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## PAPER HEARTS: THE CORRESPONDENCE OF VIRGINIA WOOLF AND LYTTON STRACHEY, 1906-1931

Frances Hooper, a 1914 graduate of Smith College and successful businesswoman from Chicago, donated the original correspondence of Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey (140 letters) to her alma mater in 1985. She purchased the witty correspondence of her British contemporaries, as well as fifty additional Virginia Woolf manuscripts, directly from Leonard Woolf through Hamill & Barker and other booksellers. Over 250 Hogarth Press publications and early editions of Woolf (some previously owned by Strachey) are also part of the Frances Hooper Collection in the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts.

For twenty-five years Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey discussed in their correspondence the books that they were reading. Many of their opinions were later published in *The Times Literary Supplement* and the *Spectator*. Woolf judged Fyodor Dostoyevsky 'the greatest writer ever born' (1 September 1912) after reading *Crime and Punishment*, while she initially thought James Joyce's *Ulysses* 'merely the scratching of pimples on the body of the bootboy at Claridges' (24 August 1922). Strachey, an authority on Jean Racine, thought John Masefield's adaptation of *Esther* deplorable: 'He converts Racine's exquisite silk, length after length of it, into odd patches of rough canvass' (10 February 1922). They both agreed on the work of Henry James. 'His novels are really remarkable for their lack of humour', noted Strachey from Rye on 3 January 1909, while

Woolf characterized James's writing as 'faintly tinged rose water' (22 October 1915).

In addition to books, Woolf and Strachey discussed their own writing, often giving constructive criticism and support to each other. Woolf inaugurated her dazzling string of novels with *The Voyage Out* in 1915. While her fame grew slowly, Strachey was immediately



Virginia Woolf at Garsington, June 1923.

Courtesy Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College

lionized after he published *Eminent Victorians* in 1918. It was the first in his series of popular satiric biographies. Strachey dedicated *Queen Victoria* to Woolf: 'you're more unlike Old Vic than anyone else in the world, it's only proper that she should be inscribed to you' (24 January 1921). Woolf thought it was a 'luxurious' biography, full of 'meat & bone & guts' (17 April 1921). Instead of a novel, Woolf dedicated her first selection of essays, *The Common Reader*, to Strachey in 1925. It was an appropriate choice for her fellow essayist who found them a classic.

Virginia Woolf's goal in writing was 'to give voice to some of the perplexities of her sex' (28 January 1909). Her letters – like her novels – are populated with evocative descriptions of obscure people like Miss Hosmer from Newnham who 'breeds guinea pigs for the spots on their tails' (7 December 1908). During her visit to Cornwall on 30 March 1921, Woolf is similarly entranced by the visionary theosophist Mr Marr who 'wears boots with soles like slabs of beef' while his wife is 'all blue, with orange hair, & cryptic ornaments, serpents, you know, swallowing their tails in token of eternity round her neck'.

In contrast to the hypocrisy of the Victorian age, Strachey hoped that the well-written literature of the future would 'tell the truth, & be indecent, & amusing, & romantic' (8 November 1912). He longed to live in the future, 'when books will pour out from the press reeking with all the filth of Petronius, all the frenzy of Dostoevsky, all the romance of the *Arabian Nights*, and all the exquisiteness of Voltaire!' His letters – like his biographies – are full of wickedly humorous observations and anecdotes.

### PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

While the correspondence between Woolf and Strachey focuses on the topics of reading and writing, it is the physical letters themselves that reveal the differences in their personalities. Strachey, a fastidious Cambridge-trained historian who based his biographies on the correspondence of his subjects, usually wrote on beautifully engraved cream-coloured

stationery with black ink in a neat evenly-spaced hand. His parents selected Joynson's parchment for their London stationery. After his father's death on 12 February 1908, Strachey wrote on the customary black-edged paper of mourning for a year. Later, when Strachey lived in a *ménage-à-trois* at the Mill House in Tidmarsh, Berkshire, with Dora Carrington and Ralph Partridge, he also chose Joynson superfine stationery followed by Emissary bond. The last stationery that he used, at Ham Spray House in Hungerford, was appropriately called Kingsway superfine. Graphic watermarks changed from an image of St Regulus on the paper he used at 67 Belsize Park Gardens in London in 1909, where he lived with his mother, to an arum lily at Tidmarsh. Strachey saved every piece of his voluminous correspondence, carefully preserving it in scrapbooks for posterity. Consequently, there are twice as many letters from Virginia Woolf represented in the collection.

By contrast, Virginia Woolf delighted in colour and variety, writing in a hurried spidery hand with black, blue, and violet-colored inks on odd sizes of paper. There are even two letters in pencil. Her earlier correspondence from 29 Fitzroy Square, where she lived with her brother Adrian, is restrained in appearance. She initially wrote with black ink on Exchequer superfine stationery, watermarked with an image of a unicorn. After her marriage to Leonard Woolf on 10 August 1912, however, her letters become notably diverse. She writes on a variety of blue papers (Kent, James Sons, Towgood fine, and Strathdon), cream-coloured papers (St Winifred, Society cream, Charing Cross vellum, and Avalon superfine), and claims that her 16 November 1912 letter from 13 Clifford Inn is written on 'bumf' or toilet paper. Ironically, her bum-fodder epistle is about the art of letter writing: 'my objection to letters is that they were all written in the 18th Century, an age I find unloveable.'

Some Woolf letters even look like mismatched mongrels. For example, she begins a 28 December 1917 letter from

13 Clarendon Lane

Nov. 16<sup>th</sup> ['12]

Really, if you go on writing, ~~as~~ you will  
 initiate John Baileys stock phrase 'The art  
 of letter writing is dying out -' Of  
 course my objection to letters is that they  
 were all written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and  
 ago I find unlovable. Still, there  
 seems no reason why we shouldn't write  
 letters even upon the 16<sup>th</sup> of November - any  
 how why you shouldn't. Of course for a  
 wife & a woman the case is different.  
 Do the race horses champ beneath you?  
 I dreamt of race horses all night which is  
 partly why I take up the pen - when I  
 ought to be reading & writing. (But it  
 is rather inspiring. I feel like a child  
 switching off the head of poppies - its such  
 a joke now, writing reviews, & I once took it  
 seriously. Poor old Wrenn was here  
 again yesterday, writes his despatch bag, in

Asheham in black ink on cream-coloured Singapore paper and continues on a small piece of yellow waste paper in blue ink, noting that her nephew Julian had splashed cocoa on it. Although the letter looks slapdash, Woolf obviously proofread it before sending it to Strachey because there are blue ink corrections on the first leaf. In this same letter from Asheham, watermarked with a rooster, Woolf mentions 'crowing & cocking' and speculates that losing one's parts in the war sends the semen to the surface 'to splash & sparkle like phosphorescent cod's roe from every glance'. There is the self-conscious cleverness in her correspondence with Strachey of a young writer practising her craft before a formidable audience.

After Virginia and Leonard Woolf purchased a small hand press in April 1917, all of their subsequent letterheads from the



*Book jacket designed by Vanessa Bell for Virginia Woolf & Lytton Strachey Letters London: Hogarth Press, 1956.*

Hogarth Press are hand-printed in black, blue, and red ink. A prospectus for the first publication of the Hogarth Press – *Two Stories* by Leonard and Virginia Woolf illustrated with woodcuts by Dora Carrington – was received by Lytton Strachey on 12 May 1917. It was followed by a gaudy invoice on 11 November 1924 from 52 Tavistock Square printed in bright green ink on gold paper, annotated by Woolf in violet ink.

Unlike Strachey, Woolf was somewhat cavalier in her treatment of his letters, displaying little regard for posterity. For example, a 17 July 1916 letter from Garsington (where Woolf's rival, the 'very amusing and sufficiently mysterious' Katherine Mansfield was a weekend guest) is singed at the bottom, probably from Woolf's cigarette. Five letters that Strachey wrote between 1916 and 1918 are severely water damaged, others are grimy, and some are missing. It is ironic that every flutter of Woolf's pen, including 101 letters and postcards, have been preserved in this collection while Strachey's 39 surviving letters had to brave floods and fire.

#### PUBLICATION OF THE LETTERS

A selection of the Woolf-Strachey correspondence was published by the Hogarth Press in 1956, with a book jacket designed by Vanessa Bell. James Strachey and Leonard Woolf, who edited the edition, clearly marked twenty-three textual omissions with bracketed ellipses and substituted random initials for the names of twenty-three people unfavourably described, such as Henry Lamb with his 'evil goat's eyes' (Woolf, 4 January 1909). The deleted passages often relate to the love life of their friends. For example, Strachey's description of Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant as a 'vision of wedded bliss' (after the birth of their daughter Angelica) was omitted from the end of his 28 September 1919 letter. Lady Ottoline Morrell with her striking looks was another favourite object of Strachey's unprintable, and, at times, cruel comments: 'her bladder has now gone the way of her wits – a melancholy dribble; and then, as she sits after dinner in the lamplight, her cheek-

pouches drooping with peppermints, a cigarette between her false teeth, and vast spectacles on her painted nose, the effect produced is extremely agitating' (19 September 1922).

In the 1970s, Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann published Virginia Woolf's letters in six volumes. The editors used a microfilm of the Woolf-Strachey correspondence to restore omissions. Because the microfilm was incomplete, three or four passages remained elusive. The 'weak man' Woolf met at Oxford in February 1909, for example, was the classical scholar Gilbert Murray and not the historian H.A.L. Fisher, who commissioned Strachey's first book, *Landmarks in French Literature*. Another unpublished passage relates to Clive Bell. Woolf tells Strachey on 24 May 1918: 'It's amusing to see you & Pot Boilers arm in arm wherever one looks – though the Times did its best to put poor Clive in his place.' Bell had the misfortune of publishing his book of essays at the same time as *Eminent Victorians*.

About thirty-two letters were never published. They include an 11 June 1918 congratulatory telegram from Leonard and Virginia Woolf after ex-prime minister H.H. Asquith praised *Eminent Victorians* at an Oxford lecture. Most of the unpublished pieces, however, are invitations to tea, written on halfpenny or penny postcards. Some notes contain important information; for example, a blotchy postscript to Woolf's 13 February 1912 postcard – 'sorry to be so sleepy & incompetent' – foreshadows one of her milder mental breakdowns. Three days later she asked Strachey for the memoirs of Mary Berry to read at Jean Thomas's nursing home in Twickenham where she periodically went for 'rest cures'.

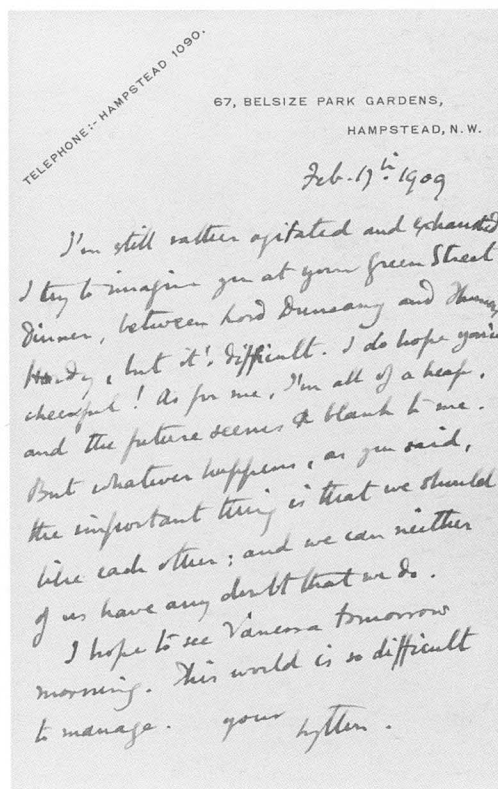
#### SALUTATIONS AND SIGNATURES

The correspondence between Woolf and Strachey began in 1906 after Virginia's elder brother Thoby died of typhoid fever. At Virginia Stephen's invitation, 'Mr Strachey' along with Thoby Stephen's other friends from Cambridge were asked to 46 Gordon

Square 'to talk', which they did about every topic imaginable, from sex to politics (22 November 1906). As a result, formal salutations were dropped in subsequent letters.

Woolf and Strachey briefly played a letter-writing game in 1909. While Woolf signed her letters 'Eleanor Hadyng', Strachey chose the more flamboyant name of 'Vane Hatherly'. These contrasting pseudonyms illustrate the differences between their personalities. An ideal evening for Woolf was 'a fire & an arm chair, silence, & hours of solitude' (20 November 1908). Strachey's dream, on the other hand, was to 'go out to dinner every night, and then to a party or an opera, and then I should have a champagne supper, and then I should go to bed in some wonderful person's arms' (27 January 1909).

Lytton and Virginia were briefly engaged in 1909. Strachey was attracted to Virginia's



Manuscript letter to Virginia Stephen from Lytton Strachey, written 17 February 1909, after Strachey's marriage proposal.

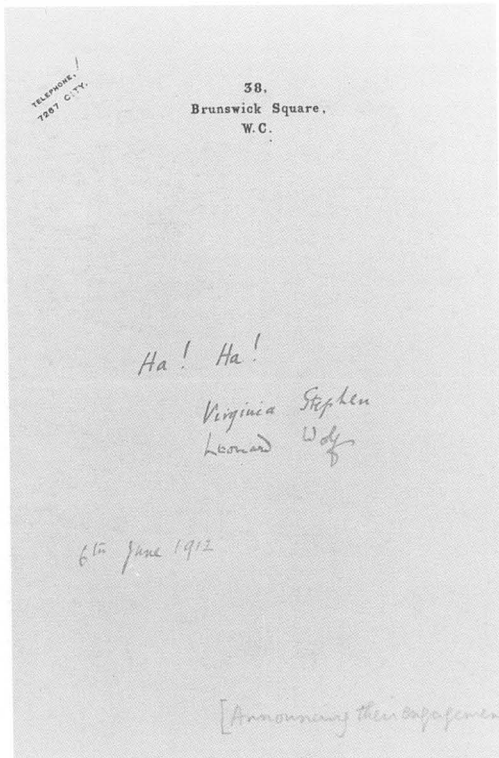
acute intellect, admiring her ability to 'see life steadily and see it whole' (27 September 1908). Lytton proposed on 17 February 1909, but withdrew the offer immediately when he realized they were not in love. He wrote in a 'heap' later that day, noting that whatever happens 'the important thing is that we should like each other; and we can neither of us have any doubt that we do'. Strachey then encouraged his friend Leonard Woolf to court her. Virginia and Leonard wrote a cryptic note [see below] to Strachey on 6 June 1912 announcing their engagement.

The first picture postcard in the collection depicts Alfoxton House in Somerset where William and Dorothy Wordsworth stayed in 1797. It was mailed on 16 August 1912 while Virginia and Leonard Woolf were on their honeymoon. Leonard was studying Spanish in preparation for their extended trip to Europe. He was a practical man who

capably arranged the details of their life together the way Carrington was later to fuss over Strachey's delicate physical health, freeing each author to write. Virginia, a relatively unknown journalist in 1912, was reading *The Heir of Redclyffe*, a romance by Charlotte Yonge. The postcard marks the first time that Adeline Virginia Stephen, or A.V.S. as she signed her early correspondence with Strachey, used the initials for Virginia Woolf, the name she would publish under for the rest of her life.

The beginning of Lytton Strachey's mature literary persona can be traced to 1912 as well. Like Woolf, Giles Lytton Strachey, or G.L.S. as he signed his early correspondence, began to use his middle name. In 1912 he published his first essay under the name of Lytton Strachey in *The Edinburgh Review*. It was a review of Mrs Paget Toynbee's edition of the *Lettres de la Marquise du Deffand à Horace Walpole*, focusing on the hopeless love of the blind, elderly French woman for the young British dilettante. In his psychologically perceptive essay 'Mary Berry', about Walpole's similar infatuation for a much younger woman, Strachey wrote that between these two women, Madame du Deffand and Mary Berry, 'the figure of Horace Walpole makes a strange appearance – a creature all vanity, elegance, insinuation, and finesse – by far the most feminine of the three.'

The bowdlerized text of the sixteen-volume British edition of Horace Walpole's letters, edited by Dr and Mrs Paget Toynbee between 1903 and 1925, particularly rankled with Strachey, who was against censorship in any form. He wrote several unfavourable reviews. Virginia Woolf also reviewed various editions of Horace Walpole's correspondence during her career, including the edition published by the Yale University Press between 1937 and 1983. She was attracted to Walpole's spontaneous, entertaining letters which were more like conversations than studied essays. The Yale edition, edited by Wilmarth S. Lewis, was impossible to criticize, according to Woolf in 'Two Antiquaries: Walpole and Cole'. She concluded her review by saying Walpole 'is the



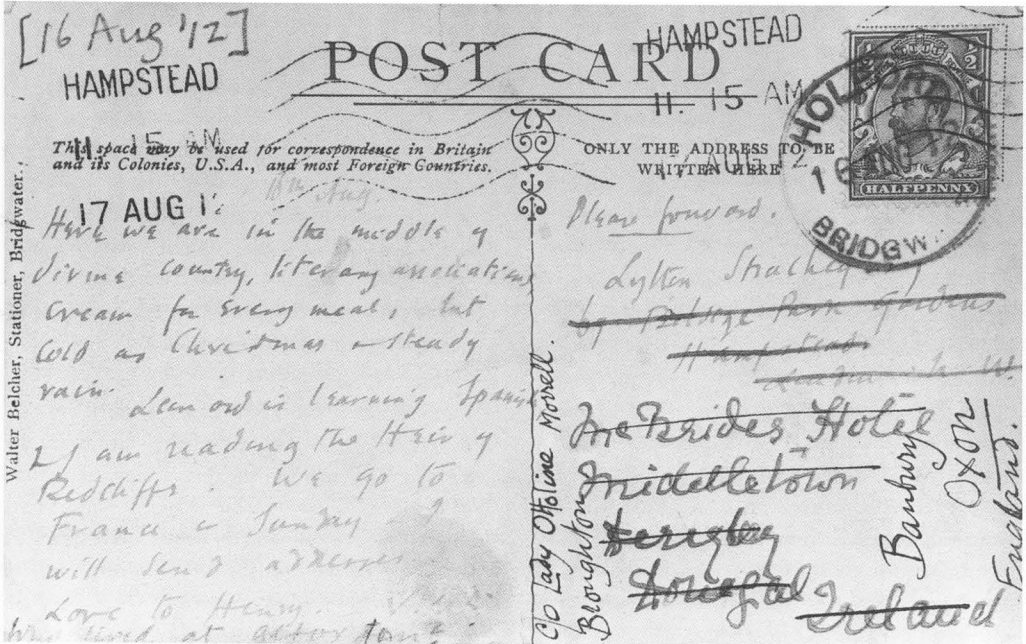
Manuscript letter to Lytton Strachey from Virginia Stephen and Leonard Woolf, written 6 June 1912, announcing their engagement.

PAPER HEARTS



Courtesy Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College

Picture postcard of Alfoxton House, Holford.



Verso of above postcard:  
 to Lytton Strachey from Virginia Woolf, mailed 16 August 1912, on her honeymoon.

best company in the world – the most amusing, the most intriguing – the strangest mixture of ape and Cupid that ever was.’

While Woolf also appreciated Strachey’s exotic personality, once describing him as ‘an oriental potentate, in a flowered dressing gown’ (30 August 1908), she clearly identified Strachey’s scholarly side with her revered father. For example, she addressed her 6 November 1911 letter to Strachey as ‘Dearest Papa’ from your ‘affectionate daughter’. Strachey often read Leslie Stephen’s works for inspiration, including his short biographies in the *Dictionary of National Biography* and Stephen’s articles in the *Cornhill Magazine* about writers like Horace Walpole: ‘the history of England, throughout a very large segment of the eighteenth century, is simply a synonym for the works of Horace Walpole’ (25 (1872): 718). Woolf addressed Strachey as ‘Prof. G. Strachey’ on a 17 November 1926 postcard after he received an honorary degree at Edinburgh. Strachey had delivered the Leslie Stephen lecture at Cambridge on 6 June 1925.

The last unpublished picture postcard in the collection, mailed to Strachey on 15 May 1931, includes a reproduction of George Eliot from the National Portrait Gallery and a printed passage on the verso: George Eliot ‘stretched the capacity of fiction, and forced it not only to tell a story and reflect manners but to contain the comment and criticism of a large mind brooding over life. Virginia Woolf.’ Thus, in less than twenty years, Woolf had become a famous author and recognized authority on English literature.

#### DEATH AND DREAMS

Death marked the end of Strachey’s long correspondence with Woolf, as it had signalled its beginning in 1906. Strachey published his

last biography, *Elizabeth and Essex*, in 1928. His portrait of the aging queen depended upon his relationship with his domineering mother for some of its emotional force. Shortly after its publication, Strachey’s mother died. Virginia Woolf wrote Lady Strachey’s obituary for *The Nation*. Lytton thanked her from Ham Spray House on 21 December 1928 in his last letter of the collection: ‘Nobody in the world but you could have produced such a perfect piece. It is absolutely right – most beautiful, most ingenious – moving too.’

Woolf sent an affectionate letter to ‘the bearded serpent’ on 10 December 1931 from his ‘old & attached friend Virginia’. It was her last letter to Strachey. She imagined him reading Shakespeare and ‘occasionally making a note very neatly in a very beautiful book’. Actually, he was dying of stomach cancer. Without knowing he was ill, Woolf wrote because she had had a dream the

night before, ‘more vivid than real life’, in which they were watching a play together; ‘suddenly you, who were sitting across a gangway in a row in front, turned & looked at me, & we both went into fits of laughter.’

## An affectionate letter to ‘the bearded serpent’ ... from his ‘old & attached friend Virginia’.

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