

Virginia Woolf: The Reluctant Poet

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Abstract

At the end of 2024 a researcher from Liverpool University in the UK found two unknown poems by Virginia Woolf in a pile of letters. The letters were hastily written in pencil with crossings out. Having no children herself, they were dedicated to Woolf's niece and nephew and intended to amuse and gently satirise them. They were never intended for publication, just as an amusing moment at a family party around 1932 and have been described as "doggerel". Despite her extremely poetic novels, Woolf had always been rather antagonistic towards poetry and believed the novel to be the superior form.

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1 Virginia Woolf

Adeline Virginia Stephen was born on January 25, 1882. Like many middle-class girls of the age, she was educated at home by her affluent parents while her brothers were sent to school, a gender disparity she resented, and which features as a theme in much of her writing.

Virginia's first novel was *The Voyage Out* in 1915, followed by *Night and Day* in 1919. Her distinctive style was found in *Jacob's Room* of 1922, followed by works which would be considered her iconic masterpieces: *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Waves* (1931). There were also semi-political works such as *A Room of One's Own* (1929), *Three Guineas* (1938), and the pseudo-biographical novel *Orlando* (1928). Her legacy in these modernist novels was her unique use of narrative devices, notably the stream of consciousness style including interior monologue.

She wrote essays on literary and artistic theory, literary history, women's writing, feminism, and the politics of power. In 1918, she was writing nearly a review a week for *The Times Literary Supplement*. She was a prodigious letter-writer and keeper of diaries: she left behind some six volumes of letters and six volumes of diaries. In 1917, Virginia and her husband bought the Hogarth Press. Type-setting and working the presses themselves at the beginning, they were responsible for publishing major works, such as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in 1922, E. M. Forster, and the couple's own work. Initially, Virginia's sister, Vanessa, designed Virginia's book dust jackets. Central members of the Bloomsbury Group of artists and intellectuals, the Woolf partnership proved a powerful force both in their personal lives and subsequent artistic developments. As Dorothy Parker wrote of the Group, famous for its artists and extremely liberal attitudes to sex, "they lived in squares, painted in circles and loved in triangles" (Virginia Woolf Society 2025).

In company, Virginia could be fun-loving, flirtatious and amusing with a somewhat malicious, acerbic wit. However, throughout her life Virginia suffered from severe depression and psychotic episodes. Her husband, whom she married in 1912, felt that her fragile health meant that she would not be capable of looking after a child and they remained childless, another theme in her work. Virginia attempted suicide in September 1913; and on 28 March 1941, at the age of 59, after another period of deep depression, she filled her pockets with stones and drowned herself in the River Ouse.

2 The Poetry

For all her many talents as a pioneer of modernist literature, Virginia is not known for her poetry. Virginia often dismissed poetry as an art form and praised the superiority of prose, though she sometimes turned to poetry for satire, playfulness and family bonding. However, her novels are full of poets and appreciators of poetry, who frequently quote poetry, and her tight prose affects the reader in the same way as poetry.

Mixing with these Bloomsbury poets and her extensive reading of poetry must have impacted Virginia's prose style. Her novels could be defined as very poetic: poetry in prose, or prose in poetry. Her novels frequently have slender plots, the prose dense and rhythmic. Almost randomly, the opening lines of *The Waves* demonstrate this lyricism:

"I see a ring", SAID BERNARD, "hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light."

"I see a slab of pale yellow," said Susan, "spreading away until it meets a purple stripe."

(2015: 5)

Yet, at the end of 2024, Dr Sophie Oliver, from the University of Liverpool's Department of English, uncovered two handwritten poems on two folded pieces of paper in the back of a file of letters that Virginia had written to her niece and nephew. These letters had been held at the Harry Ransome Center at the University of Texas at Austin, where Oliver had been conducting research on Gertrude Stein, another literary figure. The poems were in pencil and quickly written. Even though Virginia's letters to her niece have all been published, no mention had been made of these poems. These had obviously been missed by scholars and dated approximately "after March 1927." It is believed that they may actually have been written in August 1932, when the family gathered at Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant's farmhouse, "Charleston," in Sussex. A number of informal photos of the gathering exist; one of the poems may even have been written to celebrate her nephew's birthday on August 19. He would have been twenty-two. As Virginia had no children of her own, she was extremely fond of her sister Vanessa's daughter, Angelica, and son, Quentin. The verses are light and playful and a gentle satire on the two young people.

Angelica, a twelve-line verse, playfully comments on Angelica's childish, transgressive antics, the illicit sipping of wine and her flirting with a family friend, Dadie [George Rylands, a poet and Shakespeare scholar who once worked at the Hogarth Press] on who she had a crush. Angelica would have been fourteen at the time, on the cusp of womanhood. One could argue that the poem explores femininity and nascent sexuality ("Viper kissed," line crossed out). Here is the text including the crossings out:

Angelica

The name was lazy & lovely

But the name was not the whole of her,

There was the body & the soul of her.

~~Oh love[?]~~ Angelica Angelica.

The Angel name

But oh the shame
 Of bringing
 Drink she took to,
 Dadie too,
 Fellow Dadie,
 Oh how shady
 Dwelling in the violet shady
 Viper-kissed,
 To sport with Dadie,
 And the tangled yellow hair!

The rhyming is a little clunky, “to/too, shady/Dadie,” but the poem was not destined for an anthology.

The second poem, *Hiccoughs*, is written to her nephew Quentin Bell, and is an eleven-line verse written in the whimsical nonsense style of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. Why hiccoughs? The reason why Virginia chose hiccoughs as a motif for the poem is unknown. Perhaps Quentin had been afflicted by an attack of hiccoughs, or, more likely, it was simply an excuse for a show of sheer verbal dexterity. The entertainment stems from the jaunty heteronymic wordplay on cough/chough/chuff/chaff/hiccough, and bird imagery [swallow, chough]. One can imagine the comic confusion as Quentin attempted to read the poem out aloud:

Hiccoughs
 To Quentin Stephen Claudian
 Poor Quentin
 Went in
 To a cough?
 Or should we call it cup?
 For all summer he
 Hiccough? Hiccup?
 Will swallow it up,
 Swallow or chuff?
 But swallow a chuff [*sic*]?
 Will cough it up
 Cough it off,
 Fly swallow, cough chaff.

(Liverpool 2025)

Neither are particularly significant in their intellectual content, and a world away from her experimental novels. Both demonstrate Virginia's lighter side, the intimacy of her relationships with the young people, and that she could be an aunt who was affectionate and funny and who wanted to connect with her relatives.

Kennedy Smith strikes a more sombre note. Virginia pointedly did not dedicate a poem to Julian, her other nephew, only to his other two siblings. She claims that – even though they got on well - there were tensions and rivalry between Julian Bell and Virginia as both were possessive and vying for Vanessa's love. Julian was a poet starting to garner fame in his own right, and Virginia was rather critical of his work, refusing to publish various pieces in her Hogarth Press. This has been explained as Virginia's "jealousy" of him, a word that Virginia herself used to describe the relationship (Smith 2025). After Julian's death during the Spanish Civil War in July 1937, Virginia tried to atone for her earlier attitude to Julian in her *Memoir of Julian Bell* of the same year (Rosenbaum 2005). Although a more prosaic reason might have been that Julian had left home for Cambridge in 1927 and was not present at the gathering.

Of course these were not the only poems written by Virginia. The earliest known poem is a quatrain written in 1892 when Virginia was around ten years old for the *Hyde Park Gate News*, a fun newspaper that she and her siblings produced. She seemed to understand comic writing, entitling a 1934 poem (unpublished until 1985) poem *Ode written partly in prose on seeing the name of Cutbush above a butcher's shop in Pentonville* (Randall 2017).

Her last known poem was published posthumously in 1945 (four years after her death) in an anthology of favourite poetry edited by Vita Sackville-West (Virginia's lover) and Harold Nicholson, entitled *Another World Than This*. The anthology is divided into twelve sections as in the months of the year. Virginia's poem appears in July. What is remarkable, and underlines Virginia's ambiguous attitude to poetry and prose, is that the poem is a virtually verbatim poem-form of the prose opening of her 1928 novel, *Orlando*. It is not clear which came first. For Virginia, her poetic prose and poetry appear interchangeable. A few lines will illustrate this clearly. First the poem:

Let us go, then, exploring
This summer morning
When all are adoring
The plum-blossom and the bee

(Sackville-West and Nicholson 1945: 131)

And *Orlando*:

Let us go, then, exploring this summer morning, when all are adoring the plum blossom
and the bee.

(Woolf 1928: 243)

One cannot help hearing the echoes of T.S. Eliot's influential 1915 poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, "Let us go then, you and I" (Eliot 1974). Eliot was a friend and frequent visitor to the Woolf household and Bloomsbury gatherings.

3 Virginia on Poetry and Prose

In a large part for feminist reasons, Virginia championed the superiority of prose over poetry, poetry as the novel's rival form. For her, the poetic form was "defunct." If "women are to write [...] they will need another form, one not so tied to tradition" (Oliver 2025). She associated poetry with patriarchy, tradition and elitism, the masculine versus feminine, the old compared to the new, the subjugated in opposition to the free. She lamented the previous lack of female poetic forerunners available as role models to female writers. She urged women to write not poetry as such but prose that would achieve the same greatness as poetry. In the end, she believed that the novel would usurp poetry.

In her only play *Freshwater*, the characters Poet Laureate Tennyson and the painter Watts, spout poetry pompously while holding antiquated and oppressive views on women, especially the young Ellen Terry. Established poets – such as Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch – had expressed doubts that a woman was capable of writing poetry. Virginia believed that the novel could be a democratic, feminist alternative to poetry, even though she adopted many of poetry's techniques for her novels. She wrote in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) "I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman" (Woolf 2020: ch.3).

Virginia and her family grew up with poetry. In her nephew Julian Bell's archive, there were some papers called "poetry games," which consisted of each member of the family involved in the game contributing lines of the poem to make up a collaboratively created poem which someone might read aloud. In her essays, Virginia frequently wrote about the tensions between poetry and prose, although she was discontented with the over-simple designation of "novel" for her work. Essays amongst many about poetry/prose include *Reading* (1919), *The Narrow Bridge of Art* (1924), *Poetry Fiction and the Future* (1927) and her *Letter to a Young Poet* (1932). In the latter – in which is believed that she had Julian Bell in mind – she feigns a lack of knowledge of the subject "the lack of a sound university training has always made it impossible for me to distinguish between an iambic and a dactyl." She continues about poetry, taking the point of view of "we despised prose writers." She opines tongue-in-cheek that:

[...] could one say what one meant and observe the rules of poetry? Conceive dragging in "blade" because one had mentioned "maid;" and pairing "sorrow" with "borrow"? Rhyme is not only childish but dishonest [...] look at their rules! [...] how strict! This you must do; this you must not. I would rather be a child and walk in a crocodile down a suburban path than write poetry, I have heard prose writers say [...] we prose writers [...] are masters of language, not its slaves; nobody can teach us; nobody can coerce us; we say what we mean.

(Woolf 1932)

She believes that "the poem is cracked in the middle. Look, it comes apart in my hands: here is reality on one side, here is beauty on the other." The "rules" force the poet to strain "to describe; we strain to see; he flickers his torch; we catch a flying gleam" (Woolf 1932). "Poetry has always been overwhelmingly on the side of beauty," she writes in *The Narrow Bridge of Art* (Woolf 2023). In *Reading*, Virginia describes poetry as "something that has been shaped and clarified, cut to catch the light, hard as a gem or rock with the seal of human experience on it" (Leteo 2021). In contrast to this "hardness," Virginia saw prose as

“the cotton wool of daily life,” as having “taken all the dirty work on to her own shoulders; has answered letters, paid bills [...]” (Woolf 1966: 223).

Kopley writes that “poetry is everywhere, and yet not quite solidly anywhere, in the expanse of Virginia Woolf’s writing.” She posits that Virginia’s “ceaseless experimentation with the novel [is] a process of working out the relationship of prose to poetry” (Kopley 2021: 318-319). She continues that “the restless, resourceful antagonism” toward poetry “seems to have done her a service” in her quest to “absorb poetry into prose” (320-321). Virginia was “hybridizing the novel by cannibalising poetry” (Oliver 2025).

Observers were perhaps not so conflicted about Virginia’s position. After reading *Jacob’s Room*, Lytton Strachey, a Bloomsbury member, pronounced “more like poetry, it seems to me, than anything else” (1975: 93). E. M. Forster may have hit the nail on the head when he remarks that Virginia’s “problem” is that “she is a poet, who wants to write something as near to a novel as possible” (1942: 23). Virginia herself prophetically admits, “I grow more and more poetic” (Goldman 2018).

4 Conclusion

In her 1926 second essay on De Quincey, Virginia coins the phrase “impassioned prose,” which is an excellent description of her own work (Woolf 2009). She strenuously opted to write novels as she considered that the poetic form had too many constraints to be sincere in conveying reality. Yet she was a voracious reader of poetry, personally acquainted with great poets, including Tennyson and Hardy; a deep vein of poetry runs through her novels. She wrote “my brain hums with scraps of poetry and madness” (Woolf 2008).

It is rare that such undiscovered works are discovered so long after a writer’s death and whose existence is not known to scholars. Even work which is patently written for fun with no thought of literary posterity in mind. They were certainly not written for publication but are intriguing nonetheless given the celebrity of the creator. The two new-found poems are hardly serious in content; they are quickly-written verses in pencil which strain to rhyme and with the sole objective of pleasing her young niece and nephew. Oliver describes them as “doggerel,” or the verse equivalent of the three kisses Virginia demanded of Angelica and Vanessa whenever she visited them (Oliver 2025). Woolf herself may not have defined them as poetry and certainly would not have expected scholars to be pondering over them over eighty years after her death. Their surprise value is that Virginia opted to express herself in verse, even such hastily-scribbled, light follies; a flippant contrast to the normal, serious output of a major literary figure.

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