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The remains of several hearts

SUZANNE RAITT

ON 27 DECEMBER 1910, Virginia Stephen ate some hearts at Saxon Sydney-Turner's house in Brighton. Her account of the visit is both intense and dismissive. For a few hours, she glimpsed the contours and colours of lives that were profoundly different from her own. And then she went home. But fourteen years later, she remembered Mrs Turner and her own younger self when she sat down to describe what it means to be a writer. In this essay I ask: when in 1924 Virginia Woolf wrote the famous words that are the seed of this volume, what memories was she reviving? Who was she in December 1910? Why did she pick December, rather than the more obvious May (when George V ascended the throne), or November, when the first Post-Impressionist exhibition opened at the Grafton Galleries. There are only a few published surviving papers from December 1910 – no diary, just a handful of letters; but if we read those letters carefully we see the young Virginia Stephen – not yet 30 years old – staging her own exclusions from life through a series of witty and poignant vignettes, and transforming herself into a writer, one of those curious people who observe the lives of others and make them

their own by writing them down. Virginia Stephen in December 1910 was struggling to re-create her self, a self that had been dissolved by depression for most of the previous year, and her letters from that month show her transforming the pain of feeling left out into a triumph. It was during that month that she started to imagine what it actually meant to be a writer, crafting imaginary, evanescent worlds from which, after the first wild moment of creation, she would forever be excluded.

The experience of something missing is integral even to the phrase 'on or about December 1910'. Why, when Woolf revised the text of the lecture she gave to the Cambridge Heretics in May 1924, adding the sentence 'on or about December 1910 human character changed', did she write 'on' and not 'in'? Every other time that she mentions the date in the essay, she names the year, and not the month (E3: 422 [twice], 427, 433). But when she first announces the date, she writes 'on or about December'. The omitted number haunts the sentence: should it be 'on or about 23 December'? 'on or about 15 December'? What date did she leave out, and why?

Of course, I cannot answer this question. And perhaps the answer is unimportant. In fact, presumably, there is no answer. The absence simply hangs in the sentence: a word we can't hear, a vision we can't see. And this feeling of something missing, something permanently on the edge of our vision, haunts all the images Woolf associates with December 1910, images with rich associations to Woolf's emotional and aesthetic landscapes. It is worth quoting the couple of sentences that follow 'on or about December 1910 human character changed' in full:

I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; and since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910. (E3: 421-2)

There are lots of puzzling things here. First of all, why does 'one' have to go out to witness the change? Isn't 'one' already part of it, as (presumably) a 'human character' oneself? And where is 'one' going out from? The garden suggests some kind of pseudo-pastoral setting, as if the change in human character is something to do with the conventions of art. The flowering rose also conjures up images from poetry: the *Romance of the Rose*, lyric poetry, the quintessential flower of European literature. So does 'one' step out into the 'garden' of poetry and poetic metaphor? But, then, why is a hen there, laying an egg? Suddenly the pastoral mood is lifted in favour of some mundane, faintly comic squawking, hints of food, and the image of a farmer's wife, going out to collect the eggs.

For Woolf, gardens were about art, but they were also about the lost sensual pleasures of the past. One of her earliest memories – one of the 'colour-and-sound memories' from her childhood summers in St Ives – is of leaving a house and looking down on a garden:

I stopped then going down to the beach; I stopped at the top to look down at the gardens. They were sunk beneath the road. The apples were on a level with one's head. The gardens gave off a murmur of bees; the apples were red and gold; there were also pink flowers; and grey and silver leaves. The buzz, the croon, the smell, all seemed to press voluptuously against some membrane; not to burst it; but to hum round one such a complete rapture of pleasure that I stopped; smelt; looked. (MOB: 66)

In this memory the child Virginia witnesses beauty and erotic life from a vantage point on its margins. The hum is all around her but it is not hers; she is both part of and outside it.

Roses also figure in Woolf's account of aesthetic creation in *A Room of One's Own*:

Not a wheel must grate, not a light glimmer. The curtains must be close drawn. The writer, I thought, once his experience is over, must lie back and let his mind celebrate its nuptials in darkness.

He must not look or question what is being done. Rather, he must pluck the petals from a rose or watch the swans float calmly down the river. (AROO: 104)

The image is of a bedroom, with a sleeping or dreaming writer to whom something is being done, who is asked to watch swans (through the window behind the closed curtains?) or to pluck a rose (the only action required of him). Writing is like a kind of active dreaming in which the writer is both inside and outside the action. Even the hens in 'Character in Fiction' evoke this kind of dream. In Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, Rachel Vinrace watches with horrified fascination as women in the courtyard of the hotel she is visiting chop off the heads of chickens for dinner. As she lies delirious in the room where she will die, she sees the hens' heads – or perhaps their eggs – again: 'You see, there they go, rolling off the edge of the hill', she tells Terence, adding 'The old woman with the knife' (VO: 333). Rachel both remembers and creates what she sees.

The images that came into Virginia Woolf's mind when she wrote the words 'on or about December 1910' thus had enormous private significance as symbols of erotic and imaginative intensity in which she was simultaneously witness and creator. Her letters from December 1910 show her in a similar situation in relation to her friends and family. She spent Christmas that year in the Pelham Arms in Lewes with her brother Adrian, going for walks, withdrawing discreetly while Adrian talked on the phone to Duncan Grant, with whom he was having an affair, and writing to Clive and Vanessa Bell in London. She seemed surrounded by couples. Vanessa was preoccupied with her two young children, and even though Clive and Virginia were in the middle of an intense flirtation, Virginia felt slighted by Vanessa's failure to write and by her physical closeness to her children. She told Clive Bell on 29 December that Vanessa ('that old Bitch') finally 'left off suckling her whelps and wrote'; she herself could not concentrate

on reading because Duncan had arrived in Lewes and Adrian and Duncan were 'swarming on the floor, making it like the bottom of an alligators tank' (L1: 445). On 27 December, she went to Brighton to visit Saxon Sydney-Turner and his family. She had been flirting vaguely with him, but on this visit it was his household, and especially his mother, that mesmerized her. 'He lives in a street of small villas', she told Vanessa Bell. 'The house has a great air of poverty. It is too bare to be ugly - linoleum carpets, and only very low fires' (L1: 443). Lunch was 'the remains of several hearts', and after it was over Mrs Turner took Virginia Stephen into a 'bright yellow room stuffed with very cheap objects' and praised Saxon, apparently in an attempt to stimulate her romantic interest in him (L1: 444). The letter captures Mrs Turner's lively yet desperate tone: 'She only wished he could find a good wife! but he showed no signs of it ... one cant imagine Saxon shooting an elephant! but still, if he chose there's nothing he couldn't do' (L1: 444). Virginia was simultaneously troubled by and dismissive of her visit: 'It is such a poverty-stricken middle class family, and if I were as distinguished and nice as Saxon, I should be much more arrogant. ... But of course he is completely placid and sincere, and always remembers his mother's hard lot' (L1: 444). She deliberately distanced herself from the one scene in the December 1910 letters in which she could have played a starring role as Saxon's potential lover, allowing her writerly imagination full rein as she sketched the episode in all its poverty and pathos. She was implicated only so far in what she wrote, and in this instance she turns exclusion into power: 'Think of Ottoline [Morrell], in comparison! - how one might boast of having risen to know her' (L1: 444). She and Adrian, ensconced in their historic inn and dressed with eccentric magnificence (Adrian in a bright pink hat, Virginia in a purple cloak over a red dress), were - in her imagination at least - a million miles away from the genteel pretensions of the Sydney-Turner household.

Fourteen years later Woolf perhaps remembered the feeling of simultaneously witnessing, participating in and defending against the pleasures and minor humiliations of others. 'Character in Fiction', with its lengthy sketch of the encounter between Mrs Brown and Mr Smith on the train, is built around a woman who is cut from the same cloth as Mrs Turner. 'She was one of those clean, threadbare old ladies whose extreme tidiness – everything buttoned, fastened, tied together, mended and brushed up – suggests more extreme poverty than rags and dirt' (E3: 423). Woolf imagines the writer of the essay spending the journey making up extravagant stories about 'Mrs Brown', explaining that Mrs Brown drew the stories out of her without any action on her part: 'Here is Mrs Brown making someone begin almost automatically to write a novel about her' (E3: 425). Even as the essayist is entirely outside the conversation between her two travelling companions and can make little sense of it, she is busy making it her own by retelling it, just as she did the trip to Mrs Turner's sad little house. The condescending tenderness of her description of Mrs Brown – 'very small, very tenacious; at once very frail and very heroic' (E3: 425) – echoes the empathetic and yet defensive tone of her account of her visit to Mrs Turner. Inhabiting the worlds of these poverty-stricken old women allows her by some kind of alchemy to become one of them, as if she actually was Saxon's fiancée, if only for a moment.

So when, in 'Character in Fiction', Woolf describes the tiny, tenacious woman stepping off the train and walking back into her own life, whom is she writing about? Is it Mrs Brown who is so frail and so heroic? Or is it the woman who, on Christmas Eve 1910, got off the train at Lewes station and used her dog's ticket rather than her own by mistake? During her stay at the Pelham Arms, Virginia Stephen decided she needed to find a house to rent outside London, where she could escape the crowds and the stimulation. She had spent much of 1910 either in a nursing home

or staying with the Bells, watching Vanessa's belly swell and trying to establish something of her own by carrying on with Vanessa's husband, clutching at the remains of hearts. But 1911 was a new start. Even though she disliked the house she found in Firle at the end of December 1910 – 'though itself an eyesore, still that don't [sic] matter when one's inside' (L1: 451) – it was the first time she had taken a property alone. She was walking into a life in which she might not need always to be living through others, working out a way to be both part of and apart from their lives. When she returned to December 1910 in 1924, and wrote about a woman on a train, she described someone who both was and was not her, a woman who weeps as she listens to information about caterpillars and oak trees (E3: 424) but gathers herself together before she walks alone, 'carrying her bag, into the vast blazing station' (425).