

Feminist Letters

Mariza Corrêa

Resumo

Apesar de ser bem conhecida como uma autora feminista, a atuação prática de Virginia Woolf, e sua relação com as feministas de sua época, é menos divulgada, já que sua ojeriza por perder tempo assinando manifestos e participando de passeatas é bem mais analisada. Seu livro *Três Guinéus*, no qual ela explicita suas propostas é um dos poucos, inexplicavelmente, não traduzido em português. Tento aqui recuperar algumas de suas atividades relacionadas à Liga Cooperativa de Mulheres, estreitamente vinculada a sua amizade com Margaret Llewelyn Davies, uma figura ímpar no feminismo britânico e sua grande amiga, bem como sua cuidadosa atenção à publicação do primeiro livro a respeito da situação das mulheres operárias inglesas, uma espécie de versão feminina do relatório de Engels sobre a classe operária britânica.

Palavras chave: Virginia Woolf, feminismo, Liga Cooperativa de Mulheres, Margaret Llewelyn Davies

Abstract

Even if she is very well known as a feminist author, Virginia Woolf's practical work, and her relationship with British feminists is scarcely known since more attention has been paid to her distaste with signing manifestoes and participating in marches. The book in which she explicitly takes a position on these issues – *Three Guineas* – is, for reasons unknown, not available in Portuguese, even if most of her works are. Here, I draw attention to some of her work with the Women's Cooperative Guild – and her life-long friendship with Margaret Llewelyn Davies, one of the pioneers in the organization of women workers, whose first book about women workers in England—a kind of feminine version of the Engels's report about the British working class—Virginia Woolf herself published.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, feminism, Margaret Llewelyn Davies, Women's Co-Operative Guild

Feminist Letters

Mariza Corrêa
To Ana.

I will go down with my colours flying. V. Woolf
'We want the vote'. 'Yes, but we want you in the shell factory first'.¹

Some of Virginia Woolf's letters written just before and after the First World War draw attention to her political work in favor of women workers at the time – and also to the name of a friend many times evoked, but less known than her other pen-friends in the English intellectual scenery (the Bloomsbury Group) or in her biographies.² Who was, then, Margaret Llewelyn Davies, with whom Virginia exchanged malicious comments – and about whom she also made them to other friends? Even if she was claimed as a feminist writer – specially because of *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own* – Virginia Woolf's political work in the strict sense, that she always said to abominate, is not only poorly known as it is surprising to find her stealing time from her writing, something she always complained about when asked to sign manifestos etc., to travel with her husband, Leonard, to make known the work of the Women's Co-Operative Guild. At first glance, it seems that she was

1 One of the last entries in Virginia's diary, in March, 8, 1941. *A writer's diary, 1978 (1953)*; dialogue between a suffragist and Lloyd Jorje, then Minister of Munitions, at the beginnings of the First World War. In L. Tickner, 1988: 233. The pacifism of almost all the members of the British elite in the First War, when many of the friends of Virginia, and also her husband, were exempted from military service as 'conscientious objectors' – or in the case of Leonard under the pretext of a disease – may be contrasted with their decidedly position pro- war in the Second War.

2 Lytton Strachey, Roger Fry, Virginia's sister, the painter Vanessa Bell, Clive Bell, E.M. Forster, T.S.Eliot, etc. See Quentin Bell, 1972. Most of the men who were part of the Bloomsbury group were originally from the secret society The Apostles, from Cambridge – as Roger Fry, L.Strachey, Forster, J. Maynard Keynes, Leonard Woolf – to which also the older brother of Virginia's father had belonged. Founded in 1820, its name derived from his founders being a dozen. The society gained fame not only because of the Bloomsbury Group, but also because some of its members were accused of being spies for the then Soviet Unions in the fifties.

following Leonard in his socialist endeavours, but soon it becomes clear that she had introduced him to Llewelyn Davies, who, in her turn introduced him to other British socialists, launching his career as a political activist.

These letters – and many others which I do not intend to address here – suggest that one of the few books of hers not translated into Portuguese [*Three Guineas*] has a stronger and ancient link to this pre-war work – and is also present in her first novels. It seems, but that would demand another analysis, that there is a perceptible line linking, say, *Night and Day* and *The Years* with her more explicitly feminist essays such as *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*. Other critics have partially suggested these links, but none that I know of has developed an analysis of her concrete work with the women workers behind the novels.³

Maybe it was not by chance, then, that her husband chose to highlight others of her books in his preface to the diary he purged and published in 1953.⁴

The woman with the basket

Margaret Llewelyn Davies (1861-1944) was the daughter of a Christian Socialist, who was also a supporter of the rights of women. Her brother became known in Brazil when *Peter Pan*, the movie, was shown, because he was the father of the boys used as models by J.M. Barrie in the story, but she herself remained an illustrious unknown person. When she was 25, she became Secretary of the Women's Co-Operative Guild (WCG), founded in 1883, alongside the cooperative movements in England, and was linked to the history of the Guild for the next 32 years. The Guild became famous and well known under her direction. She used to say that working women should not limit themselves to have sewing lessons in their meetings and changed the slogan of the Guild from “The woman with the basket” – to “A women's influence begins at

3 See Naomi Black, 2004, and also Michèle Barrett's introduction to the Penguin edition of *A room of one's own* and *Three Guineas*, 1993. Barret has a position opposed to N. Black, and defines Virginia Woolf's attitude as “an abdication of political agency” (xxxiv). Black in her turn considers *Three Guineas* a “confusing book” (86) and adds to the ‘confusion’ by counting some twelve letters in it – instead of the three ones which are the main author's concern in the book.

4 He mentions *The waves* as her best book, and *To the lighthouse* and *Between the acts* as meritorious: “Her position as an artist and the merits of her books are a subject of dispute and no prudent man would claim to judge to a nicety the place which a contemporary writer will occupy in the pantheon of letters. ... while the other books, though on a lower level of achievement are, as I said, ‘serious’ and will always be worth reading and studying.” *A Writer's Diary*: 8, 9.

home, who can tell where it ends”.⁵ In her time, the women workers’ agenda included the fight for a minimum wage – obtained in 1912 – for the alterations of the laws of divorce, then highly favorable to men, for the right to vote – obtained in 1928 –, for abortion and for pre-natal assistance for all women. It was thus a pioneering association in the fight for the rights of women.⁶ From 1700 members in 1889, it reached 72 000 in 1933, on the eve of the Second World War. The book Margaret published in 1915, *Maternity: letters from working women*, that was composed of 160 letters of women about their experiences with maternity, lack of medical assistance, abortion and poverty was the first published report on the situation of women workers in England. In 1931 she published a kind of collective biography of women workers, also with letters from the Guild associates, entitled *Life as we have known it*. Virginia Woolf, who wrote the preface, published it herself at the Hogarth Press.⁷

The Guild, which still exists, changed much over the years – after the Second World War it became international and the most recent information we have about it reveals that, while it remains a socialist and pacifist organization, now fighting nuclear plants, it is no longer a feminist one. In one of its last congresses, it is said that the women were knitting socks for refugees and that they gave a pair to the mayor of the city where the congress was held.

But at the apogee of its career, the Guild seems to have had a considerable influence on labour legislation, and also on Virginia Woolf as a writer. Her most controversial book, *Three Guineas*, was certainly inspired by her work with Margaret who was her lifelong friend. In 1913, after a tour with Leonard, in which they promoted the work of the Guild, she wrote to a

5 Notwithstanding, a biography of Margaret, by Catherine Webb, in 1927, was named *The woman with the basket*.

6 Before the First War, British women’s association were noted by their fight for the vote – and the massive recruitment of women made them coveted by the government for the war effort, with which they cooperated and which was to give them a first, and partial, right to vote in 1918. It’s curious to note that a young painter, Duncan Grant, a conscientious objector to the war, won one of the prizes of the posters for the suffragist campaign in 1909. See Lisa Tickner, 1988.

7 Virginia’s presentation was censored by Margaret, who did not like the playful mention of her secretary’s pipe – and statements like : “It is not from the ranks of working-class women that the next great poet or novelist will be drawn.” (Hermione Lee, 1996: 356.) According to Lee, the original version was published in the *Yale Review* in 1930 and reprinted in 1966 by Leonard in the *Collected Essays of Virginia* – making him the target of critics by some feminists. But here, as in all her observations, it seems that Virginia stood by her posture of making her derisive criticisms of whoever it might be. And, after reading *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*, it seems that her critique was in fact directed against the under-education of all British women of the time.

friend: “Why the poor dont take knives and chase us out of our houses, I cant think.”⁸ And in the midst of the First World War, Virginia also lent her house for meetings of the women, whose Section she coordinated in Richmond, promoting talks in which not only women speakers were invited, but also some of her renowned intellectual friends. This, then is the background to begin to understand all those letters and *Three Guineas*, written also in letter form. Let’s begin with the essay.

Three Guineas

Published in 1938, almost ten years after *A Room of One’s Own*, *Three Guineas* is ostensibly a pacifist book - the writer is presumably answering a letter from a solicitor who asked her how we might prevent war - but it is also a quasi-sociological work about the situation of women in England after 1919, when a new law opened the opportunity for them to work in all professions. In fact, the questions she raises and statistical data she presents had been part of the agenda of the feminist movement since its beginning and are still there today: what is the difference between a man’s and a woman’s wage? how many women occupy leading roles at work? how many women are called for political or public functions, domestic service, the care of the old?, etc.

Many a critic attributed her friends’ distaste of the book to the fact that it was explicitly against the war and, just as the country was mobilizing for war, to her speaking derisively about the attire of the military, judges and universities dons – and about the hierarchies predominant in these professions – besides comparing Hitler’s speeches to some British pronouncements about the ‘place of women’, as wives and mothers.⁹ Maybe the question – why a general receives money from the State, but not the mothers?- was also first posed there.

But what few critics observed was that her entire diatribe was directed against members of her own class – it was as if, to paraphrase a Brazilian book, she was saying clearly that the ruling class had two sexes (Lobo, 1991). She was openly speaking about the different destinies, in education,

8 In her letters and diaries Virginia Woolf often left out the apostrophes of words like can’t and don’t; but not, of course, in her novels.

9 Leonard didn’t like it, neither did Maynard Keynes. The young generation followed suit: Quentin Bell and Nigel Nicolson also expressed their distaste years later.

employment, or official positions of the daughters of 'educated men' as opposed to the sons of those very educated men. Their sons – and nephews, and cousins, and grandsons – received a generous handful of the family's money directed to education and, were therefore able to attend university and afterwards occupy the best public employment in the country; their daughters were poorly educated at home and at the schools open to them; newly opened as they were, these schools had to face scarce support from public funds, so generously provided for male schools.¹⁰

Comparing their situation to the women of the working classes, she says:

Not only are we incomparably weaker than the men of our own class; we are weaker than the women of the working class. If the working women of the country were to say: 'If you go to war, we will refuse to make munitions or to help in the production of goods', the difficulty of war-making would be seriously increased. But if all the daughters of educated men were to down tools tomorrow, nothing essential either to the life or to the war-making of the community would be embarrassed. Our class is the weakest of all the classes in the state. We have no weapon with which to enforce our will. (1993:127).¹¹

So, maybe one of the reasons why her friends, all sons, or brothers, or nephews, or grand-sons of 'educated men' – as we can see in any of Virginia's biographies – didn't like *Three Guineas* was not just that it was a pacifist book, but, who knows, because she showed them, firmly, and with plenty of data, that it was at the cost of the daughters of 'well educated men' that they were where they were. As one of her biographers observes:

10 Home education could, after all, be an asset: Virginia's Greek teacher, Janet Case, introduced her to the suffragist movements – and for a time Virginia worked addressing envelopes for the NUWSS (National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies) – and to Margaret Llewelyn Davies, who took her to the Guild.

11 This reprint of *Three Guineas*, differently from many others before it, put back in print the pictures, some hilarious, of the vestments of the dignitaries of the nation – described with so much gusto, and irony, that would be appreciated by contemporary stylists of the Samba Schools (the use of lace, ribbons, plumes, neck-laces, furs, wigs, etc.) "Sartorial splendours of the educated men" as she called it (137). It seems that another reason for the uncomfortable reaction of even some friends of Virginia, such as Maynard Keynes, was that the pictures were of well known men in their day – the 'general' covered with medals and badges, for instance, was Sir Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell, a hero and founder of the Boy Scouts (Black: 169). This edition also carries the scrapbooks that Virginia kept, with her notes on statistics and newspaper cuttings for the book. It was not by chance that she refused all honours that were offered her by these dignitaries. The only pictures that are not shown, but just described, are those of the Civil War in Spain – where her darling nephew, Julian Bell, was mortally wounded by the Nazis. Some critics also see this essay as a continuation of her discussion with him, before he decided to go to fight in Spain.

A Room of One's Own, charming, witty and urbane, had slipped down deliciously, like the famous lunch in the men's college it described; Three Guineas, furious, lacerating, harsh and awkward, stuck in many of its reader's throats. (Lee, 1996:681).¹²

But not in all of her readers' throats - one of them, her good friend Margaret, wrote praising the book, and a self-educated worker wrote: "It is true that I have to cook my own dinner while you do not - but that does not make me any more free from the problems which beset women as a whole." (id. *ibid.*).

The title of the essay is somewhat elusive - shouldn't it have been called Women and Peace or What to do to Prevent War, or something like that? Ostensibly, it was a proposal, half serious, half mocking, to give a guinea to each person who wrote to her asking for support, if they promised to educate future generations against the war. But, again, there was something else to it. *Three Guineas* was the political analysis extracted from *The Years* (1937), where she dissects, unmercifully, the British elite family, and from which the expression 'three guineas' was purged. Hermione Lee retrieves from the manuscript of the novel the passage that did not find its way into the final version:

"Look at those wretched little children", said Rose, looking down into the street.

"Stop them, then" said Maggie. "Stop them having children."

"But you cant," said Rose.

"Oh nonsense, my dear Rose", said Elvira. "What you do is this: you ring a bell in Harley Street. Sir John at home? Step this way ma'am. Now Sir John, you say, casting your eyes this way & that way, the fact of the matter is, whereupon you blush. Most inadvisable, most inadvisable, he says, the welfare of the human race - sacrifice, private interests - six words on half a sheet of paper. [In the margin: Three guineas in his left hand.] Out you go -well, that's all. What I mean, in plain language, Maggie, she wont [have] a child ." We wouldn't have children if we didnt want them", said Maggie.

"But you cant say that in public" said Rose. "You can say that here, to me, in private". "But how is that woman down there going to Harley Street? With three guineas?"

"Well then publish it in The Times" said Elvira.

D'you ever take anything seriously Elvira?" said Rose. [blotted out] "It's against the Law".

12 She adds that neither Bertrand Russell, nor Aldous Huxley "were derided for mental instability or ludicrous Utopianism" or for being pacifists.

“What law?” (Lee, 1996:330)¹³

Lee adds: “And the sum of money required for an abortion, three guineas, is the symbolic sum used in the essay of that name to demonstrate the relation between domestic and public tyranny.”¹⁴

Whatever the original inspiration of the title was, the first of the three guineas was given to the dean of a college of daughters of well educated fathers; another to a school for the daughters of non educated women, so they could enter professions, and the third to the solicitor who wrote the initial letter, since he proposed the existence of a peace-loving society in which men and women would share equal rights. In other passages of her long letter, Virginia made explicit the point that education should be equally given to all, without distinction of sex, class or colour.¹⁵

One of the criticisms of the book claimed that it did not look at the ‘bellicose’ women, maybe an allusion to the suffragists who, although very aggressive in their fight, agreed to collaborate with the war effort; another argued that she analyzed the masculine dedication to war games, to the hunt and to violent sports as an ‘essentialist’ characteristic of men. But a close reading of the book makes it clear that hers is a structural analysis: the social structure and the sacred rituals – to hunt, the use of patriotic signs, etc. were as if a prelude to war – as was the work in the colonies, when many young men learned violently to control ‘others’.

But a systematic critique of colonialism is lacking, as well as of the brutish treatment meted out to young men in the public schools of England – where Virginia’s brothers and most of her friends had studied.¹⁶

13 The biographer speculates about the fact that Leonard had forbidden Virginia of having children – with the support of some medical doctors, but not from all of them, and considers the possibility of an abortion as the reason for this censored stretch on the book.

14 Black also call attention to the origin of the coin, made from Guinea gold since 1661: “A Guinea ship, a ship of the West Africa trade, was more precisely a slave ship.” (2004: 176) She also noted some other references to imperialism in the book.

15 Some of the didactic proposals of Virginia would be worth rereading- some of them utopian, but it seems clear that education was her proposed point of start to a better society. A point that must have contributed to the disgust of her husband and her nephew-biographer about this book may be its explicit didacticism, which made it almost a sociological essay, rather than a political pamphlet.

16 Criticism to colonialism is only alluded to here, but see *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), for an albeit indirect reference to the issue. The issue must have been close to Virginia’s concerns, since her husband had been a civil servant in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) for some years, and had written some reminiscences of his work as a chief of ‘natives’ – “ruling blacks”, as Virginia liked to say, according to Quentin Bell. About the brutish treatment of boys in the public English schools, see, for instance, Vieira, 1989. In *A Room of One’s Own*,

Three Guineas was the last book published while she was still alive – her biography of Roger Fry was the last. The novel she concluded before dying – *Between the Acts*, was published posthumously. Almost all her novels and essays have been published in Portuguese, but not *Three Guineas*, Roger Fry’s biography and *The Common Reader* – a collection of her fine criticism. And we have only short collections of her letters and diaries. The bulk of her work – two thirds of it – was in fact only published after her death, including five volumes of her diaries and six volumes of her letters.

So Leonard Woolf did not comply with her last wish: “Will you destroy all my papers”. Virginia, like Kafka, whose private papers were also published due to the disobedience of a friend, was thus exposed to posterity – something she declared to abhor, but as she said in a letter to a friend, about some breach of confidence of a lady of the British elite: “I know its a base pleasure that one takes in these indecent revelations – why do they do it? But if they enjoy it, I don’t see why we shouldn’t.” (1978:147).¹⁷

Be it as it may, all papers belonging to Virginia, now scattered around half a dozen museums and libraries, were strictly examined by her husband and her relatives, or relatives of friends, the only ones to have had access to them before publication. They supervised publication and hold their copyright. So, most of the ‘indecent revelations’ may have been deleted – much to the disgust of her biographers who can only speculate, as they do, about the origin of her nervous diseases, or if her husband did or did not forbid her from having children, or about their intimate relations – among other things.

Could Freud, who was also a prolific producer of personal papers, have foreseen that both of them would suffer the same insatiable research for hints of their private lives among their papers in the years to come, when he gave her a narcissus when she visited him in 1939?

Virginia did not criticize the colonialist vision of Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre*, but she is critical of her digressions out of the literary text, and maybe it could be seen as a prelude to the acid version of Jean Rhys, when she recounts the story from the perspective of the Antillean wife of Rochester in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In *Night and Day*, Virginia also pointed to the cruelty of the family system that, besides leaving the daughters without an education, also put the younger sons at the margins of the schools and the careers open to the older ones – which was the case of Rochester who ‘bought’ a rich Antillean wife.

17 In her second novel, *Night and Day* (1919), Virginia already made ironic comments about the responsibility of the women of elite families as guardians of their illustrious ancestors, in their obligation to write biographies of them – and also about the manipulation of the information in the documents they left behind. It was as if she were mocking beforehand what would happen to her documentation.

The letters

The letters are sparse, but even so they point to an unexpected interest from a writer who professed to be interested only in a world with its own rules, bounded between the covers of a book. In 1913, when she wrote about her incomprehension at the lack of violent acts by poor people against the rich, Virginia, together with Leonard, visited factories in Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Glasgow and Leicester, analyzing “the conditions of the working class”. Playful as ever in her letters, she said that “nothing -except perhaps novel writing - can compare with the excitement of controlling the masses.” (1978:19). And, also that she was mistaken when she took what Margaret Llewelyn Davies and another political leader did as philanthropy. In another letter, she adds: “We spent a fortnight moving from factory to factory in the North, getting as far as Glasgow and seeing all type of horror and miracle.” (1978:23). After this visit, Leonard made speeches about politics and society in many sections of the Guild and wrote some books about them. Virginia followed his writings and mentioned that she was reading them in her letters.

In 1914 Margaret may have consulted her about the publication of the book on the letters, for she replied: “Do publish those letters. I wish they could all be in full.” And added, saying she would send the book to the printing house of her half brother, who was also to publish her first book, and hoping that the letters would be published with many pictures: “They are so amazing”. (1978: 54,59).

Even when she was resting after a nervous crisis, in 1915, strictly guarded by nurses who controlled her writing time, she wrote to Margaret to speak well about the letters and of the positive review they had had in *The Times*. In this letter she mentions, for the first time, Margaret’s secretary, Lilian Harris. (1978: 65). In the next letter, she thanked the ‘mysterious’ Harris for a pamphlet she had sent her. Her letters to Margaret are all very affectionate and with many comments about the people both of them knew; Margaret was also a frequent visitor to the Woolf’s house. At war time, food was a common preoccupation and, in one letter, Virginia praises Lilian Harris and mocks Margaret for not knowing what semolina means – as if she was a lady, she says.

“If it weren’t for Semolina how should working women ever make both ends

meet? Semolina is to us what cream, butter, eggs, etc., are to you. We often eat nothing else for weeks. Try it with a spoonful of lard for supper.” (1978:85).¹⁸

After the Congress of the Guild in 1916, Leonard added a post-script to her letter to Margaret: “I enjoyed the Congress enormously, I thought yesterday morning was better almost than I had ever heard it before. They really are wonderful. The boy who has brought in the Press telegrams became so absorbed in listening to the speeches that someone had to prod him in order to make him realize that he had to go off to the post with one.” (1978:105).

In that same year, Virginia told her sister Vanessa that Margaret and Harris went to meet them on an excursion to Cornwall:

We are a funny party. Miss Harris has turned up, Margaret’s secretary, an old creature of 50, extremely sensible and unselfish, and independent, who smokes a pipe, and lives alone in lodgings, and reminds us both so much of Saxon in her sayings and habits that we frequently disgrace ourselves. When Margaret gets excited she calls her ‘John’, and Miss Harris calls Margaret ‘Jim’. They go out sketching all day, and produce their sketches, and want to be praised. They think it is a very bad thing to use Chinese white in water colours, and that real artists leave bits of white paper, so I said I would ask you. I have had several arguments about art and morality with Margaret, and I hope I have done some damage, but a life rooted in good works is hard to injure – especially as she always assumes that I think what Oscar Wilde thought in the 80ies. (1978:119).¹⁹

Beyond the whimsical comments, we discover that Virginia had become an active participant of the Guild and that in the next four years she would lend them her house for their meetings, and was to invite some well known intellectuals to speak to the women workers.

Let’s see how she invited her friends, this one being Robert Trevelyan:

18 The observations about what people eat, and how they got it, during the First World War, would be an object for another paper.

19 Writing to Saxon Sydney-Turner some days later, says Virginia: “We have been here a fortnight with Margaret Davies and an elderly secretary of hers, by name Lillian Harris. The secretary is a most interesting and sensible person, and I think you would have much in common – In fact you are very like her when you smoke your pipe and say nothing. She lives alone in lodgings at Hampstead, and smokes 8 pipes a day, and is very fond of good wine and cigars. She has asked me to bring you to tea – Will you come? – her other taste is for statistics.” Id. *ibid.*

My dear Bob,

I am writing to ask what of course you must refuse if inconvenient – would you come and speak to my Guild of Co-operative Women (Margaret Davies Affair) on Tuesday, 5th June? Any subject does – not literature perhaps, but travel, or politics. The talk should last half an hour. The audience consists of about 12 mothers of families. They listen with great attention. If you could, as I much hope, would you dine here at 7 first, and spend the night. Yours, ever,
Virginia Woolf

It follows with:

My dear Bob,

It is very good of you to say you will speak on the 5th. Morgan Forster and someone else have already spoken about India, so perhaps Java and China would be better – or, if you prefer it, choose any labour problem, or social question. I didn't mean to limit you to travels. Though apparently apathetic, the audience is really very keen, and of course, labour in its sympathies.

There is no need to tell me the subject beforehand. Dinner is at 7. Yours ever,
Virginia Woolf. (1978: 155,157).

The invitation to Trevelyan was in May, 1917. In January, Virginia had written to Margaret about another talk:

We had a very remarkable Guild meeting last night, which I must tell you about. A speaker [Bessie Ward] from the Civil Liberty Council, lectured us upon Venereal Diseases, and moral risks for our sons. I felt that the audience was queer, and as no one spoke, I got up and thanked her, whereupon two women left the room, and I saw another gigantic fat one was in tears. However, they all went, except Mrs. Langston who told the lecturer it was a most cruel speech, and only a childless woman could have made it 'for we mothers try to forget what our sons have to go through'. Then she began to cry. Did you ever hear such – nonsense it seems to me. The poor speaker said she was used to it. I do think it is odd – the servants tell me that great indignation was expressed by most of the women at the mention in public of such subject.

Either her letter or the conference were occasions for the talk, for she hastened to write another letter in defense of the speaker:

I expect that, writing in a hurry, I gave you a rather wrong impression of what

happened at the meeting. I have asked the servants since what the women who objected said about the lecture. Their chief objection seems to have been that she spoke in the presence of two girls – Gladys, our tweenny aged 16; and Mrs Reed’s daughter, 16 or 17. They thought this very wrong. But then Mrs Ward (Mrs Bessie Ward) specially noticed the presence of girls, said that she was going to speak on moral questions, and asked whether she was to go on. They all agreed, at any rate none objected. As a matter of fact, Mrs Reed, the girl’s mother, thought the lecture splendid, and did not mind her daughter hearing it. Mrs Miller also said it was the best lecture we had ever had, and offered to do anything, wished us to affiliate to the Council of Civil Liberties; etc. There were three who objected strongly (partly because the presence of girls) only one of whom I spoke to, Mrs Langston. I thought her unreasonable, because she seemed to take it as a personal insult on the part of Mrs Ward – and I was surprised because Mrs Langston is on a good many local Committees, I think, and is by way of being among the most broad minded. But I quite agree that their point of view about their sons is quite easy to understand and sympathize with – I thought Mrs Ward a nice women, evidently trying to make her remarks as general as possible ;half the lecture was about the conscription of women; only a small part was devoted to Venereal Diseases.

I think that the objection raised by other branches to whom she had spoken was patriotic – certainly in one case; they said nothing but sang God Save the King. It is queer though, that that class shouldn’t discuss these questions openly, considering how much more they are affected by them than we are. I spoke to Nelly (the cook) afterwards, and after being a little shocked, she agreed that it was most important that women should have knowledge in such matters – and then she told me stories of friends and relations and how they’d suffered, and so on. (1978: 138,139).

It’s a pity we don’t know anything about the other talks given but there is still an echo of this one a year later, when Virginia wrote to a friend who had returned from war and was being cared for in hospital:

A vote of sympathy, congratulation and anticipation of further favours was passed by my Mothers [the Guild]. I said I would hand it on. A great deal of emotion was displayed; you are called “the Lieutenant” – we are having an address on Sex Education next week, and you’ll be surprised to hear that after thinking over the paper on Syphilis for six months or so, they have come to the conclusion that it

is all true and “most valuable”. So although it takes some time, one need never give hope of something or other. I expect they still brood upon what you said.

But the greater part of the references are vague, as in a note where Virginia says she is taking a bath because it’s time for the meeting²⁰, or in another, from Leonard, in a letter Virginia addressed to Lytton Strachey: “I started on Arnold the evening it came [*Eminent Victorians*], and could not stop reading it while V.’s cooperative women sang hymns in the dining room.” Or, in a letter to Vanessa, where she sent news of the talk of their brother, Adrian, about peace.

Yet, the discrepancies between what the ladies thought, and what the women workers thought, even if only hinted at, seem not to have been confined to the distaste of the latter about hearing a talk on venereal disease. The same Mrs. Langston who did not like that talk – and who was helping to create a community kitchen in Virginia’s neighborhood (to which the writer planned to adhere, to escape from the ever present problem of finding a cook), said about the planning of it: “What can you expect of ladies? They don’t know anything.” She thought that they would “make a mess of it” – and the proposed kitchen did not materialize. (1978:152).²¹

Even if in 1919, when she wrote to Roger Fry to say that her role as president of the Guild section in Richmond had ended, she added that she must go to a talk given to the section by a Secretary to the Independent Labour Party, “to represent the middle classes”, and, in 1922, she was present at a Congress of the Guild in Brighton, where Margaret was paid homage and talked to 1600 women workers –when, she confesses, she cried.²²

20 Virginia could be so prudish as her ‘Mothers’. The note says: “Then a compatriot of yours [Nicholas Bagenal, the ‘lieutenant’], called James Joyce, wants us to print his new novel. I should hesitate to put it in the hands of Barbara, even though she is a married woman. The directness of language, and the choice of incidents, if there is any choice, but as far as I can see there’s a certain sameness – have raised a blush even upon such a cheek as mine. Is this an Irish quality? Well, I must immediately wash, for I’m all over printers ink, and the Mothers arrive in 20 minutes. I hardly like to have Joyce even in the next room to them.”

21 A domestic servant of Vanessa had also said to the same Mrs Langston that Virginia did not behave as a lady in relation to her employees, according to one of her letters to her sister about the recurrent problems with them. Id. p. 254. This comment, and other indications in the letters, suggest that there was a network of domestic workers that sometimes superposed the network of the working women in other domains. See the interesting work by Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants*, in which she researches the biographies of Virginia’s domestic servants and points to the many references to them in her correspondence. That Virginia had a clear perception of their lives are testimony her observations in *Flush* and in *The Years*.

22 In another letter to Fry, she spoke of her “private sources of pleasure”- one of them, “a meeting of

About the Congress, she wrote to Janet Case:

Well, it was the greatest success imaginable. First imagine a vast crowd assembled in a gaudy kind of tea caddy all arabesques and horse shoes and chandeliers: but the crowd has nothing rococo about it. No: the coops are sturdy, square headed, and a little drab, considering the weather. Considering Miss Davies too, who, very cool and distinguished looking, chiseled like a Goddess, and yet rather peremptory, enters, precisely at 10, all in grey, but with a sash of kingfisher blue about the bonnet. Cheers, a general standing, sitting down etc. One of the worthys [sic.] then says what an honour this is for Miss Davies: what a woman Miss D. is: how she has devoted her life: how she has changed the women's lot: how she is known, respected, loved, and now she will speak, and they must remember Miss D. is a lady.

Whereupon up gets Margaret: and says that the honour is not hers, but ours (so I feel it myself) – women's in general. At first, she was a little unyielding, and spoke rather statuesquely; but soon this utterly disappeared, and the address, which I do not propose to give verbatim, was superbly spoken – spoken as she might speak up at Hampstead, only with a mastery and fervour, never becoming shrill, and always on the right side of emotion, which took my breath away. The blessed address, which read in type, may sound too general and lofty, as she said it seemed on the contrary very stirring and particular. And far from spreading herself in mild and glorious retrospect, I thought she stood up to the Board and the movement and flicked them very energetically. One man, Leonard say, told another he thought it was just what they wanted; and the other man said yes, it was a splendid speech, and the best they had ever heard. Besides, it was vivid and imaginative. And so I listened to every word; and she spoke till eleven exact, and then left off, without any perorations in the offensive sense, but as if, having spoken her mind, she meant to sit down. In short (and I am scribbling to catch post) it was a dignified and masterly as could be: and as a snob, liking birth and education, I thought to myself that I could see how she ruled them by virtue of these qualities, as well as her own particular genius, which came out, Leonard and I agreed, as we ate our lunch, quite unmistakably. Her vitality, her vigour, addressing

the Women's Cooperative Guild".

this innumerable hardheaded drab middle class, completely conquered. Then came the Mayor, who chucked the Mayoress under the chin, and we all laughed. Then the Mayoress extracted three roses and gave them to Margaret. Then Mr Ray produced a cardboard case and took from it a vermilion gold stamped book, with an illuminated address, which he recited. Her name, he said, will always be remembered among the great. It seemed to me very true and right. Up got Margaret and said with great spirit, and some gratitude, but she was far from obsequious, “Not my name, but the names of Mrs Laurenson, Mrs Reddish, etc.; etc.””, and now”, she said, handing the gilt and crimson to a lackey, “Lets to business – the pleasant part of the Conference now begins...” So she drank her water and sprang her bell. (1978: 534,535).²³

Other letters

Many of Virginia Woolf’s novels, and not only her feminist incursions, certainly could be read as a treason to her class – maybe it was this position as well as her peculiar literary talent, that made her such a conundrum for her critics. Be it as it may, it’s not her letters, as interesting as they are, that give us the memories of British women workers who were pioneers in the fight against their oppression: their own letters recorded their everyday lives – in a way as a counterpoint to the record Virginia made of the everyday lives of elite and middle class women against their own oppression. *Maternity and Life as we have known* it are pungent portraits, certainly pioneering, about the life of women workers in England. Even if Engels had drawn attention to the situation of poor women in his famous work – *The condition of the working class in England* (1845)- he did not go much beyond noting their pauperism. In the letters Margaret edited, specific details of women’s lives – their everyday troubles, the harassment at work, the great number of children, the lack of schools for children, the lack of almost all utilities that already existed in England (electricity, sewage, piped water) amounts in the end to an unacceptable contrast between their lives and the ones of the other Englishmen – and women.²⁴

23 Margaret had retired the year before, but was a guest of honour at the Congress.

24 Virginia herself had suffered with the lack of bathrooms, sewage and hot water in her first houses outside London – as we can read in her letters to her sister. Maybe this was an additional reason for her being sensible to the talks of the women of the Guild. In her first version of her presentation to the *Life*, published

Virginia's *Introductory letter to Margaret Llewelyn Davies* that presents the book is emotive as well as enraged. She begins by saying that no book worth of its name needs a preface and goes on by writing a letter full of emotion to Margaret. She retold the history from where we began – in 1913, when she traveled visiting some of the country's factories. Describing the talks she and Leonard listened to, and the issues addressed (divorce, education, the vote of women, better salaries, less hours of work), she contrasts her “hypocritical” approbation of their talk about their crude lives with her own living experiences, having not anything to do with them; she also tells about her boredom, seeing so many women getting up to say almost the same things, all the time.

The letter is also a kind of *mea culpa*:

They [the women speakers] were worth looking at. Certainly there were no armchairs or electric light, or hot water laid on their lives; no Greek hills or Mediterranean bays in their dreams. Bakers and butchers did not call for orders. They did not sign a cheque to pay the weekly bills, or order, over the telephone, a cheap but quite adequate seat at the Opera. If they traveled it was on excursion day, with food in string bags and babies in their arms. They did not stroll through the house and say, that cover must go to the wash, or those sheets need changing. They plunged their arms in hot water and scrubbed their clothes themselves. In consequence their bodies were tick-set and muscular, their hands were large, and they had the slow emphatic gestures of people who are often stiff and fall tired in a heap of hard-backed chairs. They touched nothing lightly. They gripped papers and pencils as if they were brooms. (1975:xxi).

Sometime after that trip Margaret called them – we supposed that ‘them’ referred to Virginia and Leonard – to hear about their impression of the meetings. Virginia describes the Guild office in London in her peculiar style, and the women who worked there, and their clothes (as in *Night and Day*), among them “Lilian Harris, who was to the Congress what the heart to remoter veins”. She writes that she said to Margaret that “our sympathy was largely fictitious.. aesthetic sympathy.. and uncomfortable.” “It was thus that we tried to describe the contradictory and complex feelings which besets the

in the *Yale Review*, the city becomes Manchester – who knows if it was not an echo of Engels's work?

middle-class visitors when forced to sit out a Congress of working class women in silence.”

Margaret then opened a drawer and showed them a packet of letters which she could not discard. She was a little unwilling to give them up - in fact, she was unwilling for many years, from 1913 to 1930 - but said “that if we read them the women would cease to be symbols and would become instead individuals.” There had been a war, and many were dead, but, finally, there were the letters.

And when at last I began to read, there started up in my mind’s eye the figures that I had seen all those years ago at Newcastle with such bewilderment and curiosity. But they were no longer addressing a large meeting in Newcastle from a platform, dressed in their best clothes. The hot June day with its banners and its ceremonies had vanished, and instead one looked back into the past of the women who had stood there; into the four-roomed room houses of miners, into the homes of small shopkeepers and agricultural labourers, into the field and factories of fifty or sixty years ago, Mrs. Burrow for example, had worked in the Lincolnshire fens when she was eight with forty or fifty other children, and an old man had followed the gang with a long whip in his hand ‘which he did not forget to use’. That was a strange reflection. Most of the women had started work at seven or eight, earning a penny on Saturday for washing a doorstep, or two pence a week for carrying suppers to the men in the iron foundry. They had gone into factories when they were fourteen. They had worked from seven in the morning till eight or nine at night and had made thirteen or fifteen shillings a week. Out of this money they have saved some pence with which to buy their mother gin -she was often very tired in the evening and had borne perhaps thirteen children in as many years; or they fetched opium to assuage some miserable old woman’s ague in the fens. Old Betty Rollett killed herself when she could get no more. They had seen half-starved women standing in rows to be paid for their match-boxes while they snuffed the roast meat of their employer’s dinner cooking within. The smallpox had raged in Bethnal Green and they had known that the boxes went on being made in the sick-room and were sold to the public with the infection on them. They had been so cold working in the wintry fields that they could not run when the ganger gave them leave, They had waded through floods when the Wash overflowed its banks. Kind old ladies had given them parcels of food which had turned out to contain only crusts of bread and rancid bacon rinds. All this they had done and

seen and known when other children were still dabbling in seaside pools and spelling out fairy tales by the nursery fires. (1975:xxx-xxxii)

Virginia thus summed up, better than any of us could do, the pathos of these letters.

But, the letters were not all about disgrace alone; she also drew attention to the indomitable spirit of these women:

Put girls after a childhood of minding smaller brothers and washing doorsteps, into a factory when they are fourteen and their eyes will turn to the window and they will be happy because, as the workroom is six storeys high, the sun can be seen breaking over the hills – and ‘that was always such a comfort and help’. (1975:xxxii).

The “force and obstinacy” of these women were also seen in their readings: Dickens, Burns, Shelley and Scott, extracted from old magazines, that they read while working, a force that “no amount of childbirth and washing” could abate.

In her beautiful and forceful preface that cannot be resumed here, Virginia concludes that the Guild gave those women “a room where they could sit down and think remote from boiling saucepans and crying children” – a room of one’s own in her conception for literate women seen here in a version for working women.

The tireless work of Virginia in the construction of her books, against all prognoses on her mental health, and all the obstacles that she had to face when forcefully interned, may have predisposed her to understand how, beyond all unfavorable circumstances, some women workers still could write something like this:

I have been over the hilltops when the snow drifts were over three feet high, and six feet in some places. I was in a blizzard in Hayfield and thought I should never get round the corners. But it was life on the moors; I seemed to know every blade of grass and where the flowers grew and all the little streams were my companions. (1975:xxxviii).

“Could she have said that better if Oxford had made her a Doctor of Letters?”

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