
Crisis Calls for a New Diary Audience and Purpose

Four events in late 1917 and 1918—moments rarely noted by Woolf’s biographers—signal Virginia Woolf’s transition to her second diary stage: her mature, spare modernist diaries, 1918 to 1929. Because Woolf’s semiprivate diaries serve as the interface between her unconscious and her public prose, these moments must be seen as vital to her development not only as a *diarist* but also into the public writer so widely revered today.

The three Woolf diary books treated in this chapter disclose striking steps. Suddenly, in 1917, inordinate diary-writing begins—the most intensive period in Woolf’s entire forty-four-year diary history. In the fall of 1917, as she emerges from a lengthy illness, Woolf begins to keep *two* diaries: a country (natural history) diary and a city diary. The second step comes in July 1918, when she brings her city diary to the country and begins to merge her two diaries. Nature and culture, the unconscious and the conscious, the female and the male join.

In August 1918, Woolf finds in Lord Byron’s poem *Don Juan*, with its brief, open-ended cantos, the “method” she has long sought for her diary and other prose (*D* 1: 181). She now recognizes the rapid, spontaneous diary style she has been using as a “method” in itself, with artistic benefits. When she pens her mature diary credo in 1919, she uses the same words for her diary as she has for *Don Juan*.

In early November 1918 a crisis occurs. It turns on representation and on the female support so essential to Woolf’s writing life. The word *crisis* comes from the Greek word *krinein*, meaning “to separate, to judge, to decide.” Woolf’s crisis comes when Hampstead, which she calls the country-in-London and “the heart of the women’s republic,” for the first time withdraws its support. In Chinese, the word *crisis* is composed of two characters: one represents danger and the other opportunity. At this moment of crisis, Woolf makes *in her diary* an extraordinary salvaging move. She creates a new audience and purpose for her

diary, replacing her aging Hampstead female (now) detractors with Elderly Virginia. She will now parent herself. With this move, she offers her diary credo in her 1919 diary and enters her mature second diary stage. She reads Wilfrid Scawen Blunt's antiwar, anti-imperialist diaries along the way and finds there ammunition for *Three Guineas*—and also a male aristocrat whom she scorns.

Virginia Woolf's Second 1918 Hogarth Diary: July 27–November 12

"[An] elastic shape which will hold whatever you choose to put into it. . . . Still, it doesn't seem an easy example to follow; & indeed like all free & easy things, only the skilled & mature really bring them off successfully."

(August 8, 1918; *D* 1: 181)

Virginia Woolf brings her London diary to the country in mid-1918. That she totes her new Hogarth diary to Asheham House on July 31, when she embarks on her nine-and-a-half-week summer holiday, suggests she no longer feels the Asheham House natural history diary adequate for the diary she now desires. Thirty-two Hogarth (city) diary entries preserve the 102 days, July 27 through November 12, along with sixty-four almost daily Asheham diary entries during the Sussex holiday, July 31 through October 6.¹ On fifteen days Woolf pens entries in *both* diaries.

We can picture her at Asheham House with the two diaries before her: the smaller Asheham diary (4 inches wide and 6 ½ inches long), its red cover adorned with waving lines of green, gray, and white; and the larger, dark-gray-covered Hogarth diary (7 inches wide and 8 ¾ inches long). Clearly, she experiments. Which diary will she choose to write in, and when she writes in both, in what order? She writes eight staccato sentences for her August 3 Asheham diary entry: "A dreary drizzling day. L[eonard, her husband]. to Lewes to fetch a parcel. I on M's walk & round the top. All butterflies clinging to grass. Found mushrooms after tea. Murry's [Katherine Mansfield and John Middleton Murry] didn't come. K. ill. Guns very loud" (*CM* 31). They appear to be a summary of her more elaborate Hogarth diary entry for that day, which begins, "There's nothing but rustic news to record, since as we expected the Murrys have put us off" (*D* 1: 177). However, which entry was written first?

Her August 7 Hogarth entry clearly is penned second, for it begins drolly, "Asheham diary drains off my meticulous observations of flowers, clouds, beetles & the price of eggs" (*D* 1: 179). Revealingly, she writes a long Hogarth diary entry on August 27, dissecting her brother's visit and her own stop at Charles-

ton, her older sister Vanessa's nearby home, on the day she writes in her natural history diary, "Fine & windy. Nothing new" (CM 33).

Woolf's second Hogarth diary book of 1918 resembles her pivoting 1903 diary with its London, country, and return-to-London "chapters." In 1903, twenty-one-year-old Virginia Stephen vowed to forget London in the country and the male tradition as well—a defining turn toward nature, the unconscious, and the female repeated often in subsequent diaries. In the country fifteen years later, thirty-six-year-old Virginia Woolf finds a way to *integrate* London and the male tradition and, in so doing, adds a new dimension to her diary; indeed, she starts to fuse her two diaries.

She brings her Hogarth diary to the country, but she leaves her reading notebook behind in Richmond. Happy mistake! Its absence forces her to use her Hogarth diary more extensively as a reading notebook than in the past—to the diary's gain. "While waiting to buy a book in which to record my impressions first of Christina Rossetti, then of Byron, I had better write them here," she explains pragmatically in her fifth Hogarth diary entry, August 4, suggesting her original intent to keep literary thoughts apart. "Christina has the great distinction of being a born poet" (D 1: 178). And she is off, the entire entry probing Rossetti's life and art, lamenting that "she starved into austere emaciation, a very fine original gift" (D 1: 179). Leonard Woolf chose this entry to begin *A Writer's Diary*, the first version of Woolf's diary to reach the public.

Woolf then turns to Byron—to the male literary tradition—in her next two Hogarth entries. In her August 8 entry we learn it is not Byron's *diary* but his great poem *Don Juan* that supplies Woolf with the "method" she will apply in her diary and in more public works as well. She calls *Don Juan* "the most readable poem of its length ever written," suggesting her high regard for "readability" as a literary goal, "a quality," she asserts, "which it owes in part to the springy random haphazard galloping nature of its method":

This method is a discovery by itself. Its² what one has looked for in vain—a[n] elastic shape which will hold whatever you choose to put into it. Thus he could write out his mood as it came to him; he could say whatever came into his head. He wasn't committed to be poetical; & thus escaped his evil genius of the false romantic & imaginative. When he is serious he is sincere; & he can impinge upon any subject he likes. He writes 16 canto's [*sic*] without once flogging his flanks. (D 1: 180–81)

Woolf has written her own diary *hab nab at a venture* from the start, since devouring Sir Walter Scott's journal before starting her own diary in her early

teens: Scott, her diary father who praised Byron's diary method in *his* diary and adopted it as his own.³ So what can this August 8 declaration mean? It marks Woolf's recognition of the rapid, spontaneous diary style she has been using as a method in itself (with artistic advantages) and her sense of the open-ended stretch of a diary—like that of endless cantos—as an “elastic shape” of great allure.

This method is a discovery by itself. These words mark this entry as one of the most important in Woolf's whole diary history. A swift pen and quick turns of subject can save Woolf from pitfalls just as they did Byron: the traps of diary preaching, rote repetition, and (especially) diurnal dullness.⁴ In their place one finds the fast flight of the mind.

Woolf opens this second 1918 Hogarth diary confidently, revealing growing ease with her periodic diary. “As usual, this diary has skipped a day or two,” she begins July 27 at Hogarth House. “But first one must pause to say that here a new volume starts . . . & therefore there is every appearance of a long, though intermittent life. If it survives the summer, when the evenings are unfavourable to writing, it should flourish in the winter” (*D* 1: 171–72). Once more she personifies her diary, here as a vulnerable but potentially flourishing life.

Traits of Woolf's first two Hogarth diaries persist across this third. Woolf continues to reread her previous entry before starting the next, which allows her to reply to her entries as if in deep talk. As in her first 1918 Hogarth diary, she stops an entry mid-sentence, writes a new date, and continues the sentence—linking her entries another way beyond talk—and she notes again that diary-keeping soothes her (*D* 1: 196). “Since I'm back from the [1917] Club & waiting for L.,” she writes on November 4, “I had better assuage my fretfulness with pen & ink. I have a pen . . . which perhaps serves the purpose of a babies coral” (*D* 1: 214). The mothering touch of diary-writing emerges in another turn on pens nine days before: “Here I am experimenting with the parent of all pens—the black J. *the* pen, as I used to think it, along with other objects, as a child, because mother used it; & therefore all other pens were varieties & eccentricities” (*D* 1: 208). Through her diary Woolf will mother herself.

She also continues gestures to coax vivid diary prose. She denies her ability to write and, in so doing, buys time to gather force. “I'm paralyzed by the task of describing a week end at Garsington,” she writes on July 29 before delivering one of her most exquisite comic scenes (*D* 1: 173). “If I weren't too lazy I think I should try to describe the country; but then I shouldn't get it right,” begins one of her more elaborate psychological dances, on August 24. “I shouldn't bring back to my own eyes the look of all those old beautiful very worn carpets which

are spread over the lower slopes of the hills; nor should I convey the look of clouded emerald which the downs wear, the semi-transparent look, as the sun & shadows change, & the green becomes now vivid now opaque" (*D* 1: 185). She paints here once more her modernist aesthetic: the melding shades first caught at age seventeen in her 1899 Warboys diary (*PA* 155–56).

Along with denials, she uses questions to move herself along. Some questions merely goad memory—again in conversational style. "What did we discuss?" she asks herself in her August 16 entry about a Charleston visit (*D* 1: 182). "What has happened this last week—following upon the superb success of Brighton?" she presses September 8 (*D* 1: 190). She continues to be curious about people and, increasingly, about her own feelings. "What for instance is Lytton's view of Mrs Asquith; & hers of him; & Maynard's of them both," she asks her diary on August 16; "Am I getting blasé—is the 17 Club less enthralling?" (*D* 1: 183, 208). Other questions—on literature, politics, war—are more profound.

She finds in metaphor-shifting a new way to conjure prose. "I have let the first freshness of the Webbs fade from my mirror," she laments September 18 at the start of her lively two-entry re-creation of the Webbs' visit: "[B]ut let me bethink me of another metaphor which they imposed upon me, towards the end of Sunday. I was exalted above a waste of almost waveless sea, palish grey, & dented with darker shadows for the small irregularities, the little ripples which represented character & life love & genius & happiness" (*D* 1: 193). The new trope opens a new groove that allows her to proceed.⁵

She treats her long September entry recounting the Webbs' visit as if she were a novelist setting a scene: "I must now skip a great deal of conversation & let us suppose that Sidney & Beatrice & I are sitting on the road side overlooking Telscombe, smoking cigarettes, in bright sunshine, while the Silver Queen slowly patrols above Newhaven" (*D* 1: 195). She reports Beatrice's breathtakingly illusion-free view of marriage—"I daresay an old family servant would do as well [as a husband]"—and rounds out the day with Pepys's "& so to bed" (*D* 1: 196).

Because two-thirds of this diary's days unfold in the country, topics of consuming interest in her first 1918 Hogarth diary—the 1917 Club, for instance—recede in this second 1918 journal. Women and their treatment, however, remain major subjects. In her first 1918 Hogarth diary Woolf mocks the January passage of the Suffrage Bill, which gave British women over the age of thirty the right to vote, and she does the same in October when the House of Commons passes a bill to allow women to stand for Parliament. "Yes, I can speak of

myself with more confidence today as noble & profound,” she cracks the next day in her October 24 Hogarth entry:

I am capable of standing for Parliament & holding office, & becoming just like Herbert Fisher perhaps. To me the vote was as surprising as to some retired cleric in the vales of Westmoreland, who will see in it the death knell of liberty, I daresay, & preach a sermon to that effect next Sunday. Then the great lady at Stocks [antisuffragist Mrs. Humphrey Ward] must be feeling uncomfortable, though I am malicious enough to suppose that if by some process of selection she alone could represent Belgravia in the House of Lords, the change would not seem so devastating. (*D* 1: 207)

Emerging here is Woolf the witty (and wicked) diary portraitist.

Woolf looks at women in literature as well as in political affairs. Electra “lived a far more hedged in life than the women of the mid Victorian age,” Woolf notes in an August Hogarth entry, “but this has no effect upon her, except in making her harsh & splendid. She could not go out for a walk alone; with us it would be a case of a maid & a hansom cab” (*D* 1: 185). When Woolf turns to Milton in September, she finds him “the first of the masculinists” (*D* 1: 193). *Paradise Lost*, she complains, provides “no help in judging life; I scarcely feel that Milton lived or knew men & women; except for the peevish personalities about marriage & the woman’s duties” (*D* 1: 193). Thinking of Byron, she is amused at how easily she pictures his effect upon women. Had women only laughed at him instead of worshiped him, she believes, he might have escaped the “Byronic” (*D* 1: 179–80).

Age, as well as gender, continues to claim Woolf’s mind. In fact, her view of age in this second 1918 Hogarth diary is more grim than in the first. She observes physical change closely. Katherine Cox’s engagement to be married begins the diary; however, Woolf doubts that Will Arnold-Forster is worthy of his bride-to-be. This is partly because Duncan Grant reviles him for being forty-five, “& always has been,” and partly because he reminds Woolf “of one of those old ladies, who have yellow hair & very pink cheeks, but you can count their years in the way the flesh is drawn tight across the bone, & crinkled with very delicate fine lines” (*D* 1: 182, 212). Cabinet member Herbert Fisher, her cousin, possesses “eyes with that pale frosty look which blue eyes get in age,” and the resolutely unromantic Beatrice Webb, whose own diaries will offer great riches to Woolf in 1926, tells her that “[i]n old age people become of little account” (*D* 1: 203, 196). Sidney Webb, in turn, remarks that he and Beatrice are now sixty “& therefore may expect a stroke within the next 5 years” (*D* 1: 197).