

Virginia Woolf's living book

The writer's diaries reveal a mind striving to capture the elusive moment

By Anna Leszkiewicz

In the summer of 1926, Virginia Woolf sat at her desk at Monk's House, Sussex, and opened her diary, and wrote: "I shall here write the first pages of the greatest book in the world." She was 44 years old, the famed author of *Mrs Dalloway*, out of London for the season. The document that follows breaks the chronological form of her diaries so far – dates are swapped for headings such as "Art & Thought" and "My Own Brain". The greatest book in the world, Woolf writes, would be "made entirely solely & with integrity of one's thoughts. Suppose one could catch them before they became 'works of art.'? Catch them hot & sudden as they rise in the mind – walking up Asheham hill for instance." No sooner has she begun than she sees the impossibility of her task. "Of course one cannot; for the process of language is slow & deluding. One must stop to find a word; then, there is the form of the sentence, soliciting one to fill it."

These are the contradictions and ambivalences that animate *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* – a sprawling, vivid, living document that contains more than half a million words written over 27 years. Woolf wrote in the mornings or in the hour before tea; she wrote at her desk, laid up ill in bed, wedged into a window; she wrote when surging with self-confidence ("a Rolls Royce engine once more purring its 70 miles an hour in my brain") and when trembling with anxiety ("so I'm found out & that odious rice pudding of a book is what I thought it – a dank failure"). She wrote in snatches of time, before breaking off, interrupted by life, visitors – dinner! She announces again and again that these are mere scribbles, not real writing, you'd have to turn to the novels for that. But reading her diary feels as if you have been ushered up the back stairs to a private encounter with a great work of art, only to find that the artist – paint-splattered, blinking – is there too, finishing the picture as you watch. And is that you, there, now appearing in the corner of the canvases?

First published in abridged form by Leonard Woolf as *A Writer's Diary* in 1953, then in multiple volumes in the late Seventies, the five books of the diary edited by Anne Olivier Bell have now been reissued by Granta, with quirks of punctuation and spelling preserved, "unexpurgated" if not complete. (Her pre-marriage journals, going back to the age of 15, are not included, making this the diary of Virginia Woolf, not Virginia Stephen.) Woolf insists she never intended them to be published; she liked to imagine burning them, until they were just "so many black films with red eyes". She called the diary "private" – particularly when she was being vulnerable, or mean. (Of her friend TS Eliot, she writes: "He is tight and shiny as a wood louse," then hastily adds, "I am not writing for publication.")

And yet the reader's shadow falls across her page, invited or not. Sometimes it is herself – "old Virginia", sitting down to write her memoirs aged 60. (An age she never quite lived to – she would die, by suicide, at 59.) Sometimes, it is a person distinct from herself. "I like this better than letter writing. Perhaps one should write novels for the 2 of us only," she confesses in an early entry. Much later, she asks: "Do I ever write, even here, for my own eye? If not, for whose eye?" Whether



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for her benefit or ours, Woolf often admonishes herself for lapses, sloppiness – for failing to live up to her expectations of what a diary should be.

What is a diary? Woolf is characteristically full of images. It is a wastepaper basket, into which she throws scraps. It is a mop, soaking up experiences spilt upon the floor. It is a record of her mental health, in which she “must note the symptoms of the disease, so as to know it next time”. It is a rambling plant with far-reaching tendrils. It is a tissue, into which the mucus of negative thoughts are blown and discarded (“Sneezing & blowing is better than incubating germs”). It is a bath; an exorcism; a bunch of wild, randomly plucked flowers; a downy pillow on which to weep.

To write a diary, she says, is to practise, stretch, sketch. Perhaps Woolf’s reliance on metaphor tells us something about the diary’s transformational task – to take our days, in all their abstract ephemerality, and turn them into a physical object. “Here in a bound volume, the year has a chance of life,” Woolf writes. “It can be stood on a shelf.”

If one question obsessed Woolf, it was that of form. Reading the diaries shows us this is where all her novels begin. *Mrs Dalloway* came from what she called “my tunnelling process”; *Orlando* as “an escapade; the spirit to be satiric, the structure to be wild”; *To the Lighthouse* as a novel in three parts containing “all characters boiled down; & childhood; & then this impersonal thing” and “the consequent break of unity in my design”; *The Waves* as “the idea of some continuous stream, not solely of human thought, but of the ship, the night, &c, all flowing together”.

“Form, then,” she reflected, “is the sense that one thing follows another rightly.” And though she insisted that, spontaneous and unrevised, “diary writing does not count as writing”, she came to see that a diary, like any other text, would necessarily acquire its own shape. “All writing, even this unpremeditated scribbling, has its form, which one learns.” In April of 1919, she set out her hopes for it:

there looms ahead of me the shadow of some kind of form which a diary might attain to. I might in the course of time learn what it is that one can make of this loose, drifting material of life; finding another use for it than the use I put it to, so much more consciously & scrupulously, in fiction. What sort of diary should I like mine to be? Something loose knit, & yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace any thing, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into my mind. I should like it to resemble some deep old desk, or capacious hold-all, in which one flings a mass of odds & ends without looking them through. I should like to come back, after a year or two, & find that the collection had sorted itself & refined itself & coalesced, as such deposits so mysteriously do, into a mould, transparent enough to reflect the light of our life, & yet steady, tranquil composed with the aloofness of a work of art.

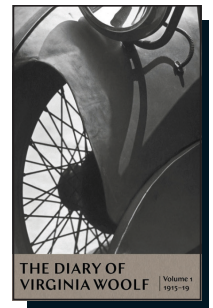
Loose, elastic, embracing – over the decades, her diary evolves. The first volume begins in 1915, three years

after her marriage to Leonard, as a diligent daily record of life in wartime London. But it comes to an abrupt stop after six weeks, when Woolf suffered a major breakdown. When she does write again, two years later, the diary has shape-shifted. Written from their country home in Asheham, Sussex, it is now a rural record of weather and landscape. The entries are shorter, the sentences clipped. “Walked up mushrooming. L.’s leg still bad. Saw a large green caterpillar.” It has the effect of someone emerging, wind-battered, after a storm, or a child only allowed to stray so far from the house.

In October 1917, Woolf rereads her 1915 diary, and starts up again. In London, there is talk and incident to record. The “diary habit has come to life” in Bloomsbury circles – books “lie, like vast consciences, in our most secret drawers”. Woolf’s entries become more novelistic, as when she remembers a fleeting encounter on a bus with a woman and a bag of fish. She hears that Lady Ottoline Morrell keeps a diary of “her ‘inner life’; which made me reflect that I haven’t an inner life”. A winking aside – but Woolf begins to tentatively delve into her psyche, working out on the page why a comment from her Greek tutor depresses her, or remarking on her sense of aloof separation from the jubilant crowds on Peace Day, 19 July 1919.

Into the 1920s, Woolf grows busier, more famous, and more intensely focused on fiction. As she races through *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* and *The Waves*, as well as *A Room of One’s Own* and countless works of criticism, the diary becomes shaggier and less formal, her pace more irregular. There are only two entries between late April and mid-June 1922, until Woolf pops up to say, “I was telling lies to Dorothy Bussy the other day about this very book – how I lived in writing – & wrote & wrote in the streets – & coming home floated it off here.” She learns that her friend EM Forster records entire conversations in his diary, and, for a brief period in 1923, resolves to “record conversations verbatim”. She is often interrupted; entries stop mid-sentence. And the question of form remains. “How it would interest me if this diary were ever to become a real diary: something in which I could see changes, trace moods developing”.

As she grows more interested in her own moods and “intolerable fits of the fidgets”, the diary shifts again, into a portrait of the manic inspiration and disabling insecurity of a writer’s mind. She turns to the “kindly blank faced old confidante” of the page for comfort: “Well you see, I’m a failure as a writer.” A full entry is devoted to the “black despair” of being mocked for her new hat. (The next day, thank God, she can laugh it off.) The 1926 Monk’s House diary contains a present-tense account of something like a depressive episode: “Oh its beginning its coming – the horror – physically like a painful wave swelling about the heart – tossing me up. I’m unhappy unhappy!... Failure failure. (The wave rises).” And yet Woolf finds despair “full of interest... One goes down into the well & nothing protects one from the assault of truth. Down there I can’t write or read; I exist however. I am. Then I ask myself what I am?” ▶



The Diary of Virginia Woolf, volumes 1-5
Virginia Woolf
Granta, £30 per volume

She lights upon “scenes which would have gone on, have always gone on, will go on, unrecorded, save for this chance glimpse”

◀ She experiences this realisation as an epiphany: “how it is not oneself but something in the universe that one’s left with”, an image of a “fin passing far out”. The diary has become a masterful chronicle of inner life. Leonard Woolf called it “an unusual psychological picture of artistic production from within”; WH Auden wrote, “I have never read any book that conveyed more truthfully what a writer’s life is like.”

In the 1930s, as she struggles through *The Years*, her biography of Roger Fry, *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts*, Woolf’s creative life becomes more laboured. The atmosphere in the diaries grows ominous, the language bolder and more fragmentary. She is “acutely depressed & already feeling rising the hard & horny back of my old friend Fight fight”. She describes galloping horses in her heart, sees herself as a cat walking on eggs. An undated entry from late 1932 begins, “Yes it was a long day & I had two days of jump jump afterwards.” Two decades in, the diary is still changing shape. She resolves to become more political. “Forced by a sense of what is expected by the public”, she describes the death of George V and the abdication of Edward VIII, and copies out headlines from the newspaper.

When the Second World War arrives, and the threat of invasion looms, Woolf imagines being killed by a bomb. She mentions suicide more frequently, and notes her own depression, but now declines to investigate it. “The writing ‘I’ has vanished,” she observes in June 1940. “No audience. No echo. That’s part of one’s death.” In November, she notes that “Many deep thoughts have visited me. And fled. The pen puts salt on their tails; they see the shadow & fly.” Then: “All desire to write diary here has flagged.” Her penultimate entry, written a few weeks before her death in March 1941, reads: “No: I intend no introspection.”

For Woolf, writing was life, not-writing a kind of death. To neglect her diary was to let life go to waste, “like a tap left running”. She felt an “instinct” to record the stuff of her life. “I wonder why I do it,” she writes in one early entry, before quoting Marvell: “Time’s winged chariot hurrying near.” Before time ran out, she wanted to capture the present and its amorphous mass of sensation; her fixation with form was the attempt to build a net robust enough to catch it all.

She wrote that she was “hypnotised, as a child by a silver globe, by life... I should like to take the globe in my hands & feel it quietly, round, smooth, heavy. & so hold it, day after day.” She saw everything, noticed everything, even when her noticing was petty or cruel. To read these diaries is to feel Woolf’s stern hand on your shoulder, giving you a little shake, telling you to take note. Here was a woman who spent her days “seeing life, as I walk about the streets, an immense opaque block of material to be conveyed by me into its equivalent block of language”.

In the diaries, as in the novels, we feel the thrill of seeing her grasp the moment. Here it is, as she sits on the dry earth under an olive tree at Delphi, goat bells ringing in the distance. Here it is, in the cold night of January 1936, as cars line the Mall, placards declare

“The King is Dying”, and photographers’ lights flash. And here it is, amid the solar eclipse of 1927:

The moments were passing. We thought we were cheated; we looked at the sheep; they showed no fear; the setters were racing round; everyone was standing in long lines, rather dignified, looking out. I thought how we were like very old people, in the birth of the world – druids on Stonehenge... The 24 seconds were passing. Then one looked back again at the blue: & rapidly, very very quickly, all the colours faded; it became darker & darker as at the beginning of a violent storm; the light sank & sank: we kept saying this is the shadow; & we thought now it is over – this is the shadow when suddenly the light went out. We had fallen. It was extinct. There was no colour. The earth was dead.

In the Sussex countryside on a blazing hot day in August, Woolf heard a hymn rising over the flats: the daughters of farmworkers were singing. The sound, she realised, “went on precisely so in Cromwell’s time”. Sometimes she saw the present and the past layered on top of each other, at one. She reflects on the feeling of “lighting accidentally, like a voyager who touches another planet with the tip of his toe, upon scenes which would have gone on, have always gone on, will go on, unrecorded, save for this chance glimpse”. It’s the effect, too, of her best entries.

We are often witness to a second moment as well: the event’s transformation into language. See how she watches rooks whirling above her in the air, then attempts to find the words to represent it. “Even now, I have to watch the rooks beating up against the wind, which is high. & still I say to myself instinctively ‘What’s the phrase for that?’ & try to make more & more vivid the roughness of the air current & the tremor of the rooks wing deep-breasting it slicing – as if the air were full of ridges & ripples & roughnesses; they rise & sink, up & down, as if the exercise pleased them rubbed & braced them like swimmers in rough water. But what a little I can get down with my pen of what is so vivid to my eyes.” This second moment was as vital to Woolf as the first, though she longed to close the gap between them. “If one does not lie back & sum up & say to the moment, this very moment, stay you are so fair, what will be one’s gain, dying?”

On Sunday 22 January 1922, a few days before her 40th birthday, Woolf sat in Hogarth House in Richmond and looked out of her window.

The Pope is dying today; & the Irishmen have come to terms. The church bells ring, & though it is 10 minutes to eleven I can’t see the face of the clock, nor even the trees in the garden. The birds wake us with their jangling about 7 o’clock; which I take to be a sign of spring, but then I am always optimistic. A thick mist, steam coloured, obscures even twigs, let alone Towers Place. Why do I trouble to be so particular with facts? I think it is my sense of the flight of time: so soon Towers Place will be no more; & twigs, & I that write. I feel time racing like a film at the Cinema. I try to stop it. I prod it with my pen. I try to pin it down. ●

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