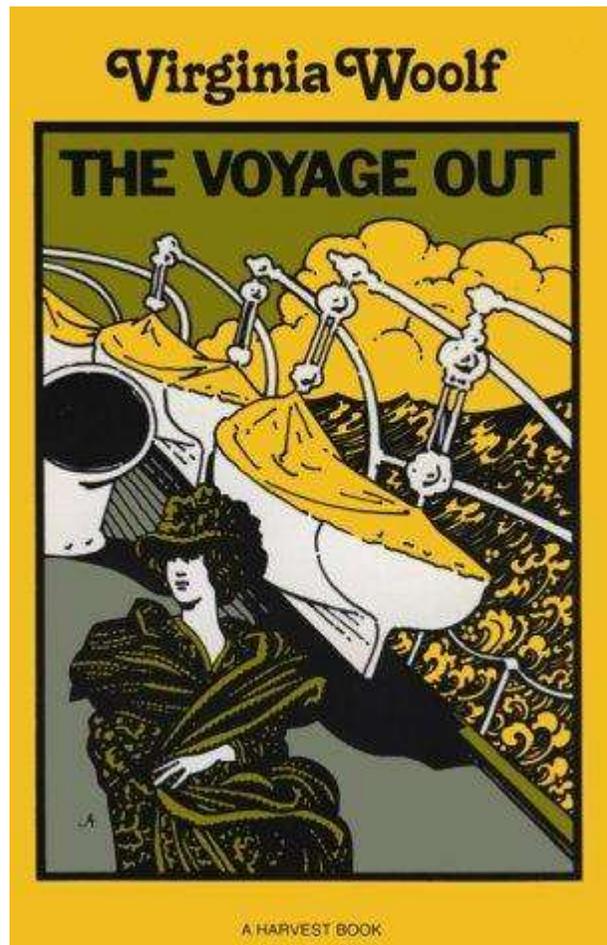


Virginia Woolf (1882-1941): *The Voyage Out* (1915)



When I was in college I was fortunate enough to take a seminar on Virginia Woolf. We read eight or nine of her novels (in chronological order), as well as *A Room of One's Own*, *Three Guineas*, and essays from her Common Reader series.

I had never read any Woolf before and aside from knowing she was a famous woman writer, I knew little about her or her work. The first novel we read was *The Voyage Out*. One of the characters is Rachel, who at first rather drifts along with events. She's a young woman who has not yet come into her own or decided what she hopes to become. She joins her aunt and uncle on an ocean trip to South America.

Here is the passage that resonated with me so strongly that though I have not re-read the novel in thirty years, it continues to live in me, suggestive and fruitful. Rachel feels separate from two older married women (one of whom is Clarissa Dalloway!) who begin to talk about their children (Chapter 4, page 57 in the Harvest/HBJ edition pictured):

Instead of joining them as they began to pace the deck, Rachel was indignant with the prosperous matrons, who made her feel outside their world and motherless, and

turning back, she left them abruptly. She slammed the door of her room, and pulled out her music. It was all old music—Bach and Beethoven, Mozart and Purcell—the pages yellow, the engraving rough to the finger. In three minutes she was deep in a very difficult, very classical fugue in A, and over her face came a queer remote impersonal expression of complete absorption and anxious satisfaction. Now she stumbled; now she faltered and had to play the same bar twice over; but an invisible line seemed to string the notes together, from which rose a shape, a building. She was so far absorbed in this work, for it was really difficult to find how all these sounds should stand together, and drew upon the whole of her faculties, that she never heard a knock at the door. It was burst impulsively open, and Mrs. Dalloway stood in the room, leaving the door open, so that a strip of the white deck and of the blue sea appeared through the opening. The shape of the Bach fugue crashed to the ground.

The description of what is now called “flow,” the state of being involved in some demanding and satisfying work, is remarkable—how Rachel is beyond herself, beyond personality almost, lost in something greater or more. The difficulties are indeed challenging, but you don’t care, because you are dedicated to what you are creating or doing. The image of fitting together notes to create the building of the fugue rings true to me because I often conceive (receive?) visual images when listening attentively to music. And then, the interruption, the intrusion of something or someone outside you and the work, and it comes crashing down, or slips away like beads from a snapped string. Reading this showed me that artistic effort could be real and valuable even in one who might not pursue art as a calling or a career. The discipline of creating beauty, of understanding truth by means of art, is worthwhile in itself, even apart from the pleasure or edification it may provide to others.

Later in the book, in Chapter 22, Rachel is again playing, and again is absorbed in the difficult task of creating a structure. Her fiancé likes “the impersonality which [playing] produced in her,” but he nevertheless insists on interrupting her when he wants her to listen to his thoughts on women as a category (page 291):

Rachel said nothing. Up and up the steep spiral of a very late Beethoven sonata she climbed, like a person ascending a ruined staircase, energetically at first, then more laboriously advancing her feet with effort until she could go no higher and returned with a run to begin at the very bottom again.

(I am omitting a discussion of what happens next—namely, her fiancé pesters her until she stops practicing. That is a topic for another day.)

All this is encouraging to me, as an unpublished writer. The time I spend wrestling with a story, with images, with words, is not ill-spent or wasted. But these passages also remind me that one cannot live forever in the flow. Friends, family, other responsibilities both welcome and not have claims upon one. Still—make the time. Raise the building. Attempt the staircase. Write.