



Woolf: a woman misunderstood

Reviewed by S. Millan
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A new book provides fascinating insight into the life and loves of one of the finest woman writers of all time. The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf, edited by Louise de Salvo and Mitchell Leaska, are extensively footnoted, providing an informative introduction to these two women.

Vita Sackville-West met Virginia Woolf in 1922 at a dinner party. Both writers, they soon became friends, and then lovers. Though both were married, the two women depended on each other for love and affection, and much of their passion can be seen in the letters they exchanged for two decades until Woolf's death.

As fascinating as their love affair was the contrast in their personalities. Sackville-West, an aristocrat, was primarily a poet. Woolf, of a more modest background, became reknowned for her literary criticism, and later, novel writing.

Though Woolf was by far the better writer of the two, that did not impede their love affair. Sackville-West was proud to have caught such "a silver fish," while Woolf was fascinated by her lover's aristocracy and the "pronounced Sapphist" in her. Both became an integral part of the Bloomsbury literary circle.

The lesbian relationship blossomed just before Sackville-West was due to leave for Persia. The letters written during this journey provide some of the most fabulous descriptions, and criticisms, of stuffy British diplomacy as embodied by her husband, Harold Nicholson. Woolf's replies were a mix of missing Vita and breath of Bloomsbury.

Often the two women wrote about their literary works in progress, especially after Sackville-West started to publish with the Hogarth press, which was run by the Woolfs. Sackville-West was full of praise for Woolf's writing, and Woolf complimented Vita's works. Their comments made for good criticism of their works, and provide some of the most intimate moments in the work. Sackville-West once wrote that she considered her most intimate letters to be the ones where she wrote about the words she was writing.

In 1927, Woolf decided to write Orlando, which has been called the longest love letter in English literature. Orlando was said to be a pseudo-biography of Sackville-West, starting in 1500, including asex change, up to 1928. Vita was delighted with the idea and Virginia's letters are filled with questions for Vita to answer about her life for the novel. Sackville-West was teased, photographed and questioned for the book, and not told anything about it until it arrived on her door step.

Sackville-West loved the book, and sales of Orlando rocketed in England and the United States. Vita wrote many letters of thanks to Virginia. One of them describes how someone, on being introduced to her, immediately shouted 'Orlando.' Virginia wrote back teasingly:

"... A woman writes that she has to stop and kiss the page when she reads O(rlando); —Your race I imagine. The percentage of lesbians is rising in the states, all because of you."

The novel cemented a friendship that was cooling off as Sackville-West pursued different women. The rest of their letter still contain examples of the great affection they had for one another. "Dear Mrs. Woolf, (That appears to be the suitable formula.) I regret that you have been in bed, though not with me—(a less suitable formula.)" writes Vita. Says Virginia: "... I'm longing for adventure, dearest creature. But would like to stipulate for at least 48½ minutes alone with you. Not to say or do anything in particular. Mere affection..."

Their affection for each other intensified during illnesses. Sackville-West became quite maternal to Woolf and often cut down their visits and letter out of concern for her health. Vita once had a village boy deliver a letter to Virginia while in town rather than visit and drew this

response: "Oh you scandalous ruffian! When Cook came up to me with letter... with the story that a lady stopped a little boy in the village and then him I was so furious I almost sprang after you in my nightgown..."

In the end Virginia was ill more often as her battle with insanity went on. Her letters are still crisp and intelligent but the underlying illness is noticeable in them. Sackville-West's letters show great concern for her. Woolf wrote her last letter to Vita a few days before her suicide, without revealing the depth of her fear of insanity.

On March 28, 1941, Virginia Woolf committed suicide out of fear she would go mad again. Sackville-West stated much later that if she had known how Woolf was feeling she might have saved her. Given the great love demonstrated in her letters, Sackville-West was probably right.

Eyes

Eyes of sorrow, eyes of pain
Are staring out at me again
They gaze at me with marked disgrace
And melt into another face

The only thing that I can do
Is wonder what I feel
I can't begin to comprehend
The phantoms or the real
I'll never know what brought to me
Emotions that I've fought
I only know I can't pretend
To feel what I am not

In the back room of my mind
There lives two empty eyes
They dialate, retaliate-
And scream out bitter lies
They see the inside-out of me
And never leave my side
I feel I've lost my space in time
And given up my pride

Eyes of sorrow, eyes of pain
Are staring out at me again
They gaze at me with marked disgrace
And melt into another face

Melting my disgrace

Why?...Because!
K.F.
I've struggled to understand.
My mind has been tortured with the question

I've prayed and fought against it!
I was ignorant and scared.
Why are some one way, and others another?

I didn't ask to be this way.
Something in me was always different.
I know that now, I accept it.
I am happy with it!
There is no reason to remain preoccupied with the question

Does it really need an answer?
The knowledge that I am is enough
I am merely a unique human being,
amongst a world of unique human beings
Nothing more, nothing less

I only ask to be accepted as I have accepted myself.

Doug Kaiser