

A Woolf at the Hogarth Press: Virginia Woolf and the Art of Publishing

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Abstract

Among those publishing houses whose stories continue to fire the public imagination, the Hogarth Press – immortalised most recently in the film adaptation of Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* – occupies a particularly cultish presence. Even in an age of self-publishing, we rarely think to equate publishers with authors: writing and publishing are still considered two different, albeit interdependent, functions of the book trade. For Leonard and Virginia Woolf, however, this was different. When they set up the Hogarth Press in the basement of their Richmond home, it was to become one of the most interesting enterprises in publishing history, bringing together the writing, editing, typesetting, printing and design of some of the most exciting books of the first half of the 20th century.

Key Words

Publishing, Hogarth Press, Virginia Woolf, Bloomsbury, Modernism, T. S. Eliot, Independent Publishing

Introduction

This essay will trace the growth of the Hogarth Press from a private, husband–wife enterprise into the quirky yet successful publishing house that would go on to publish the likes of T. S. Eliot, Katherine Mansfield, Sigmund Freud and Christopher Isherwood. Its central focus, however, will be the special effect Virginia’s new found role as publisher of her own work – and that of some of the seminal figures of Modernism – had on her as a practitioner. It will be argued that this unique situation had a big influence on her shaping and emergence as one of the greatest writers of her generation.

The Birthday Pact

The decision to establish the Hogarth Press was taken, it seems, on Virginia Woolf’s thirty-third birthday. Virginia records the occasion in her diary entry for that day:

Sitting at tea we decided three things: in the first place to take Hogarth, if we can get it; in the second, to buy a Printing press; in the third, to buy a Bull dog, probably called John (Woolf 1915, 28).

The purchase of Hogarth House was a done deal – but it would be two years before the Woolfs would procure a small hand press and install it in the basement of their Richmond home.

Buying the press, however, was only the beginning. Neither Leonard nor Virginia knew how to operate the press, and their attempts to learn the trade were unsuccessful as evening

courses were only open to trade union apprentices. This, however, did not deter the Woolfs: a few fumbling, clumsy attempts saw them teach themselves how to set, lock, ink and print type. This was to be the start of a lifelong adventure perfectly suited to one of the most influential literary couples of the early 20th century.

There are different accounts as to why the Woolfs purchased the press in the first place. In his autobiography, Leonard recounts how he believed the press would provide an ideal distraction for Virginia, prone to bouts of manic depression while absorbed in writing one of her novels. “The difficulty with Virginia,” he writes, “was to find any play sufficiently absorbing [...] It struck me that it would be a good thing if Virginia had a manual occupation of this kind which, in say the afternoons, would take her mind completely off her work” (L. Woolf 1964, 94). It is difficult to ignore the irony in Leonard’s claim that “play” – rest, relief – had also to be “sufficiently absorbing” for Virginia. He was not wrong, however, to intuit that the physicality of the printing process would prove a thoroughly therapeutic enterprise. “Printing was earnest, skilled play. Printing required dedication. It was undeniably manual [...] messy and inky, and thoroughly satisfying to body and mind” (Willis 1992, 4).

But to stop there would be to ignore an even more pressing ambition behind the Woolfs’ procurement of the hand press. “Starting the Hogarth Press gave the Woolfs the pleasure of printing their own work” (Willis 1992, 43), and this is perhaps an equally important consideration. In fact, the very first Hogarth Press publication, entitled *Two Stories*, was a collaboration between the Woolfs and included Virginia’s short story ‘The Mark on the Wall’

and Leonard's 'Three Jews'. Virginia meticulously set the type herself, while Leonard operated the hand press, due to a constant tremor that impeded him from handling the type. Woolf describes the experience in a letter to her sister, Vanessa: "Anyhow its very amusing to try with these short things, and the greatest mercy to be able to do what one likes – no editors, or publishers, and only people to read who more or less like that sort of thing" (Woolf 1919, 120). This is a sentiment that Virginia reiterates again and again, and, as we will see, becomes something of a revelation in relation to her future as a writer.

New Beginnings

Virginia Woolf had already published two novels, *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919) under the Duckworth insignia – founded by Virginia's stepbrother, Gerald Duckworth – prior to the setting up of the Hogarth Press. But when it came to Virginia's most recent novel, *Jacob's Room* (1922), the Woolfs decided to take the publication into their own hands, as the Hogarth Press. This was an exciting departure for Virginia, and gave her her first taste of freedom as the writer, editor and publisher of her work. "The completion and publication of the novel led Virginia, as Leonard observed in his autobiography, to a 'period of great fertility'" (L. Woolf quoted in Willis 1992, 61).

As Willis continues to observe:

What began as a recreation became a necessity. Virginia Woolf's genius surely would have survived in some form under any publisher, but it developed as it did in the novels and essays because she was free from editorial pressures, real or imagined, and needed to

please only herself, an editor severe enough for all seasons (Willis 1992, 44).

The implication is that her involvement in shaping and manually producing the physical copy of the book, that had inhabited her tortured imagination for so long worked as a form of catharsis so powerful it led to a heightening of Virginia's creative powers and brought about a greater desire to write.

It is also interesting to note here that, although the process of self-publishing gave her the freedom she needed to achieve creative fertility, it was this unbridled creativity that often knocked her off balance and brought on long periods of mental collapse. It was then that the manual laboriousness of days of typesetting in the basement served to ease the nerves and restore the balance to allow her to work again. This makes it easy to understand just how all-consuming Virginia's involvement in the press actually was.

The Hogarth Press became Virginia's main publisher in the years that followed, and would continue to publish her work, under Leonard's watchful eye, even after her death in 1941.

Building Words in Type

The Woolfs did not only publish their own work, however. Initially, in setting up the press, they were interested only in printing and disseminating the works of those close to them – friends, among them some of the most influential members of the Bloomsbury Group: Lytton Strachey, E. M. Forster, Maynard Keynes, Clive Bell. But by the early years of the 1920s, the Hogarth Press had been responsible for publishing some of the most influential

authors of the day. In 1922, the manuscript for T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* fell into the hands of the Woolfs. Eliot was an acquaintance, and the Hogarth Press had already published a book edition of his Poems. "It was not until the end of 1922 that Tom gave us *The Waste Land* to read," writes Leonard; "we agreed to publish it; printed it ourselves and published it on September 12, 1923" (L. Woolf 1964, 245). This was a great accomplishment for the fledgling publishing house, and was, as Willis observes, "a shrewd publishing decision" on the part of the Woolfs (Willis 1992, 74). It is Virginia, however, who seems to have been most affected by the decision to publish *The Waste Land*. In a letter to her friend Barbara Bengal she writes, "I have just finished setting up the whole of Mr. Eliot's [*sic*] poem with my own hands: You see how my hand trembles" (Woolf 1923, 56). In later correspondence with Eliot following the book's publication, he thanks her for what he acknowledges to have been the challenging task of typesetting his poem. Thus emerges the wonderful image of Virginia Woolf acting as a midwife of sorts to bring into being one of the seminal works of British Modernism. "What is the impact, one might wonder," asks one Woolf biographer, "on an author of a poem she not only reads but sets up in type?" (Rosenbaum 1995, 8).

Eliot's poem was not the only other important literary work that Virginia Woolf was involved in typesetting: from Katherine Mansfield to Sigmund Freud and Maxim Gorki, she came into close contact with the works of the authors she admired, as she prepared them for print. And being in touch, quite literally, in such a physical manner with the literature of her peers led the way to a more intimate interaction with their work than she would otherwise have

had the opportunity. Thus begins Woolf's visceral liaison with words: words alive, begetting other words – the living language of literature. "A word is not a single and separate entity," she writes in 1937, "but part of other words. It is not part of a word indeed until it is part of a sentence" (Woolf [1937] 2009, 38).

It can be argued, therefore, that Woolf's particular conceptualization of a "living" language is the result of the special relationship with words that the process of typesetting had opened her up to. "The writer is imagined as a kind of mental compositor, and the reader is invited to think of the book not as a fixed object, but as a process – something like the process that goes into typesetting" (Lee 1999, 368). She begins to view the process of typesetting as an analogy for the process of writing:

Books are made of tiny little words, which a writer shapes, often with great difficulty, into sentences of different lengths, placing one on top of another, never taking his eye off them, sometimes building them quite quickly, at other times knocking them down in despair, and beginning all over again (Woolf [1925] 2009, 96).

Language, then, is no longer static or glued to the page. Words exist as real "objects" that can be seen, handled, touched, broken apart. Language, it seems, can be constructed, words made to interact and sit alongside one another in different and unconventional combinations. And as a result – and most pertinently – the visual appearance of words becomes as important as what the words mean. Woolf's days in the Hogarth House

basement forced her into a strange new relationship with her craft and opened her up to the possibility of linguistic and aesthetic experimentation.

It is a fair observation that with each novel published, Virginia Woolf's writing moves further and further away from conventional form, and closer to an aesthetic that reflects her overarching concern with language. In an essay entitled 'Life and the Novelist', and elsewhere, she lays out her artistic vision – how to make language capture what it is to be alive:

Taste, sound, movement, a few words here, a gesture there, a man coming in, a woman going out, even the motor that passes in the street or the beggar who shuffles along the pavement, and all the reds and blues and lights and shades of the scene (Woolf 1960, 41).

This passage immediately calls to mind the opening scene of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), for instance, where the pulse of London life comes flooding through Clarissa Dalloway's windows one early morning. But it is in *The Waves*, published in 1931, that we really see Woolf's playful consciousness of form – and the blocks of language lining up to create solid images:

And, what is this moment of time, this particular day in which I have found myself caught? The growl of traffic might be any uproar – forest trees or the roar of wild beasts. Time has whizzed back an inch or two on its reel; our short progress has been cancelled. I think also that our bodies are in truth naked. We are only lightly covered with buttoned cloth; and

beneath these pavements are shells, bones, silence (Woolf [1931] 2000, 63).

Fun at the Fringe

In addition to editing and typesetting, Virginia Woolf was also involved in decisions pertaining to the physical appearance of the books published by the Hogarth Press. Unlike printing, this aspect of bookmaking was not uncharted territory. In her youth, Virginia had begun binding her own books, experimenting with different materials for the cover and establishing her own binding style. The Hogarth Press adopted a simple, straightforward approach towards the appearance and cover design of their publications, and despite the small size of initial print runs, neither Leonard nor Virginia had any interest in creating artifacts of their books. Books were made to be read, as far as the Woolfs were concerned, and the inspiration for the Hogarth Press was more Roger Fry's Omega Workshop than Morris's Kelmscott Press (Willis 1992, 44–54).

Virginia Woolf's involvement in the book's visual element also opened up new possibilities to the author–publisher. Aside from the book cover, Virginia also had access to all the paratextual material – usually the remit of the publisher alone. The notion of 'paratext' derives from Gérard Genette's conception of the word:

More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold. [...] It is an 'undefined zone' between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse about the text), and edge, or, as Philippe Lejeune put it, a

‘fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one’s whole reading of the text’. Indeed, this fringe, always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but of transaction: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public (Genette 1997, 50).

It could be argued that it was Virginia Woolf’s role of publisher – rather than her writerly self – that made her conscious of the potential influence of the paratext on the reader. And it was her privileged position as author and publisher that allowed her to engage in a playful *jeu d’esprit* in her pseudo-biography, *Orlando* (1928).

Orlando: a Biography caused a bit of a stir when, “soon after its publication, the Hogarth Press received reports that bookshops were insisting on shelving it not with novels, but with real biographies” (Lee 1999, 108). The reasons for this lie within the carefully planted paratextual cues: the title, preface, acknowledgments, index and illustrations. For anyone unaware of Mrs Woolf’s wicked sense of humour, these paratexts parading as framing devices bear all the signs of authenticity. But a closer look reveals a trail of tricks meant to lead the reader astray: is that Angelica Bell parading as the Russian Princess? In her attempts to poke fun at the tired and dry genre of biography, Virginia goes as far as tampering with every aspect of the genre, including that which lies outside the actual body of the text. As a publisher, it seems it is possible for her to have the last laugh.

Conclusion

Virginia Woolf's role as a publisher is often overshadowed by her status as one of the foremost writers of the early 20th century. To overlook the incredible influence that her active involvement in the Hogarth Press has had on her thinking and approach to her literary practice, however, would be a grave oversight. Publishing her own work taught her to wrestle with words before she put them down on paper, while setting type for some of the literary giants of the Modernist era challenged her into a new understanding of language and the possibilities of form.

Without the Hogarth Press, Woolf's propensity for experimentation may not have come into fruition. The press gave her a freedom on all fronts that women writers in her position could only dream of: "She was," Willis, quoting Woolf, writes "'the only woman in England free to write what I like.' The press, beyond doubt, had given Virginia a room of her own" (Willis 1992, 400).

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