytical practice, Virginia through the flights of the mind and the act of imagination and re-creation.

An example of this can be found in two passages from *To the Lighthouse*, where the potent and burning Oedipal rivalry experienced by James, the youngest son of Ramsay, is first described in real time and, a hundred pages later, admirably filtered and evoked through the traces left in the sensory memory:

But his son hated him. He hated him for coming up to them, for stopping and looking down on them; he hated him for interrupting them; he hated him for the exaltation and sublimity of his gestures; for the magnificence of his head; for his exactingness and egotism (for there he stood, commanding them to attend to him); but most of all he hated the twang and twitter of his father's emotion which, vibrating round them, disturbed the perfect simplicity and good sense of his relations with his mother. (42)

She'll give way, James thought, as he watched a look come upon her face, a look he remembered. They look down, he thought, at their knitting or something. Then suddenly they look up. There was a flash of blue, he remembered, and then somebody sitting with him laughed, surrendered, and he was very angry. It must have been his mother, he thought, sitting on a low chair, with his father standing over her. He began to search among the infinite series of impressions which time had laid down, leaf

upon leaf, fold upon fold softly, incessantly upon his brain; among scents, sounds; voices, harsh, hollow, sweet; and lights passing, and brooms tapping; and the wash and hush of the sea, how a man had marched up and down and stopped dead, upright, over them. (183-84)

In case any doubt remains about Virginia’s awareness of psychoanalysis, here are the words that she wrote in her unfinished memoir, “A Sketch of the Past:”

It is perfectly true that she [my mother] obsessed me, in spite of the fact that she died when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four. [...] But I wrote the book [*To the Lighthouse*] 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 laid it to rest. (81)

In fact, Freud himself wrote that it was poets and philosophers who first discovered the unconscious; what he discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious could be studied.

If we want to find a metaphor that holds together psychoanalysis and this special group of young men and women who in the early-twentieth-century London turned their life into a cultural movement, I think the phrase I chose for the title of my essay may be a suitable one. Above all, what this group of young people shared was—in the words of Virginia—“a house full with unrelated passions.” As Vanessa Bell wrote in “Notes on Bloomsbury:”

What did we talk about? The only true answer can be anything that came into our heads. [...] There was nothing unusual about it perhaps, except that for some reason we seemed to be a company of the young, all free, all beginning life in new surroundings, without elders to whom we had to account in any way for our doing or behaviour, and this was not then common in a mixed company of our class: for classes still existed. (106)

And as Virginia wrote in “Old Bloomsbury:”

It was a spring evening. Vanessa and I were sitting in the drawing room. [...] Suddenly the door opened and the long and sinister figure of Mr. Lytton Strachey stood on the threshold. He pointed a finger at a stain on Vanessa’s white dress. “Semen?” he said. Can one really say it? I thought

and we burst out laughing. With that one word all barriers of reticence and reserve went down. A flood of the sacred fluid seemed to overwhelm us. Sex permeated our conversation. The word bugger was never far from our lips. We discussed copulation with the same excitement and openness that we had discussed the nature of good. It is strange to think how reticent, how reserved we had been and for how long. (195-96)

In other words, I think I could say that the psychoanalytic movement and the Bloomsbury Group shared the credit for an extraordinarily provocative scope, a rupture of that conformity of thought which is easily activated *vis-à-vis* the need to face phenomena that are more and more complex and unpredictable. Both shared a completely new view of the individual and his/her internal dynamics, paving the way to his/her enfranchisement from pre-established social and family roles, once again questioning the sharp, static distinction between sexes, giving voice to the personal sense of each person's life course, by re-considering and working through one's own infantile experiences.

At this point, to conclude, we must go back to the starting point. As I said, Virginia and Freud met only once, on January 28, 1939. Life was coming to an end for both of them: Freud died on September 23 of a cancer that had tormented him for the past ten years; Virginia died two years later, by her own hand, due to another type of cancer, more subtle, but no less deadly and unforgiving. We know little of that one meeting. All we have is a few words Virginia wrote in her diary, recording the impression Freud had made on her: "A screwed up shrunk very old man: [...] inarticulate: but alert. [...] Immense potential, I mean an old fire now flickering" (*Diary* 5: 202).

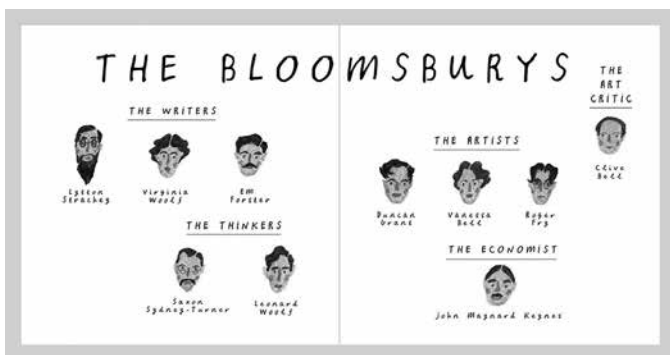
We also have a brief description provided by Leonard Woolf in his memoirs:

Nearly all famous men are disappointing or bores, or both. Freud was neither; he had an aura, not of fame, but of greatness. [...] He was extraordinarily courteous in a formal, old-fashioned way—for instance, almost ceremoniously he presented Virginia with a flower. There was something about him as of a half-extinct volcano, something sombre, suppressed, reserved. He gave me the feeling which only a very few people whom I have met gave me, a feeling of great gentleness, but behind the gentleness, great strength. [...] A formidable man. (168-69)

The flower Freud gave to Virginia was a narcissus.

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Nina Cosford, *Bloomsbury*, 2015.



“Mr and Mrs Laughton’s Cook”,
Daily Mail, 21 February 1936.



Double Oven Leamington, 19th century.



Vanessa Bell, *The Memoir Club*, c. 1943,
London, National Portrait Gallery.



Exhibition Catalogue *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, London, Grafton Galleries 1912.



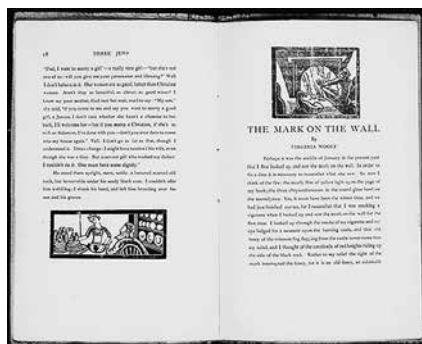
Roger Fry, *The Matisse Room at the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, 1912, Paris, Musée d'Orsay.



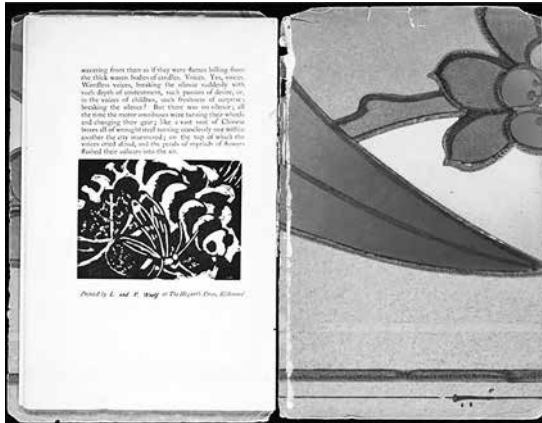
An artist's impression of the Book Society's new clubroom at 13 Grosvenor Place, SW1. Open to visiting members daily up to 6pm. Members could discuss books with staff or use amenities like those of a West End club.



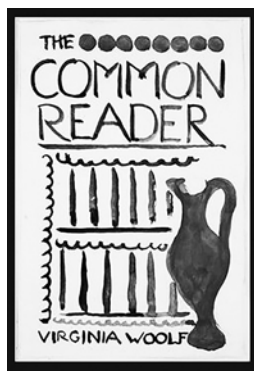
Omega design letterhead.



Virginia and Leonard Woolf, *Two Stories*, The Hogarth Press, 1917.



Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, *Kew Gardens*,
The Hogarth Press, 1919, inside back cover.



Vanessa Bell, cover design for
The Common Reader, 1925.



The cast of "Life in Squares", BBC Two, 2015.