

UNRAVELLING THE FACT AND FANTASY OF VITA SACKVILLE-WEST
IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S ORLANDO

A THESIS

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My thesis is dedicated to
Pamela Mehl Baker and Dr. Martha Lou Adams
whose early inspiration and support
indicated the potential
of my mind and spirit

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In early March 1927 the very tired, frustrated author of To the Lighthouse described her mental and emotional state in her diary. Virginia Woolf wrote, "I feel the need of an escapade after these serious poetic experimental books whose form is always so closely considered." She laid out her plan: "I want to kick up my heels and be off. I want to embody all those innumerable little ideas and tiny stories which flash into my mind at all seasons. I think this will be great fun to write. . . ." ¹ Nineteen months later, in October, 1928, her escapade ended; the product of this adventure was Orlando: A Biography. The novel was dedicated to her intimate friend Victoria Sackville-West, whose legendary family history is traced through the family's estate, Knole, as far back as Queen Elizabeth.

For the most part, Virginia Woolf had great fun writing Orlando. She kicked up her heels, and in doing so,

¹ Virginia Woolf, The Diary of Virginia Woolf, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), III, 131.

she challenged the concepts of character, plot, and time as they were traditionally accepted in early twentieth-century novels. Her creative ingenuity and imagination resulted in a character who not only lived through three and a half centuries, but who was also transformed from a male into a female. Moreover, Woolf's escapade contained satire, exaggeration, and wit as she had intended. But from where did Woolf's energy come, especially since she had been so drained after writing and worrying about the reception of her most recent novel, To the Lighthouse?

Being exceptionally sensitive and intuitive, she had for years obsessively recorded her observations of and responses to the people and events which filled her unique environment. She very seldom wrote of one idea or person in isolation; instead, everything was relative to the flux of events in time. Some of her most deeply considered subjects were the mysteries within her own personality, as they were a part of that flux. She studied herself from all angles--as a daughter, sister, wife, friend, critic, novelist, and feminist--as a woman, as a writer, and as a social entity. All these inward and outward observations, piled on top of one another and held together by her imagination, not surprisingly filled her head with "innumerable little ideas and stories." Woolf synthesized a mass of these personal stories which had begun to crowd

her life concerning her relationship with Vita Sackville-West during 1926-28 in Orlando.

She had devised a way to incorporate those "little ideas and stories" involving her personal relationship with another woman by way of Orlando and then to present it to the world. What better way to write about one's inner life than to disguise it in a fantasy, which could in no way on the surface resemble anyone's life? That aspect of the fantasy novel, providing a safe mode through which one may freely express even the most personal ideas and feelings, may have been the primary reason why Virginia Woolf was so excited about writing Orlando. Virginia Woolf took a very serious, complicated aspect of her personal life and by calling it a "joke" dealt with it publicly in a lighthearted, even entertaining style. Just as To the Lighthouse resolved for Virginia Woolf the emotional and psychological tension she felt towards her parents, Orlando relieved the personal tension Woolf experienced from her relationship with Vita Sackville-West. As Jean O. Love has observed, Orlando was Woolf's "means of gaining perspective and detachment in order to continue their friendship on a different basis."² It also prepared

² Jean O. Love, "Orlando and Its Genesis: Venturing and Experimenting in Art, Love, and Sex," in Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity, ed. Ralph Freedman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 192.

Woolf, the writer, to go on to her next poetic, mystical work, The Waves, which was published in 1931.

Until recently, however, Orlando has been considered nothing more than a fantasy and has not been seriously studied. Virginia Woolf's readers accepted it as a fantasy and its sales were actually greater at the time than those of To the Lighthouse. Because Orlando was so entertaining, the content was not questioned. Hence few readers really understood Orlando. It may have been a "joke," as Woolf had written, but she was the only one laughing because the transformation of Woolf's intimate relationship with Vita Sackville-West into a public fantasy was never recognized.

Even as recently as 1977, the unique nature of Orlando continued to isolate it from her other works. For example, Mitchell A. Leaska in his book presumptuously entitled The Novels of Virginia Woolf: From Beginning to End omits Orlando from his study because "its scope, direction, and texture are aesthetically so different from the novels themselves."³ These differences are precisely reasons why the novel should be analyzed.

Slowly Orlando is finding its position in the succession of Woolf's major novels, as it should. It seems clear

³ Mitchell A. Leaska, The Novels of Virginia Woolf: From Beginning to End (New York: The John Jay Press 1977), p. xii.

now that Orlando is more than a fantasy. When all aspects of its meaning are considered, Orlando deserves the same serious critical attention devoted to Woolf's other works. Only in the last twenty years have Woolf scholars begun studying the novel seriously. The results of their findings have challenged the outdated conclusions about Orlando and inspire deeper, more honest investigations of the novel. This wave of interest in Virginia Woolf and particularly in Orlando has stemmed directly from the recent publications of Virginia Woolf's personal letters and diary entries to which she was so faithfully devoted.

Two early sources which touched on Woolf and Vita's relationship but offer limited insights into Orlando are Quentin Bell's Virginia Woolf: A Biography (1972) and Leonard Woolf's A Writer's Diary (1953). The authors cautiously refer to Virginia and Vita's relationship. Presenting only selective samples from Woolf's diaries and letters, they lack the solid evidence for any full understanding of Orlando.

Most of the original personal letters written to and by Virginia Woolf are collected in the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library and in the library of Sussex University. Other letters remain in the hands of personal or smaller public institutions' collections. These have

been carefully edited by Nigel Nicholson, son of Vita Sackville-West, and Joanne Trautmann in six volumes which prove to be a most helpful source in directly following Woolf's correspondence. Especially helpful in this study is Volume III (A Change of Perspective, 1977). Covering Woolf's correspondence between 1923 and 1928, this volume contains Woolf's letters to and about Vita Sackville-West and traces the events leading to and following the publication of Orlando in 1928.

In addition to the letters, Woolf's diaries also provide essential information about the biographical nature of Orlando. The original diaries, which are in the Berg collection in the New York Public Library, have been published by Anne Olivier Bell (wife of Quentin Bell, Woolf's nephew) in four volumes. Of this collection, Volume III (1980), which covers Woolf's life between 1925 and 1930, is especially informative. Another valuable tool is Nigel Nicholson's Portrait of a Marriage (1973). Nicholson reveals details of the relationship that Virginia Woolf had with his mother and the effects of that relationship on each woman's family.⁴

⁴ Vita Sackville-West remained married to Harold Nicholson for forty-nine years until her death in 1962. Nicholson died in 1968.

As a result of these recently published books and the evidence they present, Orlando is due a revaluation. The purpose of this study is to explore Orlando from the biographical perspective. Before any complete understanding of the novel is possible, one must recognize how important Vita Sackville-West was to Virginia Woolf. An analysis of their relationship reveals that Orlando grew out of the complexities of that relationship. That much of the novel was patterned after the history of the Sackville family estate, Knole, was revealed soon after its publication. But what is not so readily recognized is how the development of the novel is just as clearly patterned after the development of their relationship.

Following this introduction, Chapter II analyzes the parallels between the development of their relationship and those events which led to Woolf's motivations for writing the novel. Chapter III then investigates how Woolf incorporated her revaluation of Vita Sackville-West into the character Orlando. Also presented is an explanation of the meaning of Orlando as it relates to the Sackville-West family. Ultimately, writing Orlando: A Biography was Woolf's way of dealing with the dissolution of her relationship with Vita Sackville-West.

Woolf's diaries and letters record the evolution of their relationship and reveal the steps Woolf took in writing Orlando. The two events occur within the same time frame and are closely related. Analyzing Woolf's life and her novel from primary sources opens the door to a more honest perception of Orlando. It reveals that Woolf's imagination was a key to her friendship with Vita Sackville-West, and Woolf's fantasy novel was a product of both her imagination and her friendship with Vita. Woolf's imagination seems to have been her means of coping with reality, of dealing with frustration and disappointment, of making real that which was not. In an effort to put the pieces of Woolf's complex life and her novel together, analyzing Orlando from this biographical perspective seems to be an appropriate starting point. It re-emphasizes Woolf's determination to understand herself and to resolve through her novels her many internal conflicts.

CHAPTER II

WOOLF'S MOTIVES FOR WRITING ORLANDO

Recent publication of Woolf's diaries and letters reveals that Orlando is closely tied to the events of her life. Prior to the revelations of her personal writings, scholars and critics had few sources for gaining insights into the novel. Their only route of exploration was to follow the worn path of earlier critics who had analyzed Woolf's well-known novels. Using the conclusions of these earlier Woolfian scholars and the patterns of theme and style which had been traced in Woolf's other novels, scholars tried to analyze Orlando. By assuming a unity of theme and style among all of Woolf's novels, they began their exploration of Orlando with predetermined conclusions. Thus, critics forced an explanation on Orlando. This method of investigation does not work because Orlando is unlike Woolf's other novels. As Love concludes, Orlando is "not tightly bound to her [Woolf's] other books, not quite as continuous with them as they are with each other in form and style. Rather, it is marked by its ties to her life, not to her other novels."¹ Rather than

¹ Jean O. Love, "Orlando and Its Genesis: Venturing and Experimenting in Art, Love, and Sex," in Virginia

support earlier generalizations about Woolf's work, Orlando challenged the critics to test other approaches in understanding the unique novel. A definition of the problem encountered in analyzing Orlando has finally been identified. The biographical approach to the novel becomes essential to any analysis because more nearly certain conclusions about Orlando help bring Woolf's entire complex world into perspective.

Contradictions, however, immediately arise. How does one begin to align this witty, satirical, fantasy-filled novel with the life of the woman who is most remembered "for her beauty, . . . terrible rages, and her precocious command of language?"² Woolf is too often characterized as the serious somber-eyed woman whose very soul was preoccupied with her professional writing always searching and studying the meaning of life. However, Woolf's diaries and letters reveal the lighthearted side of her day-to-day thoughts, hopes, and activities. Since her personal writings indicate that Woolf did relax and have some fun, the unique nature of Orlando becomes less incongruous to

Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity, ed. Ralph Freedman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 192.

² Quentin Bell, Virginia Woolf: A Biography (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), dust cover.

her personality and more easily accepted. Moreover, many of her letters are spiced with the same flavor of wit and imagination that characterizes Orlando. Actually, being entertained by her imagination in any way may have been one of Woolf's favorite pastimes. Ann Olivier Bell, who edited Woolf's diaries, notes that much of Woolf's personal writing is "exaggerated" and "inaccurate, and there may be some pure fantasy." Bell cautions that in Woolf's letters she even "invents in order to amuse."³ Thus, the style of some of Woolf's personal writing is similar to her style in Orlando. The styles are both patterned after her need to break away from her serious writing and have fun.

Just as Woolf strived to balance the seriousness of her personal writing with some humor, she balanced the seriousness of her professional writing with Orlando: A Biography. She explained why her writing swayed from serious works like To the Lighthouse to a fantasy like Orlando. She believed that "there are offices to be discharged by talent for the relief of genius: meaning that one has the play side; the gift when it is mere gift, unapplied gift; and the gift when it is serious, going to

³ Virginia Woolf, The Diary of Virginia Woolf, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), III, 131.

business."⁴ The "playful" style of Orlando may have balanced the pressure that those serious, poetic, mystical works must have caused. Further, Woolf anticipated that there "will be books that relieve other books: a variety of styles and subjects." With publications like Orlando in Woolf's canon, she had indeed produced a variety of styles and subjects. As a result, she achieved a kind of healthy balance in her writing which stabilized her personally as well as professionally.

Recognizing Woolf's need for fun and adventure leads to an acceptance of Orlando as a means of satisfying those needs. By doing so, Woolf's writing appears consistent with her life. Viewing Orlando as a link between Woolf's serious works, and not so much as an oddity, leads one to understand Virginia Woolf's relationship with Vita Sackville-West, as it linked together other relationships and events of Woolf's life.

Still some critics continue to situate Orlando as an anomaly in Woolf's writing. They conclude that not only is it incongruent with Woolf's other novels, but it is also incongruent with her life in general. These critics neglect Woolf's expressed need for an escapade, and they neglect other equally important aspects of the novel. Woolf

⁴ Diary, III, 203.

contended that the novel had been a "very quick, brilliant book, . . . the outcome of a perfectly definite, indeed overmastering impulse"⁵ as she had intended it to be. She felt strongly about having fun, about fantasy and about giving things their caricature value. In the end, Woolf voiced no regrets about Orlando's style and content.

Interestingly, this penchant for impulsive behavior is characteristic of Woolf's personal life. She was not always so inhibited and reserved as she is thought to be. Instead, her cautious willingness to venture out over an unknown precipice indicates the risks she was willing to take. Writing Orlando was only one of several occasions when Woolf satisfied her need for an escapade. It recorded what was probably her most daring escapade, and that was her involvement with Vita Sackville-West. In addition, other escapades in Woolf's life establish a pattern of adventures which are precedents to Woolf's motives in writing Orlando.

For example, in 1910 Virginia Woolf and some of her Bloomsbury friends disguised themselves as Abyssinian officials and boarded the H.M.S. Dreadnought, the newest warship in the Royal Navy. The hoax was a success, and

⁵ Diary, III, 203.

Woolf and her friends were received aboard with all the pomp due the Emperor of Abyssinia.

With their blackened faces and convincing costumes, no one of the group was easily recognized, especially the solemn-looking, bearded Virginia Woolf with a turban on her head. Few expect to read of Woolf's participation in such a practical joke. John Lehman, a personal friend of the Woolfs, concludes that "it was the last as well as the first" of such occasions.⁶

It was not, however, the last time that Woolf did things spontaneously and even unexpectedly. One month before she wrote that she needed an "escapade," she let loose and did something that was to surprise many, especially her sister, Vanessa. One evening after twelve o'clock Woolf, "being a little tipsy," let her friend Beatrice Mayor cut her hair. After sipping on Spanish wine, Woolf "let her do it." Delighted and still laughing, Woolf eagerly wrote to tell Vita the news a few days later:

I'm shingled . . . bound to be a little patchy at first. . . . It's off; its [sic] in the kitchen bucket, my hairpins have been offered up like crutches in St. Andrews, Holborn, at the high altar. Darling Honey, if anything

⁶ John Lehman, Virginia Woolf and Her World (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 28.

could make me say Vita's a villain it is that you didn't tell me, you'll be happier, wiser, serener, cleverer a thousand times shingled than haired.⁷

Since Woolf never considered herself as pretty as other women, her shingled hair did not upset her. In the same letter to Vita, Woolf wrote, "I'm a plain woman; shall be plainer; so a bingling, and shingling more or less don't matter." A month later still amused, Woolf compared her hair to "the hind view of a frightened hen partridge."⁸ By April, in a letter to Vita, she was still joking about her shingling: "I have bought a coil of hair, which I attach by a hook. It falls into the soup, and is fished out on a fork." Woolf never seemed to regret any of her escapades; instead, she seemed delighted at the chances she had taken.

At the same time that Woolf cut her hair, she also began smoking cigars, wearing make-up, and learning to drive. Later, after Woolf had written Orlando, she and Vita went together to get their ears pierced. None of these activities were encouraged by the early twentieth-century

⁷ Virginia Woolf, Letter to Vita Sackville-West, 16 Feb. 1927, A Change of Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977), III, 330-31.

⁸ To Vita, 16 March 1927, Letters, III, 348.

English. They were Woolf's adventures out into the world, and in the same fun-loving spirit, writing Orlando was Woolf's adventure through her imagination.

Ironically, the same woman who was shingled by a "rather violent and highly coloured" friend after midnight and wrote Orlando also wrote To the Lighthouse. As incongruent to each other in style, plot, and theme as the two novels may be, both are deeply grounded in particular relationships in Woolf's life. J. O. Love sums up the comparison of the two novels. Both novels may be read without reference to Woolf's life; however, Orlando "does not quite stand on its own as To the Lighthouse is able to do."⁹

Love further argues that Orlando "cannot be completely understood outside the context of her [Woolf's] friendship with Vita Sackville-West." Yet, how could one woman have had such a tremendous effect on someone like Virginia Woolf as to change her entire life? The women's first meeting was no indication of the tumult to follow.

Virginia Woolf met Vita Sackville-West and her husband, Harold Nicolson, at a dinner party given by Clive Bell in December, 1922. The two women had two

⁹ Love, p. 192.

particular things in common. Both were pursuing writing careers and both had unique, yet similar, marriages.

Nigel Nicolson compares Leonard and Virginia to Harold and Vita from first hand observations. He recalls:

Their marriages were alike in the freedom they allowed each other, in the invincibility of their love, in its intellectual, spiritual and non-physical base, in the eagerness of all four of them to savour life, challenge convention, work hard, play dangerously with the emotions-- and in the solicitude for each other.¹⁰

On the other hand, the women came from different backgrounds. Woolf's middle class background could not compare to the aristocratic heritage of the legendary Sackville-West tradition. At first Vita's heritage did not impress Woolf. Woolf described Vita as "florid, moustached, parakeet coloured, with all the supple ease of the aristocracy, but not the wit of the artist."¹¹

Two years later, the women resumed communication. Following their visit, Vita wrote to her husband: "It was the first time, I think, that I'd been alone with her for long. I went on . . . my head swimming with

¹⁰Nigel Nicolson, Portrait of a Marriage (New York: Atheneum, 1973), p. 203.

¹¹Virginia Woolf, The Diary of Virginia Woolf, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), II, 216.

Virginia."¹² Later, Woolf lunched with Vita and Lord Sackville at Knole, and that afternoon Woolf visited Long Barn for the first time.¹³ Woolf was "enchanted and made envious" by the visit. When she saw Knole, the Sackville family's estate, which is still one of England's grandest, she was "almost crushed." In a letter to Vita, Woolf explained that she was unable to express anything that she felt. She admitted: "I was thoroughly happy and very miserable. In fact, I'm only now beginning to recover my normal spirits."¹⁴ Woolf visited Knole several times afterward, and during each of her visits she collected bits and pieces of the family's history to assemble into her novel. Yet, Woolf's mixed emotions at this early stage of their relationship soon after seeing Knole is an indication of the tumult to follow.

Early in their correspondence Woolf complained that Vita did not write "intimate letters." Vita replied that

¹² Nicolson, Portrait, p. 202.

¹³ Knole, the Sackville family estate for almost 400 years, was originally a gift from Queen Elizabeth in 1556 and was filled with the family's history and tradition. By 1915 Vita's living at Knole caused problems; in order to remain nearby, she and Harold bought Long Barn in 1915, two miles from Knole. It was a sixteenth-century house, and they spent their summers there until 1925.

¹⁴ To Vita, 6 July 1924, Letters, III, 118.

Woolf looked upon their relationship as "copy," something to be fictionalized in some novel. Vita accused Woolf of liking people "through the brain, rather than through the heart."¹⁵ Denying nothing, Woolf replied:

It gave me a great deal of pain--which is I've no doubt the first stage of intimacy, no friends, no heart, only an indifferent head.¹⁶ Never mind: I enjoyed your abuse very much.

Vita's assessment of Woolf's tendency would prove to be accurate. Woolf did finally incorporate the complexities of their relationship in her fantasy novel. But even before Woolf had the idea of writing a novel about Vita Sackville-West, her personal writing was so heavy with fantasies about Vita that they cannot be ignored. In addition to the facts of Vita's life, which are in Orlando, Woolf also incorporated her fantasies of Vita into the novel. Actually, most of Woolf's personal writing to and about Vita during this time is embedded in fantasy rather than fact. It seems therefore fitting then that the fantasy novel provided a comfortable and suitable mode through which the culmination of their relationship would be resolved.

¹⁵ To Woolf, 16 July 1924, Letters, III, 138.

¹⁶ To Vita, 9 Aug. 1924, Letters, III, 125.

Certainly, Vita ignited Woolf's emotions, which were not to be ignored. Woolf wrote: "my aristocrat (Vita) . . . is violently Sapphic. . . . To tell you a secret, I want to incite my lady to elope with me next."¹⁷ Woolf seemed restless, she admitted: "I often wish I had married a foxhunter."¹⁸ She felt the "desire to share in life somehow," a desire which was denied to writers. In the same letter Woolf admitted to "preferring my own sex . . . or at any rate, finding the monotony of young men's conversation considerable, and resenting the eternal pressure which they put, if you're a woman, on one string, find the disproportion excessive, and intend to cultivate women's society entirely in future." Vita gratified Woolf's desires for adventure and fantasy, and getting to know Vita Sackville-West was Woolf's "most venturesome and experimental personal relationship."¹⁹

¹⁷ To Jacques Raverat, 24 Jan. 1925, Letters, III, 155-56. Vita Sackville-West was a known sapphist and had had serious affairs with other women. In addition, Harold Nicolson had similar relations with men. As Nigel Nicolson relates: "Both loved people of their own sex, but not exclusively. Their marriage not only survived infidelity, sexual incompatibility and long absences, but it became stronger and finer as a result" (Nicolson, Portrait, p. ix).

¹⁸ To Jacques, 5 Feb. 1925, Letters, III, 163.

¹⁹ Love, p. 192.

In the same year that Mrs. Dalloway (1925) was published, Woolf was often ill and bed-ridden. Yet, she continued work on To the Lighthouse. Woolf seemed to wait impatiently on Vita's letters, always disappointed when they were not flattering, soon enough, or long enough. Love reasons that Woolf's illness played a part in her growing attraction to Vita. During those vulnerable times, Woolf needed maternal attention provided by Vita. However, Love asserts that Woolf spent some of her time simply enjoying her personal fantasies.²⁰ For example, Woolf wrote: "I have a perfectly romantic and no doubt untrue vision of you in my mind--stomping out the hops in a great vat in Kent--stark naked, brown as a satyr, and very beautiful. Don't tell me this is all illusion."²¹

During this time, Woolf fantasized a lot. In a letter written to another female friend, Woolf planned that the two women should give a summer party for "compatibles only," and Woolf insisted upon a "sufficiency of young women."²² Woolf also invented events for the coming

²⁰ Love, p. 201.

²¹ To Vita, 24 Aug. 1925, Letters, III, 198.

²² To Majorie Joad, 15 Feb. 1925, Letters, III, 168.

winter. She, Vita and others "unmixed, undressed, [and] unpowdered" would have "one great gala night a month."²³ The studio would be candle-lit, and the tables filled with chocolate and buns. Woolf set the scene and then imagined that Vita would "emerge like a lighthouse, fitful, sudden, remote." In the same letter, Woolf expressed her hopes of "sail[ing] gradually [with Vita] and calm into latitudes of intimacy which in drawing rooms are never reached." Then she admitted to Vita: "But you have complicated my relations for life." The intensity of their relationship was yet to be realized.

Woolf struggled to create a clear picture of Vita and admitted the difficulty of such a task. She indicated how Vita herself could help:

Tell me who you've been seeing; even if I have never heard of them--that will be all the better. I try to invent you for myself, but I find I really have only two twigs and three straws to do it with. I can get the sensation of seeing you--hair, lips, colour, height, even, now and then, the eyes and hands, but I find you going off, to walk in the garden, to play tennis, to dig, to sit smoking and talking, and then I can't invent a thing you say--This proves, what I could write reams about--how little we know anyone, only movements and gestures, nothing connected, continuous, profound. But give me a hint I implore.²⁴

²³ To Vita, 23 Sept. 1925, Letters, III, 214.

²⁴ To Vita, 9 Sept. 1925, Letters, III, 204-05.

Woolf's struggle to put the pieces of Vita's character together went on for three years, and it was as frustrating as it was satisfying. During this time Woolf attempted to define Vita in terms of these illusions. However, rather than helping to understand Vita more honestly and realistically, Woolf's illusions fostered an even more incomprehensible character. In time Vita became to Woolf "a lighted candle stick, a glow, an illumination."²⁵

Woolf had total freedom in forming her illusions of Vita; Woolf felt no limits. She even encouraged that they exchange personal images of each other. She wrote to Vita: "I can assure you, if you'll make me up, I'll make you."²⁶ Woolf was eager to share her illusions with Vita and waited to know Vita's illusions of her. She asked Vita: "What I am: I want you to tell me."²⁷

Even though these illusions clouded Woolf's chances of seeing Vita realistically, they were at the time better than no illusions at all for Woolf. They provided a safe approach to the complex world of Vita Sackville-West. Woolf expressed her "fears and refrainings" and a "self-consciousness in intercourse with people who mayn't want

²⁵ To Vita, 5 Jan. 1926, Letters, III, 226.

²⁶ To Vita, 9 Sept. 1925, Letters, III, 214.

²⁷ To Vita, 1 Jan. 1926, Letters, III, 233.

me and so on."²⁸ She indicated insecurities throughout their friendship. The intensity of these women's relationship would challenge Woolf both psychologically and emotionally. Vita also recognized Woolf's deep emotional sensitivity and was considerably cautious. She explained to her husband that "one's love for Virginia is a very different thing: a mental thing; a spiritual thing, if you like, an intellectual thing. . . . I did not want to get landed in an affair which might get beyond my control before I knew where I was."²⁹

When Woolf was ready both psychologically and emotionally to deal with Vita more honestly, she could tone down the unreality of her illusions. That time was not until 1927 when Woolf was able to put her friendship with Vita in perspective by way of Orlando. Until then, their relationship continued, fluctuating between illusions and reality.

In late 1925 Woolf received news that Vita would be leaving for Persia that winter. The thought of not ever seeing Vita again filled Woolf with "envy and despair." While Vita was "doomed to go to Persia," Woolf concluded,

²⁸ Diary, III, 51.

²⁹ Nicolson, Portrait, p. 206.

"I am genuinely fond of her. . . . There is the glamour of unfamiliarity to reckon with; of aristocracy . . . of flattery."³⁰

Contrary to doctor's orders for bed rest, Woolf sent the following message to Vita prior to her departure: "So this is my swan song. But come and see me."³¹ With Vita's husband away in Persia, Woolf delighted in the idea of her and Vita being together "in all London, you and I alone like being married."³² Vita's impending departure, however, threatened their friendship. Woolf's diary entries echo a sense of urgency at this time: "Only if I do not see her now, I shall not-ever: for the moment of intimacy will be gone, next summer. And I resent this, partly because I like her; partly because I hate the power of life to divide." Not having been invited to see Vita one final time prior to her leaving, Woolf wrote in her diary that she wanted to "lie down like a tired child and weep away this life of care."³³ Like a child, she did not know altogether why she cried.

³⁰ Diary, III, 47.

³¹ To Vita, 13 Oct. 1925, Letters, III, 217.

³² To Vita, 16 Nov. 1925, Letters, III, 221.

³³ Diary, III, pp. 48-49.

Woolf's weeping must have stopped when she spent three nights with Vita alone at Long Barn. During this visit, Woolf's fantasies may have been fulfilled. Her interest in Vita had grown during the last year as her letters indicate, but at the time in their relationship when Woolf had high expectations, Vita was to leave for Persia. Woolf's timely visit to Long Barn seems to have determined the course of their friendship after 1925. As Nicolson notes, they met six more times prior to Vita's departure, and their succeeding correspondence "contains veiled references to what happened at Long Barn."³⁴ Nicolson concludes that this visit marked the "beginning of their love affair."

Woolf's letters after Long Barn were somewhat dreamy and very intimate. She thanked Vita for "spoiling, caring cossetting the Wolf [Virginia] kind for three days." To Woolf, Vita was a "dear old rough coated sheep dog; or alternatively hung with grapes, pink with pearls, lustrous candle lit, in the door of a Sevenoaks draper." Pleased, Woolf confirmed in her letter, "Ah, but I like being with Vita."³⁵

³⁴ Nicolson, Letters, III, 223. For the details of Nicolson's conclusions see Portrait, pp. 203-04. See also Love's statement on Woolf's visit to Long Barn, pp. 203-205, and Bell, Virginia Woolf, II, 117-18.

³⁵ To Vita, 22 Dec. 1925, Letters, III, 224.

Yet the day before this letter was written, Woolf sorted out her feelings about Vita in her diary a bit more objectively. Woolf's feelings were

very mixed. There is her [Vita's] maturity and full breastedness: her being so much in full sail on the high tides, where I am coasting down backwaters; . . . [T]here is some voluptuousness about her; the grapes are ripe; and not relective. No. In brain and insight she is not as highly organised as I am.³⁶

Still trying to put Vita in proper perspective, Woolf acknowledged her own need for "maternal protection." She compared "what L. [Leonard] gives me, and Nessa [Vanessa] gives me, and Vita, in her more clumsy external way, tries to give me." Still, Woolf noted that "mingled with all this glamour, grape clusters and pearl necklaces, there is something loose fitting."

Woolf realized that she was still "hung about with trailing clouds of glory from Long Barn wh[ich] always disorientates me and makes me more than usually nervous: then I am-altogether so queer in some ways. One emotion succeeds another."

These emotions were no less turbulent after Vita left for Persia. Woolf's personal writing became very serious and introspective. Since their visits would now be months

³⁶ Diary, III, 52.

apart, Woolf depended heavily on Vita's letters. As expected, Woolf's most intense personal writing occurred when she and Vita were apart. On the day of Vita's departure, Woolf noted a "lack of stimulus, of marked days . . . and some pathos, common to all these partings."³⁷ In their long distance correspondence, Woolf especially expressed very intimate and sometimes anxious feelings towards Vita.

Interestingly, Woolf dealt with her temporary separation from Vita through her imagination. Quite expectedly, Woolf's illusions were most vivid when she and Vita were separated for long period of time.³⁸ Woolf's illusions gapped the distance and time that separated them. By predicting what Vita was doing and how she looked, Woolf's imagination brought Vita near. These vivid illusions were precedents to the fantastic details of Orlando. Coated with infatuation, these illusions exaggerated Vita's charm and transfigured her into a mystical vision. The flavor of adventure and charm which highlight Orlando is a reflection of Woolf's illusions of Vita. Woolf acknowledged that the illusions intensified as a consequence of their

³⁷ Diary, III, 57.

³⁸ Vita visited Harold in Persia twice: Jan. 19, 1926-May 16, 1926 and again from Jan. 28, 1927-May 1927.

separation. Yet through her imagination, she traced Vita's overseas journeys. Soon after Vita's departure, Woolf wrote:

Somehow, as you get further away, I become less able to visualize you; and think of you with backgrounds of camels and pyramids which make me a little shy. Then you will be on board ship: Captains and gold lace: portholes, planks. . . . Now Vita's getting bored in Bombay; but its [sic] a bald prosaic place, full of apes and rocks. I think; please tell me, you can't think how, being a clever woman, as we admit, I make every fragment you tell me bloom and blossom in my mind . . . couldn't you write me lots more letters and post them at odd stations as you pass through?³⁹

Woolf idealized Vita's journey in Persia, "where the air is rose-coloured," and imagined her "somehow in long coat and trousers, like an Abyssinian Empress, stalking over those barren hills."⁴⁰ In the spring, she saw Vita "always picking little bright red flowers high up on a stony mountains."⁴¹ When Woolf spent the day motoring, she imagined Vita, "all the time motoring too, through the desert, I could not think it was lovelier, or stranger."⁴²

³⁹ To Vita, 26 Jan. 1926, Letters, III, 233.

⁴⁰ To Vita, 3 Feb. 1926, Letters, III, 239.

⁴¹ To Vita, 29 March 1926, Letters, III, 250.

⁴² To Vita, 1 March 1926, Letters, III, 243.

Woolf's illusions bridged their present separation. At the same time, she kept fresh the memories of their past in which they were together and also anticipated their future union. For example, Woolf wrote: "as we drove, I kept seeing the streets you drove me through: and thinking about you, and thinking how shy I had been of you; and then when I rushed you, how you at once stepped out of that focus into another; and what distance shall we be at on Monday the 10th May?"⁴³ Specifically, Woolf made plans for their summer reunion: "I want to take you over the water meadows in the summer on foot, I have thought of many million things to tell you. Devil that you are, to vanish to Persia and leave me here!"⁴⁴

In the midst of her fantasies, Woolf did acknowledge the limits of their relationship. She explained the difficulties of any relationship: "And you think it all fixed and settled. Do we then know nobody?--only our own version of them, which as likely as not, are emanations from ourselves."⁴⁵ Likewise, Orlando was Woolf's version of Vita. It was just as much an emanation from Virginia Woolf

⁴³ To Vita, 31 March 1926, Letters, III, 237.

⁴⁴ To Vita, 17 Feb. 1926, Letters, III, 241.

⁴⁵ To Vita, 2 March 1926, Letters, III, 245.

herself, and therefore partly Woolf, as it was Vita Sackville-West.

As Vita's return to London drew nigh, Woolf's illusions began to fade temporarily. Woolf readily identified changes within herself: "I write differently now you're coming back. The pathos is melting. I felt it pathetic when you were going away; as if you were sinking below the verge. Now that you are rising, I'm jolly again."⁴⁶

After having seen Vita all over again, the reality of Woolf's confusion returned. As usual, Woolf sorted out her feelings in her diary:⁴⁷ Woolf noticed changes in their feelings towards one another:

I am amused at my relations with her; left so ardent in January--& now what? Also I like her presence and her beauty. Am I in love with her? But what is love? Her being 'in love' (it must be comma'd thus) with me, excites & flatters; & interests, what is this 'love'? Oh & then she gratifies my eternal curiosity: who's she seen, whats [sic] she done. . . .⁴⁸

Ironically, there was little that was flattering, exciting, or curious between the two women when they were

⁴⁶ To Vita, 13 April 1926, Letters, III, 253.

⁴⁷ Prior to Vita's return from Persia, Woolf did not write of Vita in her diary from Jan. 20 to May 20, 1926. After Vita returned, Woolf's diary is filled with references to her.

⁴⁸ Diary, III, 87.

reunited. Instead, Woolf "register[ed] the shock of meeting after absence; how shy one is; how disillusioned by actual body." The woman who had once been "all so cool and fruitful and delicious" was now "more mature" and even "shabbier" in her traveling clothes, and "not so beautiful" as sometimes perhaps. After Vita returned from Persia, the two women sat rather silently, and Woolf "chattered," hoping that Vita would not think, "Well is this all?" They each registered some disillusionment and perhaps also acquired some "grains of additional solidity." Woolf correctly predicted the future of their friendship: "This may well be more lasting than the first rhapsody." Now Vita seemed "quieter, shyer, awkwarder than usual." And Woolf realized that "there may be many parts of her perfectly unilluminated."⁴⁹

The fervor of Woolf's attention to Vita had calmed down. By November, Woolf relaxed and wrote of their "spirited, creditable affair." Woolf thought it was "innocent (spiritually) and all gain, . . . rather a bore for Leonard, but not enough to worry him." She concluded: "The truth is one has room for a good many relationships."⁵⁰

⁴⁹Diary, III, 88.

⁵⁰Diary, III, 117.

Woolf had been ill frequently during the later half of 1926. And during that time her letters frequently expressed her desire to be alone with Vita.⁵¹ She had "tired of everything except seeing you [Vita]. Shall you be kind to me?"⁵² By November, Woolf had finished writing To the Lighthouse and may have already had ideas about The Waves. However, she wrote that she had "no idea yet of any other to follow it [Lighthouse]."⁵³ Her diary entry at that time does show the first suggestion of a novel that could possibly be about Vita Sackville-West. Woolf was

now and then haunted by some semi mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall all be told on one occasion; and time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past. One incident--say the fall of a flower--may contain it. My theory being that the actual event practically does not exist--nor time either. But I don't want to force this.

Woolf was still discovering how little she really knew about Vita. Woolf wrote: "How I should like to know this

⁵¹ For examples, see letters to Vita, 1, 13, 19, 22 June; 22 Aug., 21 Sept., 19 Oct. 1926, and 24 June 1927, Letters, III, 268, 275, 281, 277-78, 288, 293, 300, 394.

⁵² To Vita, 3 Dec. 1926, Letters, III, 305.

⁵³ Diary, III, 118.

woman. . . . But I do and then No I don't."⁵⁴ Woolf did not yet know the extent of Vita's "subleties," the "sly, brooding, thinking, evading" aspects of Vita.

Woolf also began to doubt the future of their relationship. She reckoned that Vita would be tired of her one of these days and took "little precautions." She explained to Vita: "That's why, I put the emphasis on 'recording' rather than feeling." Woolf was still faced with the mysteries of Vita's personality:

Donkey West [Vita] knows that she has broken down more ramparts than anyone. And isn't there something obscure in you? There's something that doesn't vibrate in you: It may be purposely--you don't let it: . . . something reserved, muted--God knows what.⁵⁵

By 1927, Woolf and Vita had gone through a most unusual phase of their relationship, characterized by vivid fantasies, extended separations, strong desires to be together, intense letter writing, and apparently intimate visits with one another. In January of that year, Vita was to leave for Persia, once again for six months. Nicolson notes, however, that "Virginia's melancholy about her departure was not so acute as it had been a year before."

⁵⁴ To Vita, 15 Sept. 1926, Letters, III, 290-91.

⁵⁵ To Vita, 19 Nov. 1926, Letters, III, 303.

Even though Woolf referred to the coming months as the "strenuous times," Nicolson adds that "her letters of this period [early 1927] are among her liveliest, because she had no illness, and her two favorite correspondents, Vanessa and Vita, were both abroad, hungry for news and affection."⁵⁶ Another factor for Woolf's good spirits may have been her finishing To the Lighthouse. She still had to prepare it for publication, but her worries about it were temporarily out of the way.

So it seems that two major events occupied Woolf's mind at this time. One was her relationship with Vita, who had just left her for the second time; and the second was what she would write to follow Lighthouse. Since her writing and her friendship with Vita consumed her thoughts and emotions from two different directions, Woolf dealt with them separately until September, 1927. Then the revelation was simple and, as usual, spontaneous. Not until then did Woolf see the possibilities of writing her next novel about the very woman who had consumed her attention for the past two years. Thus Woolf resolved her two major concerns in September by focusing her attention on the potential of Orlando. Orlando's success indicates how well suited the book was for Woolf's needs.

⁵⁶ Nicolson, Letters, III, 315.

During the months following Vita's departure to Persia Woolf entered into a "grim but salutary" period, her "hibernating season," during which she contemplated her next book. She did nothing but read and write, frequently interrupted with thoughts about Vita who was "motoring across mountains," and driving into the gates of Teheran, sitting "proud as a peacock."⁵⁷

Woolf's tendency to fantasize about Vita had not completely disappeared. Woolf imagined Vita "being very distant and beautiful and calm. A Lighthouse in clean waters." Three days after Vita left, Woolf admitted, "I try my best to put off thinking about you . . . how dream-like things are, how skinned of flesh and blood when one's thinking of Vita going further and further."⁵⁸

Once again Woolf despaired like a child; she felt "at the mercy of people, of moods;" she felt lonely, like "something pitiable which couldn't make its wants known." Woolf noted what had happened to her: "You [Vita] have demoralized me. I was once a stalwart upstanding woman."⁵⁹

However, there was nothing stalwart about Woolf when she later confessed: "It gets worse steadily--your being

⁵⁷ To Vita, 7 Feb. 1927, Letters, III, 326.

⁵⁸ To Vita, 31 Jan. 1927, Letters, III, 319.

⁵⁹ To Vita, 2 Feb. 1927, Letters, III, 321.

away. All the sleeping draught and the irritants have worn away, and I'm settling down to wanting you." As Woolf wrote more honestly, she became more frustrated: "It's damned unpleasant for me." She wanted to "cheat the devil" and put her head under her wing and think of nothing. But Woolf's insatiable longing to be with Vita seemed endless: "I want you [Vita] this Saturday more than last and so it'll go on." While Vita was on the Caspian, "being tossed up and down on a smelly ship," Woolf sat over the gas [stove] in her "sordid room."⁶⁰ Woolf imagined Vita on the heights of Persia, riding an Arab mare to some deserted garden and picking "yellow tulips."⁶¹

Woolf was not usually aggressive; however, she pleaded for Vita to come home. She even wrote: "You must wring Harold's neck, if worst comes to the worst. . . . Yes, darling honey. I am a misery without you."⁶² Vita expressed similar intimate longings which may have added to Woolf's frustration.⁶³

⁶⁰ To Vita, 5 Feb. 1927, Letters, III, 325.

⁶¹ To Vita, 21 Feb. 1927, Letters, III, 333.

⁶² To Vita, 28 Feb. 1927, Letters, III, 338.

⁶³ Vita has proposed that Virginia meet her in Greece when her ship docked in Piraeus: "I leave it to your imagination to reconstruct what it would mean to me if I saw you coming up that gangway" (Vita to Virginia, 19 Feb. 1927, Berg); rpt. in Letters, III, 338.

Woolf's most significant letter of this period was dated March 6, 1927. Woolf admitted her tendency to fictionalize Vita, but indicated no specific plans for her personal stories, despite how obviously these stories about Vita offered potential content for Woolf's next novel. Woolf wrote:

This year you seem to me, imaginatively, more unattainable; more pearled, powdered, white legged, gay, gallant and adventurous than ever. I can't imagine you in the basement. . . . Still--oh yes--I'm very fond of you, all the same--I lie in bed making up stories about you. Do send me a heap of facts; you know how I love a fact: what you had for dinner: and any scrap of real talk for instance between you and Harold, upon which I can build pinnacles and pagodas, all unreal as you justly remark.⁶⁴

Rather than serving Woolf's needs professionally and providing the plot for her next novel, these ideas fulfilled Woolf's needs personally and compensated for Vita's absence.

Until Vita returned to London in May, Vita tossed Woolf's emotions about. Woolf was sinking and sailing, stopping and starting. She wanted Vita and "the night too with birds singing and stars rising."⁶⁵ She cursed Vita: "Damn you Vita, why do you insist upon taking the world by

⁶⁴ To Vita, 6 March 1927, Letters, III, 342.

⁶⁵ To Vita, 6 March 1927, Letters, III, 343.

the scruff of its neck and shaking it? Why these great and gallant ways? being so adventurous and athletic and spartan?"⁶⁶ She worried about Vita in Persia: "Are you well? . . . Where you drowned, shot, raped, tired?" She asked herself: "Why do I think of you so incessantly, see you so clearly the moment I'm in the least discomfort? An odd element in our friendship. Like a child, I think if you were here, I should be happy."⁶⁷ Finally, she dreamily awaited Vita's return: "Please darling come back safe. We will have a merry summer: one night perhaps at Long Barn: another at Rodmell: we will write some nice pieces of prose and poetry: we will saunter down the Haymarket. . . . We will snore."⁶⁸

At the same time that Woolf was dealing with her separation from Vita, Woolf's second major concern was the topic for her next novel. She had a few vague notions of what the novel might be about, but she had learned to wait until all of her ideas had presented themselves, and then when the time was right, she would see the pieces as they

⁶⁶ To Vita, 15 March 1927, Letters, III, 347.

⁶⁷ To Vita, 23 March 1927, Letters, III, 352.

⁶⁸ To Vita, 5 April 1927, Letters, III, 360.

fit together. Meanwhile, she would be on the watch for symptoms of this "extremely mysterious process."⁶⁹

At first Woolf considered writing a new kind of play. She jotted down her early ideas for a play in her diary: "Woman thinks: . . . / He does. / Organ Plays. / She writes. / They say: / She sings: / Night speaks: / They miss[.]" Though uncertain about the plot and genre, Woolf did want to get "away from the facts: free; yet concentrated; prose yet poetry; a novel and a play."⁷⁰ Perhaps she recalled Lytton Strachey's advice. He said that Woolf needed something "wilder, and more fantastic, [after Mrs. Dalloway] a frame that admits of anything . . . there must be reality for you to start from. . . . Heaven knows how you're to do it."⁷¹

Woolf also considered getting "historical manuscripts and writ[ing] Lives of the Obscure." Nonetheless, she wasn't worried; she felt confident that after a holiday the old ideas would come as usual; seeming fresher, more important than ever; and she should be off again, feeling that extraordinary exhilaration, that ardour and lust of creation."⁷²

⁶⁹ Diary, III, 131.

⁷⁰ Diary, III, 128.

⁷¹ Diary, III, 32.

⁷² Diary, III, 129.

As she had expected, two weeks later, Woolf recorded the conception of a new book. For weeks she had been toying with "some thoughts of a flower whose petals fall; of time all telescoped into one lucid channel through wh[ich] my heroine was to pass at will." She sketched the possibilities of an "unattractive woman, penniless, alone," who would stop a motor on the Dover Road and so cross the channel, when "suddenly between twelve and one Woolf conceived a whole fantasy to be called "The Jessamy Brides." She started:

Two women, poor, solitary at the top of a house. One can see anything (for this is all fantasy) the Tower Bridge, clouds, aeroplanes. Also old men listening in the room over the way. Everything is to be tumbled in pall mall. It is to be written as I write letters at the top of my speed: . . . No attempt is to be made to realise the character. Sapphism is to be suggested. Satire is to be the main note--satire and wildness. The Ladies are to have Constantinople in view. Dreams of golden domes. My own lyric vein is to be satirized. Everything mocked. And it is to end with three dots . . . so. For the truth is I feel the need of an escapade after these serious poetic experimental books whose form is always so closely considered. I want to kick up my heels and be off. I want to embody all these innumerable little ideas and tiny stories which flash into my mind at all seasons. I think this will be great fun to write; and it will rest my head before starting the very serious, mystical poetical work which I want to come next. Meanwhile, . . . I might dash off a page or two now and then by way of experiment. And it is possible that the idea will evaporate. Anyhow this records the odd

hurried unexpected way in which these things suddenly create themselves--one thing on top of another in about an hour.⁷³

Woolf's ideas did not evaporate. She wrote a fantasy, Orlando, at top speed, satirizing and mocking everything. In March Woolf expressed her desire for an escapade in her writing, but it was not until September that she realized which of those innumerable little stories and ideas she would develop.

The transition from Lighthouse to Orlando was difficult for Woolf. Following the publication of Lighthouse (May 5, 1927), she lay in bed for weeks with severe head pains, worrying about the novel's success. The only person she wanted to see was Vita. She wanted only "one line daily" so that she could go on building Vita up. A letter to Vita during this time implies a withdrawal from the world. Woolf seemed vulnerable and needed support. She was lying under a "blue and purple forest" of lupins Vita had bought her. They looked like enormous trees, and Woolf was a "little rabbit running about among the roots." Woolf noted how being ill like this "splits one up into several people." Her brain was quite bright, but purely critical and modest. And her body was another person. It

⁷³ Diary, III, 131.

was a "gray mare, trotting along a white road. We go along quite evenly for a time like this . . . suddenly she jumps a gate. . . . I rather like the gray mare jumping." Woolf preferred lying on her chair under the blue and purple forest. Vita made such a "figure in this forest; coming out of a glade; yellow; golden."⁷⁴

Vita had returned from Persia and Woolf, being emotionally and physically drained, asked her to "please be rather strict for a time" and not to encourage her to excitement. More than anything, Woolf wanted three days at Long Barn, doing nothing but sleeping, and eating with an "occassional kiss on waking and between meals."⁷⁵

Following Woolf's illness, the compatability of the two women seemed to decrease as their needs and desires became evident. For example, Vita's response to Woolf's request was that if Woolf were not a person to be rather strict with, she would motor by night to Woolf's window and throw gravel until Woolf let her in. For a different Virginia, she would fly to Sussex by night. However, "with age, soberness and the increase of consideration," Vita refrained. But the temptation was great.⁷⁶ Vita called

⁷⁴ To Vita, 5 June 1927, Letters, III, 388.

⁷⁵ To Vita, 7 June 1927, Letters, III, 390.

⁷⁶ To Woolf, 11 June 1927, Letters, III, 391.

Woolf "elderly and valetudinarian,"⁷⁷ to which Woolf strongly replied: "Look here Vita--throw over your man, and we'll . . . walk in the garden in the moonlight, come home late, and get tipsy on a bottle of wine."⁷⁸ Their letters indicate that when Woolf needed Vita's patience and quiet companionship, Vita needed some excitement.

Their relationship was further threatened when Vita began to spend time with other women. Nicolson notes that Woolf visited Long Barn several times, "where Vita was becoming deeply involved with Mary Campbell, the wife of the South African poet Roy Campbell,"⁷⁹ who lived nearby. Prior to that time, Vita was staying with Dorothy Wellesley at Sherfield.

With their relationship challenged, Woolf probably re-evaluated herself. In a letter to Vanessa, she wrote that "poor Billy [Virginia] isn't one thing or the other, not a man nor a woman, so what's he to do?"⁸⁰

One thing that Woolf did was vent her jealousies freely to Vita. She cautioned Vita of her "gambolling," or else Vita would find "Virginia's soft crevices lined

⁷⁷ To Woolf, 14 June 1927, Letters, III, 391.

⁷⁸ To Vita, June 1927, Letters, III, 393.

⁷⁹ Nicolson, Letters, III, 404.

⁸⁰ To Vanessa Bell, 23 July 1927, Letters, III, 401.

with hooks." Then she added: "You'll admit I'm mysterious--you don't fathom me yet."⁸¹ At other times, Woolf was armed with sarcasm. She wrote: "How nice it is of me to be writing to you, when you're not writing to me. No, you're not. You're talking to Dottie [D. Wellesley]. By God, at 3 this morning I'll ring you up." And the butler will "catch you in the act."⁸²

Further, Woolf declared that Vita must be devoted to her "wholeheartedly," not just as she might tickle a trout with the tip of her finger. Vita was to lay herself out to enchant Woolf every second.⁸³ By September, Woolf presented her ultimatum: "I won't belong to the two of you, or to the one of you, if the two of us belong to the one. In short, if Dotty's yours, I'm not. A profound truth is involved which I leave you to discover. It is too hot to argue, and I'm too depressed."⁸⁴ Hurt, but unwilling to let go, she invited Vita to visit and promised to "be sweet as honey, soft as silk." Jean Love notes that Woolf's vacillation near the end of the

⁸¹ To Vita, 4 July 1927, Letters, III, 395.

⁸² To Vita, 24 July 1927, Letters, III, 402.

⁸³ To Vita, 7 Aug. 1927, Letters, III, 408.

⁸⁴ To Vita, 2 Sept. 1927, Letters, III, 415.

relationship was similar to her attitude before it had begun.⁸⁵

The tension in their relationship was evident. Vita "felt something wrong" by one of Woolf's letters. Woolf explained that she had been a "little rasped" at not seeing her, but that was, after all, to Vita's taste.⁸⁶

Woolf would have written letters "filled to the brim with lovemaking unbelievable; indiscretions incredible," but because Mary Campbell might hear, she did not. Woolf acknowledged a "terrific gulf" within herself. There were millions of things she wanted to say but couldn't because Vita had "sold" her love letters, walking the lanes with Campbell.⁸⁷

Instead, Woolf's letters suggest the coming end of their relationship. She wrote to Harold Nicolson: "Love to Vita: whom I shall soon cease to love."⁸⁸ Impatiently waiting to see Vita once again, she wrote: "It's the last chance of a night before London's chastity begins."⁸⁹ Woolf noted a "dying hue" over their relationship; "it

⁸⁵ Love, p. 211.

⁸⁶ To Vita, 7 Aug. 1927, Letters, III, 408.

⁸⁷ To Vita, 9 Oct. 1927, Letters, III, 420.

⁸⁸ To Harold Nicolson, 13 Sept. 1927, Letters, III, 421.

⁸⁹ To Vita, 25 Sept. 1927, Letters, III, 423.

shows the hectic dolphin colours of decay. Never do I leave you without thinking its [sic] for the last time."⁹⁰

In addition to losing Vita, Woolf's sense of loss was compounded at this time with the death of her good friend, Philip Ritchie. Moved by the effect of his death, Woolf contemplated writing a novel about her friends' lives. It would be "like a grand historical picture, . . . a way of writing the memoirs of one's own times during peoples [sic] lifetimes." Then it dawned on her: "Vita should be Orlando, a young nobleman." Her novel should be truthful but fantastic. Maybe she would write about her other close friends in the same book; but somewhat overwhelmed with the potential of that complicated idea, she admitted: "I can think of more books than I shall ever be able to write."⁹¹

After narrowing down her subject, Woolf decided to write "a biography beginning in the year 1500 and continuing to the present day, called Orlando: Vita; only with a change about from one sex to another. I think, for a treat, I shall let myself dash this in for a week."⁹² The next day, she wrote to Vita: "I'm frightfully

⁹⁰ To Vita, 14 Oct. 1927, Letters, III, 429.

⁹¹ Diary, III, 156-57.

⁹² Diary, III, 161.

excited: I will tell you why."⁹³ Later, Woolf explained how she almost automatically wrote the words Orlando: A Biography on a clean sheet of paper. No sooner had she done this than her body was filled with rapture and her brain with ideas.

Next Woolf asked Vita's permission to write this book which could possibly be about her: "What if it's about the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your mind--suppose there's the kind of shimmer of reality which sometimes attaches to my people, . . . shall you mind? Say yes, or no."⁹⁴

To this letter, Vita enthusiastically replied that she would be "thrilled and terrified" at the prospect of being "projected into the shape of Orlando. What fun for you; what fun for me. . . . You have my full permission. Only I think that having drawn and quartered me, unwound and retwisted me, or whatever it is that you do, you ought to dedicate it to your victim."⁹⁵ And Woolf did dedicate Orlando to Vita Sackville-West.

It is unlikely that Woolf doubted Vita's permission to write such a novel. Although Woolf's approach seemed

⁹³ To Vita, 6 Oct. 1927, Letters, III, 427.

⁹⁴ To Vita, 9 Oct. 1927, Letters, III, 428-29.

⁹⁵ To Woolf, 11 Oct. 1927, Letters, III, 429.

innocent and honest, to Vita it was more like a tantalizing temptation which could not be resisted. Of course, Vita would consent and did not hesitate to offer her suggestions.

Woolf first explained that Vita's excellence as a subject arose largely from her noble birth and the opportunity thus given for florid descriptive passages in great abundance.⁹⁶ On the surface that explanation suits the situation very well since Vita's family history was full of adventures and deeply rooted traditions. In addition, Woolf had recently visited Knole and had met Lord Sackville, and she was immediately impressed. The magnificence of the family's legends and estate were fresh in her memory.

However, the timing of the dissolution of her relationship with Vita and her idea to write a novel about Vita suggest more than coincidence. That these two events were so synchronized suggests a relationship between them. And that relationship merits exploration.

Woolf recognized her need for an escapade in March 1927 and planned to write a fantasy. By September Woolf's relationship with Vita had begun to fade, further weakened by other women in Vita's life. Fortunately for Woolf, the idea of Vita's being the subject of a novel aroused Vita's

⁹⁶ To Vita, 9 Oct. 1927, Letters, III, 429.

curiosity and lured her back to Woolf. Both women were excited about the potential of such a novel. In addition, Woolf must have sensed the renewed potential of their relationship. Was this part of Woolf's plan: to find a way to continue their relationship? Did she see Mary Campbell and Dorothy Wellesley as rivals to Vita's attention and writing a novel about Vita as a means of competing with them?

Woolf hardly identified her motives for writing Orlando so specifically. Nonetheless, she did become the focus of Vita's attention as a result of writing her novel. Because of the nature of the novel, Woolf would have to meet with Vita frequently. Nicolson notes that "Vita was delighted and tantalized by Virginia's probing questionnaires about her past."⁹⁷

In addition, Woolf focused her attention on writing a novel now, and the pain of their fading relationship softened. Being consumed with writing, Woolf's jealousy also subsided. Finally, Woolf did admit her deeper, more honest motives for writing about Vita, confessing to her: "I should like to untwine and twist again some very odd, incongruous strands in you: going into the question of Campbell."⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Nicolson, Letters, III, 427.

⁹⁸ To Vita, 9 Oct. 1927, Letters, III, 429.

Thus it seems that writing Orlando was Woolf's means of gaining proper perspective of the personal escapade she had already experienced with Vita Sackville-West, and as Love suggests, it provided the women a means to continue their relationship on a different basis.⁹⁹ Woolf did not deny that personal feelings and events played a part in her writing Orlando. In a letter to Vita written soon after the idea of Orlando had taken shape, Woolf announced: "If you've given yourself to [Mary] Campbell, I'll have no more to do with you, and so it shall be written, plainly, for all the world to read in Orlando."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Love, p. 192.

¹⁰⁰ To Vita, 14 Oct. 1927, Letters, III, 430.

CHAPTER III

THE PROCESS OF WRITING ORLANDO

With an awareness of the unique nature of Woolf's relationship with Vita, one can understand Woolf's impulse to unravel the complex character of Vita Sackville-West. The two women had been involved in an intimate relationship for over two years, during which time Virginia Woolf experienced some of her most satisfying and also some of her most perplexing emotions. Yet after recording her responses to Vita in her personal letters and diaries, something was still unsettled about their relationship, and the process of writing Orlando was for Woolf a means of externalizing that dilemma and of viewing Vita Sackville-West from a more objective perspective, thus perhaps settling the uncertainties of their relationship.

This aspect of her motives is comparable to her motives in writing Lighthouse. As Vogler makes clear in regards to Lighthouse, "the most important reason for setting the novel in a fictional world similar to the real St. Ives is not transcription of detail, but the double isolation [in time and space] that Virginia Woolf needed to explore her attitudes towards herself and her

family."¹ For reasons similar to these that caused Woolf to model Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey in Lighthouse after her parents, she modeled Orlando after Vita. In writing both novels, she did for herself "what psycho-analysts do for their patients." As Woolf noted, she had "expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotions. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest."²

With Woolf's expressed motives for writing Orlando clarified, it is possible to see how Woolf "untwined" those odd incongruous strands which made up Vita Sackville-West and how she "twisted" them again into her fantasy novel. Granted, one may read Orlando unaware of the basis of its characterizations and plot; however, one then overlooks the most important aspect of the novel, because Woolf purposely incorporated the facts of Vita's life and lifestyle into Orlando. Therefore, in order to understand Orlando better, one should be familiar with Vita Sackville-West's life and her family history. Only then can one fully understand Orlando; until that time, much of the novel's charm remains a mystery.

¹ Thomas A. Vogler, ed. Twentieth Century Interpretations of "To the Lighthouse": A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p. 9.

² Virginia Woolf, Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. 81.

Initially, Woolf had planned a small book about 30,000 words to be finished by Christmas.³ She found herself "launched somewhat furtively but with all the more passion upon Orlando. She was constantly making up phrases, contriving scenes and even planning to include pictures and a few maps. She wrote:

Talk of planning a book, or waiting for an idea! This one came in a rush . . . I had very little idea what the story was to be about. But the relief of turning my mind that way was such that I felt happier than for months; as if put in the sun, or laid on cushions; . . . and [I] have abandoned myself to the pure delight of the farce: which I enjoy as much as I've ever enjoyed anything, . . . I am writing Orlando half in the mock style very clear and plain, so that people will understnad every word. But the balance between truth and fantasy must be careful.⁴

The element of fantasy which Woolf wanted in Orlando was her invention, while the element of truth depended on her investigation of Vita and the Sackville's history. Consequently, Woolf and Vita corresponded frequently while she planned Orlando, and they visited regularly during

³ Virginia Woolf, Letter to Vita Sackville-West, 13 Oct. 1927, A Change of Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977), III, 430.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, The Diary of Virginia Woolf, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), III, 161-62.

which times Woolf "interviewed" Vita. Caught up in the momentum of her ideas, Woolf wrote:

I make you up in bed at night, as I walk the streets, everywhere, I want to see you in the lamplight, in your emeralds. In fact, I have never more wanted to see you than I do now-- just to sit and look at you, and get you to talk, and then rapidly, and secretly, correct certain doubtful points.⁵

Reshaped into a fantasy, the information derived from her investigations was fictionalized and bound by neither time nor space. The novel begins in the sixteenth century and ends on October 11, 1928, which was also its date of publication. Within these four centuries, Orlando, who is sixteen years old in Chapter One accepts political ranks, attempts to write poetry, falls in love, lives with gypsies, experiences a sex change at age 30, marries, gives birth to a son, and comes to terms with his/her identity at age 36. Further, through the persona of Orlando's biographer, Woolf directly addresses her reader within her fantasy novel.

Underneath the fantasy, though, lies the history of the Sackvilles. Woolf had read Knole and the Sackvilles (1922), and from this source she undoubtedly got many of

⁵ To Vita, 13 Oct. 1927, Letters, III, 430.

her detailed facts.⁶ In addition, Woolf had visited Knole several times and had met Lord and Lady Sackville. Her most recent visit had been in March, 1927, and she recorded her strong impressions in her diary:

yet one or two things remain: Vita stalking in her Turkish dress, attended by small boys, down the gallery, wafting them on like some tall sailing ship--a sort of covey of noble English life: dogs walloping, children crowding, all very free and stately: and [a] cart bringing wood in to be sawn by the great circular saw. . . . They had brought wood in from the Park to replenish the great fires like this for centuries: and her ancestresses had walked so on the snow with their great dogs bounding by them. All the centuries seemed lit up, the past expressive, articulate; not dumb and forgotten; but a crowd of people stood behind, not dead at all; not remarkable; fair faced, long limbed; affable; and so we reach the days of Elizabeth quite easily.⁷

Thus, it is evident that Woolf saw the potential of writing about Knole long before she actually began her novel.

Those aspects of Orlando which derived from Sackville family facts were first decoded by Frank Baldanza. He has revealed, for example, that Knole was given to Sir Thomas Sackville by Queen Elizabeth in 1566, just as Orlando's

⁶ Frank Baldanza, "Notes, Documents, and Critical Comment: Orlando and the Sackvilles," PMLA, 70 (1955), 275.

⁷ Diary, III, 125.

unnamed estate was a gift from Queen Elizabeth.⁸ Baldanza overlooked no details in his comparative study. He disclosed that Knole's only architectural ornaments were leopards at the corners of its gables explaining the shadows of heraldic leopards in which Orlando is often presented. The King's bedroom is furnished completely in silver, which was Orlando's choice of furnishing for his royal bed chamber. The list of household items on page 109 of Orlando is a modified version of an inventory of a shipment of "household stuff" to Knole in July 1624.⁹ In addition, Orlando had teams from Sussex draw "great trees, to be sawn across and laid along the gallery for flooring" (p. 110), just as part of the floor at Knole was made of solid tree trunks split in half and laid with the straight half upwards (p. 276).

Woolf, however, did not adhere strictly to the facts. She may have exaggerated some of her details purposely in order to disguise her plan. For example, Knole covered four acres compared to Orlando's estate which was made up

⁸ Baldanza, p. 276. Prior to Queen Elizabeth, Knole belonged to Bouchier, Archbishop of Canterbury, and Edward VI and Henry VIII.

⁹ Virginia Woolf, Orlando: A Biography (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1928), p. 109. All further references to this work appear in the text.

of five and then nine acres of stone (pp. 21, 74, 107). Woolf adapted the legend that Knole had 365 rooms (one for each day of the year), 52 staircases (one for each week of the year), and 7 courtyards (one for each day of the week); instead, Orlando's estate had 365 bedrooms and 52 staircases.¹⁰

In addition to documenting the facts of Knole, as Charles G. Hoffman points out, Woolf sought to recreate "the temperament of the Sackvilles, who not only played a part in English history and literature, but who also in their various personages and the history of Knole House mirrored the spirit of the age in which they lived." He also noted that Woolf had written a marginal note in her manuscript that she wanted to reveal "'the different aspects of the character in different centuries. The theory being that character goes on underground before we are born; and leaves something afterwards also.'"¹¹ This sidenote explains the personality changes that Orlando experienced as he passed through each century, and those changes correspond to individual Sackvilles who lived during those times. Hoffman has interpreted those

¹⁰ Charles G. Hoffman, "Fact and Fantasy in Orlando: Virginia Woolf's Manuscript Revisions," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 10 (1968), 440.

¹¹ Hoffman, p. 436.

personality changes as they correspond historically to personages of the Sackville lineage.

Hoffman's investigation was followed by D. B. Green's character analysis of Orlando. Green added that Orlando's sex change was also founded in the history of the Sackville family. Green noted that "Orlando's ceasing to be a man is equivalent to the ending of the male line in the Sackville family, and his becoming a woman is equivalent to the beginning of the female representation of the family in the Sackville-Wests."¹² These studies reveal how intricately Woolf merged her theories with the facts of the Sackville's history and shaped them into the plot of Orlando.

While evidence shows how Orlando represents the entire Sackville lineage in many ways, he/she is more particularly modeled after Vita Sackville-West. For example, Orlando's literary achievements were derived from Vita's professional career. Orlando's poem, "The Oak Tree," which finally won him "The Burdett Coutts' Memorial Prize" of two hundred guineas is based on Vita Sackville-West's poem, "The Land," for which she received the Hawthornden Prize.¹³ A more

¹² David B. Green, "Orlando and the Sackvilles: Addendum," PMLA, 71 (1956), 268.

¹³ Baldanza, p. 278.

obvious clue to Orlando's model is the collection of photographs of Orlando for which Vita posed which were included in the final publication. The four illustrations within the novel which are Vita are as follows:

1) Orlando as Ambassador (male, p. 126), 2) Orlando on her return to England (female, p. 158), 3) Orlando about the year 1840 (female, p. 246), and 4) Orlando at the present time (female, p. 318). Woolf's letters contain details of the arrangements which were made to have these as well as other photographs taken.¹⁴

Just as Orlando is modeled after Vita, so are other characters based on actual people, especially people in Vita's life. Once Woolf's diaries were published, the secret of her characters' identities was disclosed. But until that time, several scholars hypothesized as well as they could who the characters represented. Interestingly, Baldanza speculated in 1955 that Sasha, the Russian princess with whom Orlando falls in love, could have been drawn from either the "mysterious Madame Muscovita, whose portrait is at Knole," or a "Countess Gerbetzow" who had some affiliation with the Sackvilles.¹⁵ However, Woolf clearly wrote in her diary that Sasha was based on Violet Trefusis,

¹⁴ For examples, see 30 Oct.; 4, 6, and 11 Nov. 1927, Letters, III, 434-35.

¹⁵ Baldanza, p. 277.

with whom Vita had had a passionate and dramatic love affair.¹⁶

Another character whose identity was unresolved until the publication of Woolf's diary was the Archduchess Harriet Griselda of Finister Aarhorn and Scand-op-Boom. Baldanza could only note that her name bore a "curious resemblance to Bergen-op-Zoom in Holland," the scene of a duel involving Edward Sackville.¹⁷ In the same diary entry, Woolf revealed that the Archduchess Harriet was based on Lord Lascelles, who had courted Vita prior to her engagement to Harold Nicholson.

Despite some of his erroneous speculations, Baldanza did uncover other characters' identities. The names of Orlando's household servants were actually taken from a roster of seventeenth-century servants. Orlando's gypsy wife, Rosina Pepita, was certainly based on Vita's gypsy grandmother also named Pepita. Her affairs with Lionel Sackville-West led to several illegitimate children, one of whom was Vita's mother who later married a younger cousin, Lionel Sackville-West. The consequences of her questionable right to possession of Knole led to her

¹⁶ Violet Trefusis, née Keppel (1894-1972) had an affair with Vita between 1918 and 21 (see Nicolson, Portrait of a Marriage, 1973).

¹⁷ Baldanza, p. 277.

arguing for her own illegitimacy in court. The court case in which Orlando becomes involved is Woolf's rendition of Pepita's legal suits. Both cases contain elements of farce, exemplified by Orlando's satisfaction when her "children [were] pronounced illegitimate. . . . So they don't inherit, which is all to the good" (pp. 254-55). Hoffman has added Harold Nicolson to the list of people in Vita's life who were included in Orlando; his marriage to Vita corresponds to Orlando's marriage to Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine.

Thus, it is evident that Woolf did model her characters on actual people whose identity has been revealed. In addition, Woolf seems to have projected some of her own experiences and thoughts into those characters. A comparative analysis of Woolf's personal writing with her novel suggests that in many ways Orlando represents Virginia Woolf as well as Vita Sackville-West. For example, the difficulties Orlando encounters in describing Princess Sasha reflect the difficulties Woolf experienced when she tried to describe Vita. Throughout her writing, Woolf referred to Vita as "candle lit," "stalking on legs like beech trees, pink glowing, grape clustered, pearl hung," secret, "mature, voluptuous, maternal." At the same time, Vita was clumsy, "not reflective or organized

in brain and insight," and there was "something loose-fitting" about her.

Experiencing the same kind of difficulties as Woolf, dazzled Orlando is "plunging and splashing among a thousand images" trying to describe Sasha. What was she like?

Snow, cream, marble, cherries, alabaster, golden wire? None of these. She was like a fox, an olive tree, like the waves of the sea when you look down upon them from a height; like an emerald; like the sun on a green hill which is yet clouded--like nothing he had seen or known in England. Ransack the language as he might, words failed him. He wanted another landscape, and another tongue. English was too frank, too candid, too honeyed a speech for Sasha. For in all she said, however open she seemed and voluptuous, there was something hidden; in all she did, however daring, there was something concealed. (p. 47)

Likewise, Virginia Woolf needed a new language, a new landscape in order to identify Vita. During the first few years of their relationship, her fantasies provided that new landscape; and the language she chose was romantic and distant. Later, when Woolf chose to write about Vita publicly, she still needed a particular landscape and language. Her fantasy novel, although called a biography, was the appropriate genre for her needs.

Further Orlando notes that the mysteries of Sasha were hidden like the green flame in the emerald or "the sun prisoned in a hill. The clearness was only outward; within

was a wandering flame. It came; it went" (p. 47). Orlando vowed that he would "chase the flame, dive for the gem, . . . the words coming on the pants of his breath with the passion of a poet whose poetry is half pressed out of him by pain" (p. 47). Likewise, in the midst of Woolf's effort to clarify the subtleties of Vita, Woolf found herself in the "thick of the greatest rapture known" to her. She had written herself into a headache and like a tired horse had to come to a halt.¹⁸ Moreover, Orlando felt "as if he had been hooked by a great fish through the nose and rushed through the waters unwillingly, yet with his own consent" (p. 53). Woolf wrote that Vita was "so much in full sail on the high tides, where I am coasting down backwaters."¹⁹

Although early scholars identified factual correspondences between Vita and Orlando, they were unable to note fully the other similarities between Vita and Orlando. Baldanza summarized the situation: "we shall probably never know how many purely personal impressions of Vita Sackville-West have found their way into Mrs. Woolf's novel."²⁰ At the time of his article, he

¹⁸ Diary, III, 161-62.

¹⁹ Diary, III, 52.

²⁰ Baldanza, p. 278.

was correct. However, the publication of Woolf's writing to and about Vita have made possible a renewed investigation of Orlando's identity as it relates to Vita Sackville-West personally, for during the intense period of their relationship, Woolf put on paper her hopes, dreams, disappointments, and impressions of Vita. In her letters and diaries, Woolf documented those tenuous aspects of Vita's personality that she could have perceived only through a kind of personal intuition. Woolf was sensitive to those aspects of Vita Sackville-West which lay beneath the surface. It was Woolf's awareness of something below the surface of Vita's personality that further intrigued her to write about Vita. Thus one can conclude that Woolf intended to incorporate those intuitive observations of Vita into her novel. They were, as Baldanza stated, Woolf's "purely personal impressions" about which little was known until recently. Through a comparative analysis of Woolf's personal writing and Orlando one can recognize passages in the novel which must have been derived from Woolf's "purely personal impressions" as they were honestly recorded only in Woolf's diaries and letters.

Woolf's preoccupation with the sense of historical continuity and the ways that idea was incorporated into Orlando have already been mentioned, but her early diary entries reveal how Vita exemplified that idea. This sense

of "having always been" was perhaps enhanced by the depth and quality of Vita's aristocratic lineage. This idea may account for those early passages in Woolf's diary where she described Vita's "pendulous, rich society face, glowing out under a black hat at the end of the smokey dismal room, [which] looked very ancestral and like a picture under a glass in a gallery."²¹ At another time, Woolf described Vita's "damned lustrous face, like the portrait of an ancestress by a great painter on the wall of a gallery with a light blazing on it, [which hung] there so fruity, so rich."²² Similarly, Woolf wrote that Vita had descended from "the whole of English history, which she keeps, stretched in coffins, one after another, from 1300 to the present day, under her dining room floor."²³ This image was extended in the novel, when Orlando descended

into the crypt where his ancestors lay, coffin piled upon coffin, for ten generations together. . . . It was a ghastly sepulchre; dug deep beneath the foundations of the house as if the first Lord of the family, who had come from France with the Conqueror, had wishes to testify how all pomp is built upon corruption; how the skeleton lies beneath the flesh; how we that dance and sing above must lie below; how

²¹ Diary, III, 115.

²² To Vita, 5 Feb. 1927, Letters, III, 325-26.

²³ To Vita, 26 Dec. 1924, Letters, III, 150.

the crimson velvet turns to dust. . . .
(pp. 70-1)

Admittedly, such aristocratic trappings engaged Woolf's imagination, and it was Vita's aristocracy which attracted Woolf to Vita. Early in their relationship, she called Vita "a lovely, gifted aristocrat." Later, Woolf referred to her as "my aristocrat."²⁴ Particularly, Woolf liked the "complete arrogance and unreality of their minds."²⁵ The glamor of Vita's aristocracy was as romantic as Woolf let it be. Woolf wrote that this aristocrat's real claim to consideration was her legs. They were "exquisite--running like slender pillars up into her trunk, which is that of a breastless cuirassier (yet she has 2 children) but all about her is virginal, savage, patrician. . . ."²⁶ Later, Woolf wrote that Vita was "very striking; like a willow tree; so dashing on her long white legs with a crimson bow. . . ."²⁷ On one occasion, Vita had been bitten by midges and therefore needed to rub her legs with ointment. Woolf liked this: the legs, the bites.

²⁴ To Jacques Raverat, 24 Jan. 1925, Letters, III, 155.

²⁵ To Vanessa Bell, 22 May 1927, Letters, III, 380.

²⁶ To Jaques Raverat, 26 Dec. 1924, Letters, III, 150.

²⁷ To Vanessa Bell, 22 May 1927, Letters, III, 380.

Likewise, Orlando's most frequently mentioned physical attribute is his/her legs. He has a "pair of the finest legs that a young nobleman has ever stood upright upon" (pp. 23, 116). Orlando's legs become a humorous focal point in the novel. It is speculated that "it was his merits that won him his Dukedom, not his calves" (p. 126). When the female Orlando shows but an inch or two of calf, an observant sailor on the mast nearly falls off. Consequently, she keeps even her ankles covered from then on.

Vita's aristocratic lineage and all that is suggested by such a personal history was one feature of Vita's character that intrigued Woolf which she successfully incorporated into Orlando. Those "personal impressions" surrounding Vita's aristocracy become more complicated by Vita's sexual relationships, which were just as significant. Vita had had many affairs with women; the complexities of that aspect of Vita's lifestyle were compounded by her lifelong marriage to Harold Nicolson. Vita's ironic situation must have been part of that which challenged Woolf to write a novel about her.

Just as Vita's sexuality was central to her identity, so was Orlando's. Early in the planning stages of her novel, Woolf had intended to include a change from one sex to another and a suggestion of Sapphism, which were likely

inspired by Vita. Woolf freely probes the questions of Vita's sexual identity through satire, wit, and exaggeration. Yet, beneath the humor of her caricatures, lie serious comments on who Vita Sackville-West was.

Discrepancies between Woolf's final draft and her manuscript version indicate that she purposely centered Orlando's sex change in the novel for emphasis.²⁸ Once informed about Vita's lifestyle, one can see how Orlando is Vita. Bored with being a woman, Orlando dresses in men's clothing and galavants through the streets at night. Similarly, during Vita's affair with Violet Trefusis, Vita often dressed in men's clothing in public.²⁹ Orlando's switching male and female clothing throughout the novel leads to some humorous scenes. Yet, Woolf has only clothed her more serious comments. Aside from her jokes, Woolf probes the duality of Vita's identity in terms of Orlando psychologically:

The difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity, clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman's dress and of a woman's sex, . . . a dilemma. Different though the

²⁸ Hoffman, p. 437.

²⁹ Nicolson, Portrait, pp. 109-10.

sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above. (pp. 188-89)

While Woolf explored the question of sexual identity as it pertained directly to Vita, she also expressed her own theories on androgyny which were later published in A Room of One's Own. Woolf believed that men and women were made up of more than only male or female characteristics. Instead, Woolf saw a blending of the sexes within the makeup of each individual. Having been male up to age thirty and then becoming female, Orlando was Woolf's spokesman for androgyny as well as a representation of Vita. These two interpretations of Orlando are complementary rather than contradictory.

Being androgynous, Orlando would have been happily married only to someone who was likewise androgynous. From the beginning, Orlando and Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine are in perfect communion with each other. The harmony which characterizes their marriage represents Vita's secure marriage to Harold Nicolson, who was himself androgynous. James Hafley notes:

The mentally androgynous man and woman can understand each other with a perfection impossible to those barred behind the

limitations of their sex. When Orlando and Marmaduke meet, they understand each other immediately: "An awful suspicion rushed into both their minds simultaneously: 'You're a woman, Shel!' she cried. 'You're a man, Orlando!' he cried." The truth is that both are androgynous.³⁰

Further Orlando's marriage was characterized by long absences from Marmaduke due to his frequent ocean journeys. Harold's diplomatic duties similarly ordered him overseas, leaving Vita alone for long periods of time. Thus Orlando, like Vita, though married, finds herself in "an extremely happy position; she need neither fight her age, nor submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself" (p. 266).

Furthermore, the sexual transformation causes Orlando to sense a wholeness not experienced as a male: "No human being, since the world began, has ever looked more ravishing. His form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman's grace . . ." (p. 138). He exemplified androgyny in the same way that Vita Sackville-West did.

Although masculine and feminine traits come together in one person, the physical appearance remains unchanged. As the fictional "biographer" says of Orlando, she

³⁰ James Hafley, The Glass Roof: Virginia Woolf as Novelist (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), p. 104.

had become a woman--there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same. (p. 138)

Vita too was a woman; there was no denying it. However, while Orlando's identity was literally made up of male characteristics as well as female, Vita's personality was made up of male as well as female characteristics, and the photographs of Vita dressed as a male and then as females within the text illustrate her androgyny.

Woolf's final comment on the question of Orlando's sexual identity and perhaps upon Vita's notes an ambiguity of roles:

For it was this mixture in her of man and woman, one being uppermost and then the other, that often gave her conduct an unexpected turn. . . . Whether then, Orlando was most man or woman, it is difficult to say and cannot now be decided. (p. 190)

Vita Sackville-West's personal writings, which were not published until 1973, also remark upon this ambiguity:

I [Vita] have here a scrap of paper on which Violet [Trefusis], intuitive psychologist, has scribbled, 'The upper half of your face is so pure and grave--almost childlike. And the lower half is so domineering, sensual, almost brutal--it is the most absurd contrast, and extraordinarily symbolical of your Dr. Jekyll

and Mr. Hyde personality.' That is the whole crux of the matter, and I see now that my whole curse has been a duality with which I was too weak and too self-indulgent to struggle.³¹

To the best of Nigel Nicolson's knowledge, no one had ever read his mother's diary until her death in 1962.³² It is remarkable then to note how accurately Virginia Woolf portrayed the complexities of Vita Sackville-West's identity in Orlando. Even Woolf's language nearly matches Vita's own.

These aspects of Vita's personality which lay beneath her surface were the most difficult to verbalize, especially those which pertained to Vita's androgyny; yet, Woolf succeeded. However, the process was no easy one. Woolf tripped over Vita's many unexplainable characteristics. Yet, Woolf cleverly smoothed out any stumbling blocks which were part of her adventure in writing Orlando, through the persona of the truth-seeking biographer, perplexed by Orlando's inconsistencies and contradictions. In this manner of speaking directly to her audience, Woolf is able to bridge the often unexplainable gap in her fantasy novel.

³¹ Nicolson, Portrait, pp. 34-5.

³² Nicolson, Portrait, p. ix.

When the biographer admits his inability to explain aspects of Orlando's life, that is actually Woolf voicing her personal difficulties in probing the subtleties of Vita Sackville-West. The personal conflicts which triggered Woolf's writing further explain why Woolf, the "biographer," was so sensitive and made such personal observations. For example, the biographer observes that "Orlando was strangely compounded by many humours--of melancholy, of indolence, of passion, of love of solitude, to say nothing of all those contortions and subtleties of temper" (p. 73). The informed reader will realize that Vita was no less complex.

In a later passage, the biographer notes that Orlando/Vita Sackville-West has been stuffed with "clay and diamonds" and "rainbows and granite" (p. 77) at the same time.

Perhaps, untwisting Vita was more complicated than Woolf had anticipated. After the rapture of writing Orlando died down, Woolf's writing slowed down, and she realized that the novel would not be finished by February as she had intended.³³ Within the text, Woolf noted that nature "added to our confusion by providing not only a perfect rag-bag of odds and ends within us . . . but has contrived that the whole assortment shall be lightly

³³ Diary, III, 167.

stitched together by a single thread" (p. 78). Woolf figured that "memory" was the capricious seamstress. This metaphor is easily applied to Woolf's personal situation. Her memory had stitched together the odds and ends of their relationship, and through Orlando, she sorted through her confusion, the "rag-bag of odds and ends" which characterized their relationship.

Within the text, the biographer justifies his need to sometimes speculate on the details of Orlando's life. Fire destroyed parts of the records of Orlando's life, and those gaps left some of the "most important points obscure" (p. 126). Consequently, the biographer has the opportunity to speculate or fantasize what Orlando would have been doing and how he/she would have looked. For example, the biographer imagines that Orlando would have wrapped in a long Turkish cloak, with a cheroot gazing down at the city beneath him. He would have seen the men and animals, heard their prayers, and smelled the incense (p. 120). In this manner, the biographer's speculations relate to Woolf's earlier fantasies in which she imagined Vita journeying in the Persian deserts amidst camels and pyramids. Thus the act of fantasizing which helped Woolf bridge the distance between them during their separations later enriched Woolf's creative process and became a part of her novel.

An additional comment is to be made on Woolf's earlier fantasies as they relate to her later novel. It seems that some of Woolf's early personal fantasies were literally incorporated in Orlando. In Woolf's imagination Vita was "candle lit, an illumination," and those same illusions surround Orlando when he is described as being "a million-lighted Christmas tree" (p. 54). In another diary entry, Woolf dreamed that if she were Vita, she would wander through Knoles with Vita's elk hounds,³⁴ and it seems more than coincidental that "Orlando walked through his house with his elk hounds following and felt content" (p. 111).

Since Woolf incorporated her "purely personal impressions" of Vita into Orlando, the novel gains even deeper meaning and becomes irreplaceable in understanding Woolf's relationship with Vita Sackville-West. Only then can one recognize the levels of meaning which are in Orlando and realize its significance. It seems as though Woolf had several ideas and themes that she wanted to weave into her fantasy novel, and analyzing Orlando in terms of Vita Sackville-West and her family history explains but some of the novel's meanings.

³⁴ Diary, III, 51.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The beginning of Woolf's manuscript of Orlando is dated October 8, 1927;¹ and by March, 1928, Woolf was eager to end the novel. She had difficulty with the last chapter, and the entire novel was beginning to drag out longer than she had intended. She referred to Orlando as "an old man of the Sea,"² and she insisted on finishing him. A few days later, Woolf finished writing her first draft of Orlando. She wrote that it still needed three months of close work before it could be printed since she had "scrambled and splashed," and the canvas showed through in a thousand places. Nonetheless, it was a "serene, accomplished feeling, to write, even provisionally, The End." Woolf acknowledged in her diary that she

¹ Charles G. Hoffman, "Fact and Fantasy in Orlando: Virginia Woolf's Manuscript Revisions," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 10 (1968), 436.

² Virginia Woolf, Letter to Vita Sackville-West, 12 March 1928, A Change of Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977), III, 471.

had written Orlando more quickly than any of her other novels, and it was all a joke.³

Woolf eagerly shared the news of the novel's provisional end with Vita Sackville-West. Excited and yet nervous at having ended her process of unraveling Vita, Woolf asked:

Did you feel a sort of tug, as if your neck was broken on Saturday last [17 March] at 5 minutes to one? That was when he died--or rather stopped talking, with three little dots. . . . Now every word will have to be re-written, and I see no chance of finishing it by September--It is all over the place, incoherent, intolerable, impossible--And I am sick of it.⁴

Having announced the end of her major project, Woolf's immediate concerns were personal. In the same letter, she asked: "The question now is, will my feelings for you be changed? I've lived in you all these months--coming out, what are you really like? Do you exist? Have I made you up?"

That Woolf would question her feelings about Vita as soon as she had finished writing Orlando demonstrates how inextricable Vita was from Orlando. Finishing Orlando led Woolf to a sort of self-analysis, particularly in regards

³ Virginia Woolf, The Diary of Virginia Woolf, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), III, 176-77.

⁴ To Vita, 20 March 1928, Letters, III, 474.

to her feelings towards Vita. At the same time, her diary entries reveal her preoccupation with being "middleaged."⁵ But her letters to Vita still echo her enchantment; she remembered Vita "all fire and legs and beautiful plunging ways like a young horse." Woolf wrote that she wanted to travel with Vita one day, "unless you are, as I think all my friends are, a myth, something I dreamt."⁶ That trip was yet to come.

By April Woolf began her revisions of Orlando, which included collecting all of the final photographs for the published edition. In one instance Woolf asked Vita to pose as "Orlando in country clothes in a wood."⁷ While smoothing out the rough edges of her novel, Woolf seems to have held on to her jealousies which had begun before she started writing Orlando; and, therefore, her relationship with Vita needed some smoothing out. Woolf called Vita a "promiscuous brute" and complained of wearing out her heart for a "woman who goes with any girl from an Inn!"⁸ Woolf wrote of including Vita's promiscuity in the Index to Orlando: "For Promiscuous you are, and thats [sic] all

⁵ For examples, see Diary, III, 176-178, 180-181.

⁶ To Vita, 31 March 1928, Letters, III, 479.

⁷ To Vita, 27 April 1928, Letters, III, 488.

⁸ To Vita, 17 April 1928, Letters, III, 484-85.

there is to be said of you. Look in the Index to Orlando--after Pippin and see what comes next--Promiscuity passim." ⁹

She had finished revising Orlando by May, 1928, and Leonard was the first to read it before it went to the printer. With the manuscript in Leonard's care, Woolf wrote that the novel had "passed half out of my [her] possession."¹⁰ Woolf's feelings after giving her novel to Leonard echo Orlando's feelings after she gives her blood-stained manuscript to Nick Greene for publication: "Now that the poem was gone,--and she felt a bare place in her breast where she had been used to carry it--she had nothing to do but reflect upon whatever she liked" (p. 281). Both writers shared a sense of vacancy in having to let go of something that they had labored over for so long. Woolf reflected that Orlando was begun as a joke but had unintentionally become serious; this change in nature may account for its lack of unity.¹¹

As Woolf reflected on the condition of her novel, she also reflected on her friendship with Vita Sackville-West. After a happy visit with Vita to Long Barn, Woolf's diary entry reveals her reflections:

⁹ To Vita, 25 July 1928, Letters, III, 514.

¹⁰ Diary, III, 184.

¹¹ Diary, III, 185.

I'm interested by the gnawing down of strata in friendship; how one passes unconsciously to different terms; takes things easier; . . . scarcely feel it an exciting atmosphere, which, too, has its drawback from the 'fizzing' point of view: yet is saner, perhaps deeper.¹²

Her personal writings at this time echo the same sense of things coming to an end as they had in early 1927 before she began writing Orlando. In 1927 she wrote of the "dying hue" which clouded their relationship. And in August, 1928, Woolf wrote to Vita that "11th Oct. sees the end of our romance."¹³ That was the publication date of Orlando. Woolf and Vita did travel to France together for a week alone just prior to the public release of Orlando. Woolf was both melancholic and excited about venturing with Vita and leaving Leonard behind. Their trip was a success, and according to Nigel Nicolson, they did not discuss Orlando during that time. Following their return, Woolf wrote that she had seen a little ball which kept bubbling up and down on the spray of a fountain, and Vita was like that fountain for Woolf, who was like the ball. She continued: "It is a sensation I get only from you. It is physically stimulating, restful at the same time I feel

¹² Diary, III, 187.

¹³ To Vita, 7 Aug. 1928, Letters, III, 515.

suppled and anointed now."¹⁴ She later wrote to Harold Nicolson that Vita had a "charming and indeed inimitable mixture. . . . I've written quite enough about her and got it all wrong too. (Yes--I'm very nervous about Thursday and Orlando . . .)."¹⁵

Writing Orlando had been a success in more ways than one. Woolf began writing her novel in the same excited emotional state which she began to grow fond of Vita. The terms of their relationship had indeed changed; the intensity had ended, and that situation was now easier for Woolf to accept.

In addition, the fantasies, which characterized the early phase of their relationship and provided a means through which Woolf could personally explore Vita Sackville-West, later suggested an appropriate genre through which Woolf could publicly write about her. Ironically, however, it was not until their relationship was threatened that Woolf actually began writing her fantasy novel. Writing Orlando then became Woolf's means of putting their relationship into perspective. It allowed Woolf the time she needed in order to accept the dissolution of her relation with Vita. It was a means of getting

¹⁴ To Vita, 7 Oct. 1928, Letters, III, 540.

¹⁵ To Harold Nicolson, 7 Oct. 1928, Letters, III, 541.

out of her system something which had been disturbing her internally for years.

Hurt, disappointed, yet still slightly hopeful, Virginia Woolf set out to untangle the complexities of their relationship. Her private discoveries were secretly recorded in her novel, and the mysteries of Vita Sackville-West were reshaped into "Orlando, a young nobleman." As a result, Woolf's novel bridged their differences and confirmed their respect and love for each other.

The changes going on in Woolf herself are reflected in chapter six of the novel, which in many ways mirrors Woolf's mental state, making Orlando not exclusively a portrait of Vita. Woolf noted that her novel had become more serious than she had intended, and those serious passages seem to be centered in the final chapter. Orlando has been searching for the "truth," for "life's meaning," and she discovers the "meaning of life" in a "toy boat on the Serpentine." Orlando discovers that the meaning of life is not articles, covenants, nor factory acts; but "it's something useless, sudden, violent; something that costs a life; red, blue, purple; a spirit; a splash; . . . something rash, ridiculous . . ." (p. 287). In the same way that an ordinary toy boat sailing on the Serpentine river represents for Orlando "another thing, which is

bigger and much more important" (p. 286), Woolf's novel, which was "sudden, rash, a spirit, a splash and in some ways thought to be "useless and ridiculous," represented another thing bigger and much more important than the novel itself. For Orlando represented Woolf's working through her personal dilemma instigated by Vita Sackville-West.

As a result, Woolf gradually began to accept the dissolution of their relationship. Discarding her old fantasies, she began to accept their present situation realistically. Similarly, one can note how Woolf reckoned with that process of accepting the present, as it is dramatized in the novel. Similarities between Orlando's and Woolf's final experiences merit discussion. After having lived through the past four centuries, Orlando turned pale when the present moment seemed to have violently struck her on the head. Her biographer notes that the only reason she survived the terror of that revelation at all is "because the past shelters [her] on one side[,] the future on another" (p. 298). One can apply this explanation to Woolf's acceptance of her present situation with Vita Sackville-West. Likewise, Woolf was protected and buffeted by her memories of their past on one side and the consecration of the future of their relationship through Orlando on the other.

One can also compare Orlando's final experience in which she identifies her true self with Woolf's same experience. Woolf wrote that one must

somehow contrive to synchronize the sixty or seventy different times which beat simultaneously in every normal human system so that when eleven strikes, all the rest chime in unison, and the present is neither a violent disruption nor completely forgotten in the past. (p. 305)

After writing Orlando, Woolf synchronized the different times beating simultaneously in her system, and the present status of her relationship with Vita was neither a violent disruption nor completely forgotten in her past. Further probing the philosophy of identity, Woolf asks that in addition to the possible

76 different times all ticking in the mind at once, how many different people are there not--Heaven help us--all having lodgement at one time or another in the human spirit? Some say two thousand and fifty-two . . . which have built up, one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter's hand, hav[ing] attachments elsewhere. . . . [F]or everybody can multiply from his own experience the different terms in which his different selves have made with him. . . . (pp. 308-09)

Could Woolf have identified within her personality several selves, one of which had grown as a response to her experiences with Vita Sackville-West? And could that "self" be one of the 2052 selves having lodgement in Woolf's spirit? If so, Woolf's next effort was to synchronize those selves within her personality.

Thus, when Orlando calls for her "Captain self, the Key self, which amalgamates and controls" (p. 310) her other selves, that is actually Woolf voicing her struggle to gain control of her identity, to put all of her dis-severed selves into proper perspective. Once her "Captain self" surfaced, Orlando had become "a single self, a real self. And she fell silent" (p. 314). In this same respect, Woolf waited for her "Captain self" to surface after she had finished writing Orlando, and she too was once again "a single self, a real self."

Writing Orlando was a kind of therapy for Woolf. She realized that what had been hers and Vita's had passed. Woolf addressed the problem of accepting personal loss in the text. In the end, Orlando realized that her estate was no longer hers entirely: "It belonged to time now; to history; was past the touch and control of the living" (p. 318). The meaning behind Orlando's loss is two-fold as it relates to Woolf and Vita's separate losses. Once Leonard had begun reading Woolf's manuscript, she realized that it was no longer completely hers; it would belong to the public, to history. Likewise, Woolf had lost in part some of what which represented her bond with Vita Sackville-West. Comparable to Orlando's and Woolf's losses is Vita's. Because she was the only child and female, she could not inherit Knole, which Woolf recognized as being

"the passion of her life."¹⁶ The loss of Knole tormented Vita until her death. Nicolson notes how Woolf softened the harshness of Vita's separation from Knole:

The novel identified her with Knole forever. Virginia by her genius had provided Vita with a unique consolation for having been born a girl, for her exclusion from her inheritance, for her father's death earlier that year. The book, for her, was not simply a brilliant masque or pageant. It was a memorial mass."¹⁷

By the end of the novel, Orlando has resolved her identity crises; she is thirty-six years old (which corresponds to Vita's age at the time Orlando appeared). That resolution is full of multiple meanings. Virginia Woolf has come to terms with two identities within herself. First, she has "untwined and twisted" together those "odd, incongruous strands" which made up Vita, and in doing so she sorted out some of her own incongruities and inconsistencies.

One can consequently understand why Woolf gave her original manuscript to Vita Sackville-West. Vita explained how she reacted to the novel and to Woolf's gesture to give her the manuscript. She had never read one word of Orlando

¹⁶ To Vanessa Bell, 29 Jan. 1928, Letters, III, 451.

¹⁷ Nigel Nicolson, Portrait of a Marriage (New York: Atheneum, 1973), p. 208.

until the day of publication; and on that date she received the printed book, which she read with "unparalleled avidity and curiosity," and "the manuscript of Orlando which is today amongst my [her] most treasured possessions."¹⁸ Vita quickly emphasized that "Virginia had gone through the trouble of getting them both specially bound for me in niger leather with the additional details of my initials on the spine. . . ." Vita explained that despite Woolf's "frail health, the wild genius driving at her all the time and people pursuing her and wanting to meet her and lionise her," she could still "find time to go round to a book-binder and arrange with him for these special bindings" for her. Vita concluded that she had seldom "been more deeply touched."

Nicolson concludes that Vita loved Orlando, which was Woolf's "most elaborate love-letter, rendering Vita . . . immortal."¹⁹

¹⁸ Vita Sackville-West, "Virginia Woolf and Orlando," The Listener, 27 January 1955, p. 158.

¹⁹ Nicolson, Letters, III, xxii.

APPENDIX

From V. Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf

On first reading "Orlando"

Oct. 11th 1928

Long Barn, Weald,
Sevenoaks, [Kent]

My darling,

I am in no fit state to write to you--and as for cold and considered opinions, (as you said on the telephone) such things do not exist in such a connection. At least, not yet. Perhaps they will come later. For the moment, I can't say anything except that I am completely dazzled, bewitched, enchanted, under a spell. It seems to me the loveliest, wisest, richest book that I have ever read,--excelling even your own Lighthouse. Virginia, I really don't know what to say,--am I right? am I wrong? am I prejudiced? am I in my senses or not? It seems to me that you have really shut up that "hard and rare thing" in a book; that you have a complete vision; and yet when you came down to the sober labour of working it out, have never lost sight of it nor faltered in the execution. Ideas come to me so fast that they trip over each other and I lose them before I can put salt on their tails; There is so much I want to say, yet I can only go back to my first cry that I am bewitched. You will get letters, very reasoned and illuminating, from many people; I cannot write you that sort of letter now, I can only tell you that I am really shaken, which may seem to you useless and silly, but which is really a greater tribute than pages of calm appreciation,--and then after all it does touch me so personally, and I don't know what to say about that either, only that I feel like one of those wax figures in a shop window, on which you have hung a robe stitched with jewels. It is like being alone in a dark room with a treasure chest full of rubies and nuggets and brocades. Darling, I don't know and scarcely even like to write it, so overwhelmed am I, how you could have hung so splendid a garment on so poor a peg. Really this isn't false humility; really it isn't. I can't write about that part of it, though, much less ever tell you verbally.

By now you must be thinking me too confused and illiterate for anything, so I'll just slip in that the book

(in texture) seems to me to have in it all the best of Sir Thomas Browne and Swift,--the richness of the one, and the directness of the other.

There are a dozen details I should like to go into,--Queen Elizabeth's visit, Greene's visit, phrases scattered about, (particularly one on p. 160 beginning "High battlements of thought, etc" which is just what you did for me), Johnson on the blind, and so on and so on,--but it is too late today; I have been reading steadily all day, and it is now 5 o'clock, and I must catch the post, but I will try and write more sensibly tomorrow. It is your fault, for having moved me so and dazzled me completely, so that all my faculties have dropped from me and left me stark.

One awful thought struck me this morning: you didn't, did you, think for a second that it was out of indifference I didn't come to London yesterday? You couldn't have thought that? I had got it so firmly fixed in my head that Oct. 11th was the day I was to have it, that I was resigned (after all these months) to wait till then. But when I saw it in its lovely binding, with my initials, the idea rushed into my head and utterly appalled me. But on second thoughts I reflected that you could not possibly so have misunderstood.

Yes, I will write again tomorrow, in a calmer frame of mind I hope--now I am really writing against time--and, as I tell you, shaken quite out of my wits.

Also, you have invented a new form of Narcissism,--I confess,--I am in love with Orlando--this is a complication I had not foreseen.

Virginia, my dearest, I can only thank you for pouring out such riches.

V.

You made me cry with your passages about Knole, you wretch.

Berg

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