

A Posthumous Visit by Virginia Woolf

In 1918 Virginia Woolf wrote:

I was taken to Gertler's studio and shown his solid unrelenting teapot. He is a resolute young man; and if good pictures can be made by willing them to be good, he may do wonders.¹

Fifty or more years later walking up the narrow path and approaching the door she writes:

The green door was undoubtedly the same one Virginia knocked on when she paid her visits and the life within hardly less spartan. The latest "unrelenting teapot" was still pouring copious mugs of hot tea; the only difference being that visitors now drank it in front of a TV. January, 1980.

If postcards from the present and diaries from the past could meet, could this then be a dream sequence - a vision of interactive timeframes each imposing and intermingling with the other, meeting at the apex of a highly vaulted glass and wood beamed ceiling (a more recent innovation) and rays of light beaming down onto a stone floor. Could this be a moment of stillness or stasis between one millennium and another (the end of the '70s; this is the dawn of the '80s). Yet just for the moment I have no cognition of newer revelations, newer dispensations, only the faintly mouldering scent of times past and an old bath set in behind a wall. The stove could be just the same and it now heats brown rice and vegetables (that's all we can afford) and a row of teacups dangle on hooks on a ledge. The main feature, the stone fireplace, broods constantly throughout the daytime and far into the night. It grows in strength and vigour. By 8.00 p.m. its sparks jettison out into the room, sometimes landing on the mat. It's the only source of light in that part of the room where people gather. By the fireplace the divan, high bolstered and firmly stuffed with layers of coverings, also serves as a part-time mattress and bed for visitors. To the left of the fireplace commanding the flames in a wooden rickety rocker chair its mistress, rolled cigarette dangling from hand, surveys and cajoles all who enter. Old worn-out and newer stories come and go. In between come snippets of the literary: the tragic, the death unexpected or the note left behind. She shoulders the past like old friends - the ghosts of Bloomsbury

move in and through. Night is a time for storytelling when young men can become quasi-lovers.

In January 1980, she writes:

The studio's interior soared over my head like a glass pyramid. A wooden mezzanine floor was still several feet below an angular glassed ceiling that reflected light down onto the stone flagged floor below. It all felt so airy and expansive in the mild autumn weather.

He might also have had a vaulted ceiling through which light beams could descend onto his latest canvas – with tins of old paint and brushes lying about and an old chair or two. Even now, painted makeshift murals make up the living room walls and there's a mezzanine floor for both sleeping and painting or drawing. Up two flights of steps a bedroom might have done for guests (but no heating – nothing modern – whatsoever).

And then, as always, there is the stove:

Talk at Nessa's last night. Much about Gertler's suicide. He gassed himself two nights ago in his studio.²

Now it's 1917 – the eye then catches an invitation from DL pinned by a mirror – a few words of encouragement. No-one's thought to sell it yet (no-one's yet thought of doing anything). Is there a real ghost story hidden here – is this a message that TIME exists everywhere at once.

She sits and meditates. Is he standing at the canvas, dreaming of – could it be the moment when:

He had got through to a new stage as a painter... his last show, just over was a great advance and very remarkable.³

Not long afterwards, the sounds stop and time falls again into silence.

He used to tell her how literature has a vulgarity that makes it unequal to painting:

The little platform of present time on which I stand is, so far as the weather is concerned, damp and chilly. I look up at my skylight - I look up and see, as if reflecting it, a sky the colour of dirty water. And the inner landscape is much of a piece.⁴

This is what she would do in her writing; in subtle shades of movement, slides moving in and out, sideways, vertically, horizontally, meeting each other

momentarily, like light touching the floor. It was always worth it just to talk. She steps out through the heavy green door and picks her way along the narrow winding path; back out onto the quiet street of the small cul-de-sac. It was beginning to drizzle. It must have been almost 4 o'clock. She would be just in time to catch the Kensington train...

Ann Brown

¹ Bell, A.O. (ed), *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol.V: 1936-1941 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986).

² Bell, 221.

³ Woolf, W, *Moments of Being* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986), 85

⁴ Woolf, 85.