

VIRGINIA STEPHEN IN GEORGE DUCKWORTH'S FAMILY ALBUM

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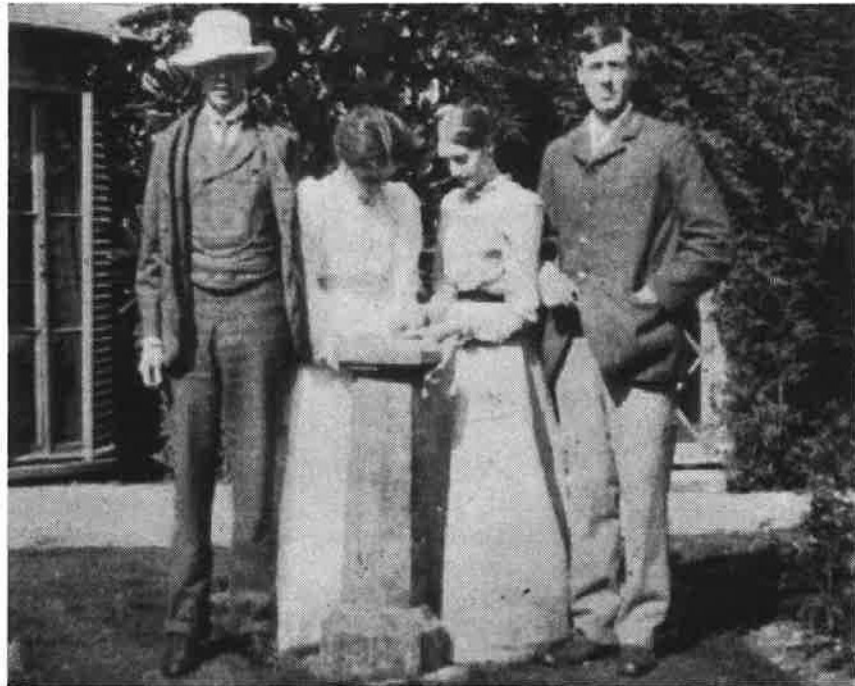


Fig.1 Adrian, Vanessa, Virginia, and Thoby Stephen (1901?)

We have been fortunate enough to have been given access to George Duckworth's family album which contains a number of unpublished photographs of Virginia Stephen and her family taken at the close of the nineteenth century. These photographs provide the framework for our discussion of Virginia Woolf's "Victorian Childhood" which has been the subject of fictional representation and biographical speculation for the past hundred years. The small, soft-covered album was George Duckworth's personal one, as distinct from the large Duckworth album containing many generations of family photographs which has been drawn on by biographers and critics to date.

Unlike the large family album, which permanently sits on a table in the drawing room, George Duckworth's own collection of family photographs has remained in the attic at Dalningridge Place, the house he built in Sussex where his daughter-in-law still lives. Due to a personal connection with the family this album was brought down from its private resting place for us to see. While we have been accorded the privilege of viewing and reproducing these photographs, our interpretation is ethically circumscribed

by Katherine Duckworth's clear wish that the family name be protected—although she agrees with us that that it is important for them be presented to the public.



Fig.2 Vanessa Stephen and George Duckworth (1896)

George Duckworth's album follows a chronological, linear format: placed at the beginning, the shots of the Stephen family reproduced here in their entirety constitute about one third of its contents. The remainder of the photographs cover George's extensive travels on the Continent. The prominent location of the Stephen photographs and their sheer number suggest the importance George Duckworth placed on his connection with the family. They provide a unique insight into his own view of a relationship which has until now been seen almost entirely through Woolf's own reconstruction of their shared past.

The controversies surrounding the sexual/sibling relationship of Virginia and Vanessa Stephen and their half-brothers George and Gerald Duckworth are very well-documented by Louise de Salvo and others and in biographies of Woolf by writers such as Quentin Bell and Hermione Lee. And yet the relationship still remains tantalisingly ambiguous and elusive. Woolf herself describes George Duckworth as one of the "demi-gods and tyrants" of her childhood world and that of her sister (*Moments of Being* 38). The ambivalence of this remark is reflected throughout her relationship with him: early in her life she talks of the Duckworth siblings as "beings possessed of knives" (35), and later Hermione Lee reported that "George Duckworth as incestuous seducer was a regular butt of satire" (157). And yet as Lee also points out Virginia's few surviving letters to him, written in 1898 and 1899—the period in which these photographs were taken—"read affectionately, even confidingly" (157). After her suicide attempt in 1913 Woolf convalesced at Dalningridge, and as Jane Dunn notes: "Decades later, in her

despair just days before she took her own life . . . was talking about him still, haunted by him she said, the half-brother whom, her doctor friend Octavia Wilberforce reported, she had 'evidently adored'" (38-41).

Gerald Duckworth (of whom there are no pictures in the album) played a more pivotal role in Woolf's career as a professional writer. It was his publishing house which published her first novel *The Voyage Out* in 1914. However, Quentin Bell contends that she "hated submitting her novels to Gerald Duckworth" because "he had what she called a 'clubman's view of literature,'" and Bell argues that this aversion provided a powerful incentive for her to set up her own printing house, the Hogarth Press (2, 74). By contrast Virginia Blain suggests that the aversion to Gerald had more to do with her "early traumatic experience of sexual abuse" (5). Although the shadow of incest must always hang over the relationship between these children, born of the same beautiful mother Julia Stephen—herself romantically memorialised in Julia Margaret Cameron's soft-focused portraits as well as in Woolf's hard-edged prose—access to George's family album enables us to approach the Stephen/Duckworth family from a different angle and through a different lens. We read these grainy images as resonant of Woolf's own metaphors and ask what other family secrets can this collection of faded photographs reveal?



Fig.3 Virginia and Adrian Stephen 1896

In her book *Family Secrets* Annette Kuhn notes that “if the family album produces the family, produces particular forms of family in particular ways, there is always room for manoeuvre within this, as within any other genre. People will make use of the ‘rules’ of the family album in their own ways” (17). We might wish to consider George Duckworth’s manoeuvres in constructing his photographic record of Stephen/Duckworth family life but we must also recognise that manoeuvring is part of the critical process in which we ourselves are engaged. Photographs are arrested and arresting fragments of elusive lives that we are trying to reconstruct. They can at best only offer a piecemeal account, not a seamless narrative. Through our reading of these photographs we can attempt to interrogate the spaces in the narrative inhabited by the young Stephen girls and the Duckworth brothers. but we cannot hope to escape the partiality of interpretation.



Fig.4 Vanessa Stephen (1899)

Critics such as James Kincaid and Carole Mavor have demonstrated that childhood was a site of contradiction for the Victorians, and both have made particular use of photographs of children to support their arguments. As Susan Sontag observes: "Photographs . . . are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy, (23), and indeed Mavor's *Pleasures Taken* is principally about Victorian photography of girl children and women (including photographs by Julia Margaret Cameron, Woolf's great aunt). As a writer Woolf was herself fascinated by childhood—not least by questions of gender and sexuality in the Victorian family dynamic. She returns to the subject of her own childhood again and again in her private and her public writing in an attempt to understand, sometimes to recover, sometimes to exorcise, its profound impact on her later life.



Fig.5 Virginia Stephen (1901)

The photographs in George Duckworth's album are of Woolf in adolescence, a category only beginning to be recognised by the Victorians, for whom the parameters of "girlhood" in particular were matter of fierce contestation (Mavor 19). They therefore constitute an even more problematic discourse. When we look at the photographs we should be alert to this broader framework: to their imbrication in ideology and to the way they are enmeshed in a web of discourses about sexuality, the family, and childhood. Thus a picture of the young Vanessa posed amongst the roses in the garden of the Rectory at Warboys in Huntingdonshire (fig.4) is freighted with the kind of ideological contradictions that so often inflect Victorian representations of female sexuality. The emergent woman is equivocally aligned with a nature already over-inscribed with gendered meanings, her own "nature" seemingly barely contained within the cultivated *hortus conclusus* within which she is framed.



Fig.6 Stella Duckworth (undated)

Indeed, as Linda Haverty Rugg points out, while photography since its invention "has been understood as *truer* than other representative images . . . at the same time, we know that photographs are not simply the things they represent, but must be read through the culture that creates and consumes them" (12). But our reading of these particular family photographs must equally be mediated not only by Woolf's own

numerous attempts to write her childhood—to record and analyse her memories of her relationship with her parents and siblings—but also by her own reverberating poetics.



Fig.7 Virginia and Vanessa Stephen and Garth (1901)

We bring to our reading of this album our knowledge of its owner's unwelcome attentions to the Stephen girls and of their father's abusive tyranny in the period 1895 to 1904—the years recorded in these photographs which cover the period between their mother's death at the age of forty nine and his own. Julia Stephen does not appear in the album; the earliest photograph in it was taken in 1896. Yet her absence is as palpable as it was in Woolf's own life. Her premature death from rheumatic fever and over-work when Woolf was thirteen was described by her daughter as "the greatest disaster that could happen" (*Moments of Being* 47) and made her adolescence a particularly troubled time. As Woolf later noted: "The years between childhood and maturity . . . are so

complex. My mother's death fell into the very middle of that amorphous time. That made it much more broken. The whole thing was strained" (qtd Lee 130). By her own account until she was in her forties the presence of her mother obsessed her: "She was one of the invisible presences who after all play so important a part in every life" (*Moments of Being* 89). Julia Stephen may be absent from her son's album but his sister Stella, whose death in 1897 once again cast the family into mourning, is represented in a black-framed formal portrait (fig.6) that sets her apart from the outdoor family snaps and suggests the sombre and poignant background to the endless summer holidays they seem to depict.



Fig.8 Vanessa and Garth (1901)

Photographs have always played an important role in the cultural construction of Bloomsbury. Bloomsbury biographies are typically as liberally adorned with family snapshots as the hallway of the house at Gordon Square was with (Great Aunt) Julia Margaret Cameron's portraits. There seems to have been an insatiable fascination amongst the Bloomsbury "characters" themselves with the photographic record of Bloomsbury. For instance Woolf wrote an introduction for a collection of Julia Margaret Cameron's photographic portraits (Cameron 13-19), while Bell and Angelica Garnett published a selection of snapshots from their mother Vanessa's family album in 1981. Yet how is such domestic photography to be read? Bell presents his mother's album as a further "tiny crumb of evidence" to the public in the hope that it "may dispel some misconceptions concerning the social history of the group and give a reasonably

accurate idea of how a Bloomsbury family looked and amused itself" (8). But as Val Williams argues in her essay on Vanessa Bell's albums, to view such a collection unproblematically as simple documentary evidence seems disingenuous. She points to Garnett's more troubled comments on her mother's photographs as she sorted through them after completing *Deceived with Kindness*, her highly critical autobiographical memories of her Bloomsbury childhood. Garnett wrote:

What had I said? What picture had I drawn and how true was it? How did it compare with this assembly of black-and-white images stuck to the page, rather like the keys of an old piano whose notes tinkle suggestively in the stale air of memory? Their message is one of happiness and enjoyment; they convey so much better than the written word the moments of vitality that have receded, leaving in their wake a world of shadows. (Qtd Williams 188)



Fig.9 Vanessa Stephen (1901)

Are photographs incontrovertible empirical evidence of the real existence of people—of how they lived, and of their relationships, as Bell would have us believe? Or are they fabrications that deceive, masquerading as a metaphor for memory, yet, as in the case of Garnett, confounding memory by offering a different truth? Despite photography's controversial status as documentary evidence, epitomised in Sontag's observation that "any photograph has multiple meanings" (23), there has of late been a growing interest in reading the photography of Bloomsbury not merely as illustration, or as offering a naively conceived accurate picture of how things were, but as furnishing a particular kind of material trace of those Bloomsbury relationships whose value, according to Sontag, "is of the same order as fiction" (22).



Fig.10 Vanessa Stephen (1897)

Woolf's own fiction and her non-fiction prose suggest tropological or allegorical ways of reading these photographic images of her adolescent years, images that are not merely irreducible but hermeneutically uncontainable. *To the Lighthouse*, for example, which some critics argue has been influenced by Julia Margaret Cameron's photography (Lee 90), turns on a series of images that suggest the tension between permanence and flux, just as a photograph arrests a moment in time that is irrevocably passing. If "photography is the inventory of mortality" (Sontag 70), so the lighthouse, the lost brooch, and Lily Briscoe's painting provide the framework for an elegiac exploration of the novel's central narrative episode, "Time Passes". Such figures and motifs provide a focus for acts of memory in the fictional text. As Woolf famously wrote in her essay "Modern Fiction" (published in 1927 the year in which *To the Lighthouse* appeared): "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (*Essays* 2: 106). Writing twelve years later on the subject of memory in her own "Memoir," she describes life as "a bowl that one fills and fills and fills" (*Moments of Being* 73). Drawing on images such as these we approach the photographs of Woolf's own youth with a consciousness at once of their disarticulation as frozen moments seized from "time's relentless melt" (Sontag 15), and their vital connectedness to the life of this woman writer.



Fig.11 Leslie Stephen (1900)



Fig.12 Virginia and Leslie Stephen (1900)



Fig.13 Virginia and Leslie Stephen (1900)

Woolf's feminist thematics centred on her insistence that the position of women is socially and historically determined. As she wrote in *Three Guineas* she was interested in the ways in which "the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected . . . the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other" (364). The family tyrants of her childhood were not only her half-brothers George and Gerald Duckworth but also her father Leslie Stephen, towards whom she felt a similarly ambivalent emotional attachment which she described as a "violently disturbing conflict of love and hate" (*Moments of Beings* 120). Woolf wrote a number of portraits of her father at different stages of her life—memoirs both public and private as well as her fictional portrayal of Mr Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*—and what emerges is a picture of a monstrous domestic tyrant. Although she wrote in her diary in 1940 that as a woman of fifty-eight she felt more tolerance and understanding towards her father than she had as a child, in a "Sketch of the Past" written in the same year she recalls how domineering her father had been when she was fifteen (during the period of these photographs):

Suppose I, at fifteen, was a nervous, gibbering, little monkey . . . leaping into dark corners and then swinging in rapture across the cage, he was the pacing, dangerous, morose lion; a lion who was sulky and angry and injured; and suddenly ferocious, and then very humble, and then majestic; and then lying dusty and fly-pestered in a corner of the cage. (*Moments of Being* 128)¹

And yet when she tries to recover the feelings she had for him as a child—to reinhabit her childhood self—she is able to experience more positive memories of his magnificent physical presence (not particularly manifest in these photographs of the broken, decrepit widower), and of his ability to make her feel "that we two were in league together" (*Moments of Being* 123).

As Lee emphasises in her biography, Leslie Stephen was a Victorian patriarch and Virginia Woolf's was a Victorian childhood from which, as a modernist, she consciously dissociated herself in later years: "Every day we find ourselves doing, saying, or thinking things that would have been impossible to our fathers," she wrote in her 1923 essay "How it Strikes a Contemporary" (*Essays* 3: 357). Yet it was a childhood to which she continued to feel connected. She ponders for example in a "Sketch of the Past":

Is it not possible—I often wonder—that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence? And if so, will it not be possible, in time, that some device will be invented by which we can tap them? I see it—the past—as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions. There at the end of the avenue still, are the garden and the nursery. Instead of remembering here a scene and there a sound, I shall fit a

¹ On Woolf's relationship with her father see Hill-Miller, Abel, and Fisher.

plug into the wall and listen in to the past. I shall turn up August 1890. I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start. (*Moments of Being* 75-76)

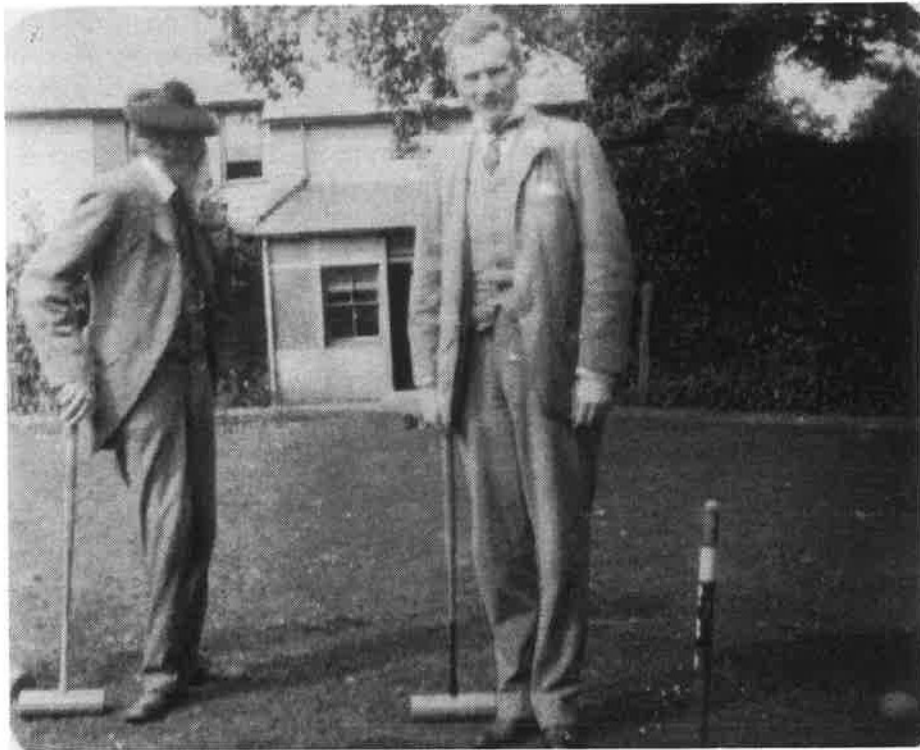


Fig.14 Leslie Stephen and George Duckworth (1900)

Lee describes this extraordinary passage as a “1930s technological vision of a wireless of memory which could be tuned into the past” (98). And yet it could be said that photographs are precisely devices by which “things we have felt with great intensity” may be tapped, material vestiges—“traces” to use Woolf’s word—of that “long ribbon of scenes, emotions.”

The imagery of attachment that she uses is striking: the ribbon (conjuring girlhood) and the wire that can be plugged in (signifying modernity). They are figures that taken together locate her nostalgia for her childhood firmly within the technological present. More speculatively they are images that trigger thoughts of Roland Barthes’s comment that “a sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze” (81). When we look at the photographs of Virginia and Leslie reading German together on holiday at Fritham in 1900 (figs12,13) the hearing device into which the daughter speaks to her deaf father seems to bind her to him in a way that is also parodically suggestive of a “sort of umbilical cord” linking the young woman—who

even as a child had confessed she “read partly to make him think me a very clever little brat” (123)—to the writer and intellectual who encouraged her intellectual aspirations. It is in photographs such as this that the absent mother seems almost unbearably present. Loss is inscribed in the photograph through the metaphorical resonance of the umbilical image.

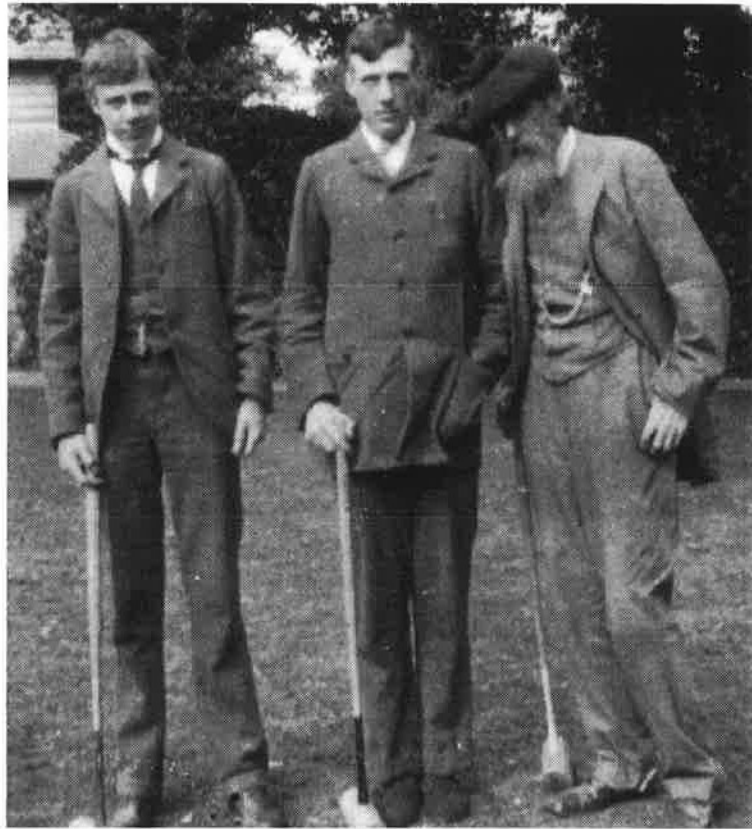


Fig.15 Adrian, Thoby and Leslie Stephen (1900)

Reflecting on her childhood and youth in “A Sketch of the Past” Woolf asks: “Who was I then? Adeline Virginia Stephen . . . descended from a great many people, some famous, others obscure; born into a large connection, . . . born into a very communicative, literate, letter writing, visiting, articulate, late-nineteenth-century world” (*Moments of Being* 73). Woolf here describes her birth in terms of “connection” yet her writing more often reveals the fissures in her deeply riven family life. For example:

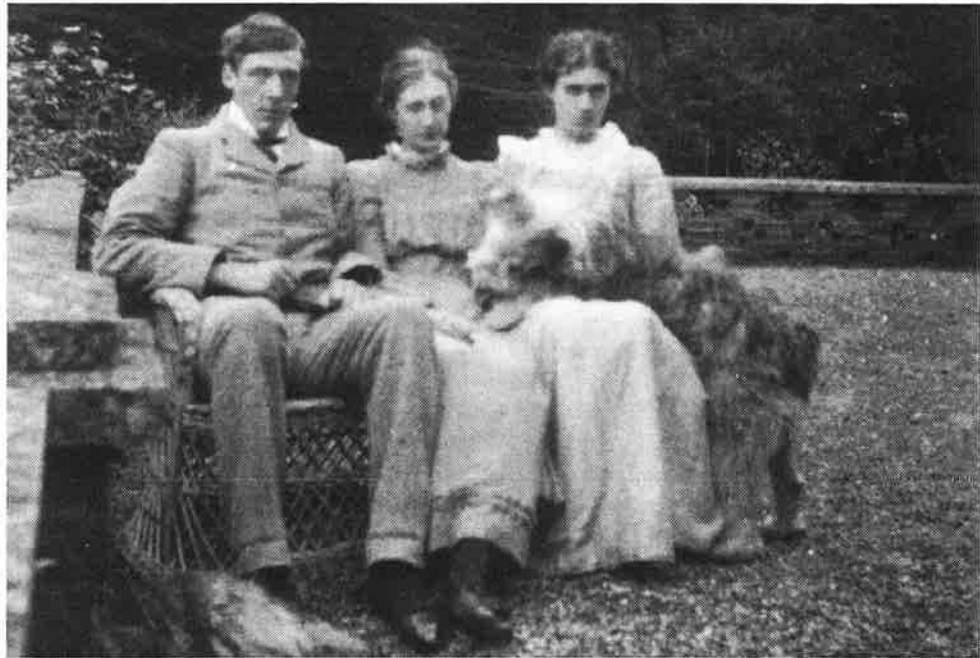
The division in our lives was curious. Downstairs there was pure convention; upstairs pure intellect. But there was no connection between them. . . . Thus I would go from the drawing room, where George was telling one of his little triumphs . . . up to father’s study to

fetch a book. . . . Then, feeling proud and stimulated, and full of love for this unworldly, very distinguished and lonely man, whom I had pleased by coming, I would go back to the drawing room and hear George's patter. There was no connection. There were deep divisions. (*Moments of Being* 172)

Sontag has written that "Cameras go with family life. . . . Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait chronicle of itself—a portable kit of images that bear witness to its connectedness" (8). Pierre Bourdieu makes a similar point when he contends that "photographic practice only exists and subsists for most of the time by virtue of its *family function* or rather by the function conferred upon it by the family group, namely that of solemnizing and immortalizing the high points of family life . . . or reinforces the integration of the family group by reasserting the sense that it has both of itself and of its unity" (19). Marianne Hirsch develops these insights when she observes that the family snap "perpetuates family myths while seeming merely to record actual moments in family history . . . sustaining an imaginary cohesion" (5). Connectedness, integration, unity, cohesion—these are the words used to describe the ideological focus of the family album and the photographs it contains.



Fig.16 Leslie, Adrian, Thoby and Vanessa Stephen (1900)



(Fig.17) Thoby, Virginia and Vanessa Stephen with Shag and Garth (1899)

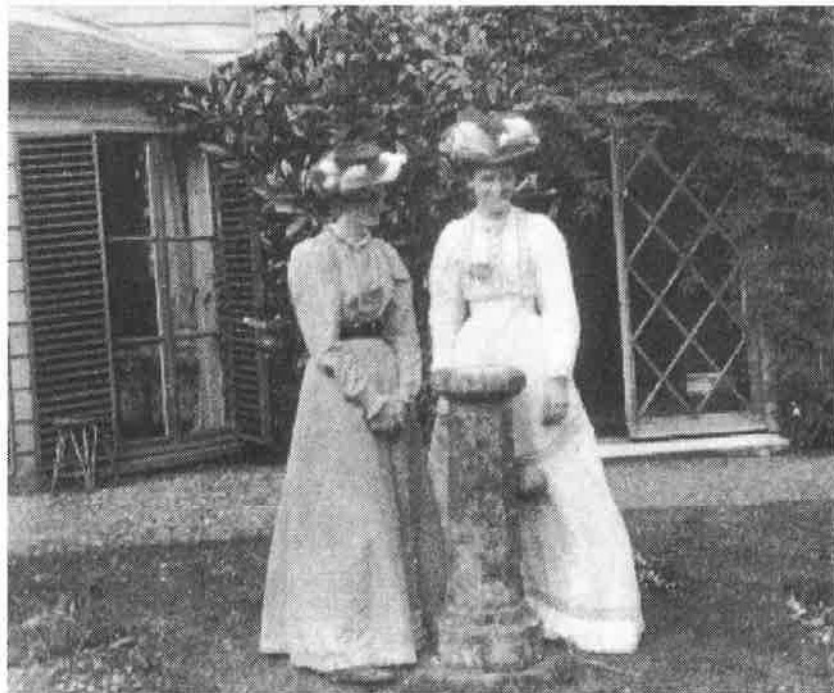


Fig.18 Virginia and Vanessa Stephen (1900)

George Duckworth's album, like so many others, is full of pictures of a family on holiday together, having fun in the open air, entertaining friends, playing croquet. It is a pictorial valorisation of the upper middle classes at leisure. But for Hirsch, as for other recent cultural theorists of photography, the camera, the album, and the familial gaze are "instruments of ideology" that are open to interrogation and contestation since "photographs locate themselves precisely in the space of contradiction between the myth of the ideal family and the lived reality of family life" (7-8). For all its attempts to affirm the Stephen/Duckworth family's connectedness, the album can be read as effectively reinscribing the "deep divisions" identified by Woolf and her biographers. We have seen how her mother's death marked the end of her childhood, rendering her adolescence an even more decisive moment of division in her own life than it might otherwise have been. But the household was also divided against itself, with the four younger Stephens forming an alliance against the older generation. This comes across in some of the photographs which suggest the separateness of the younger generation, such as the picture of Thoby, Virginia and Vanessa (fig.17) in which they subvert the decorum of the photograph and the coercive demands of the photographer by refusing to pose, offering sulky resistance rather than polite compliance. And in a picture such as the one of Virginia and Vanessa (fig.18), the sisters in their elaborate hats seem to share a private joke and, as photographic subjects, to play a more active, performative role.

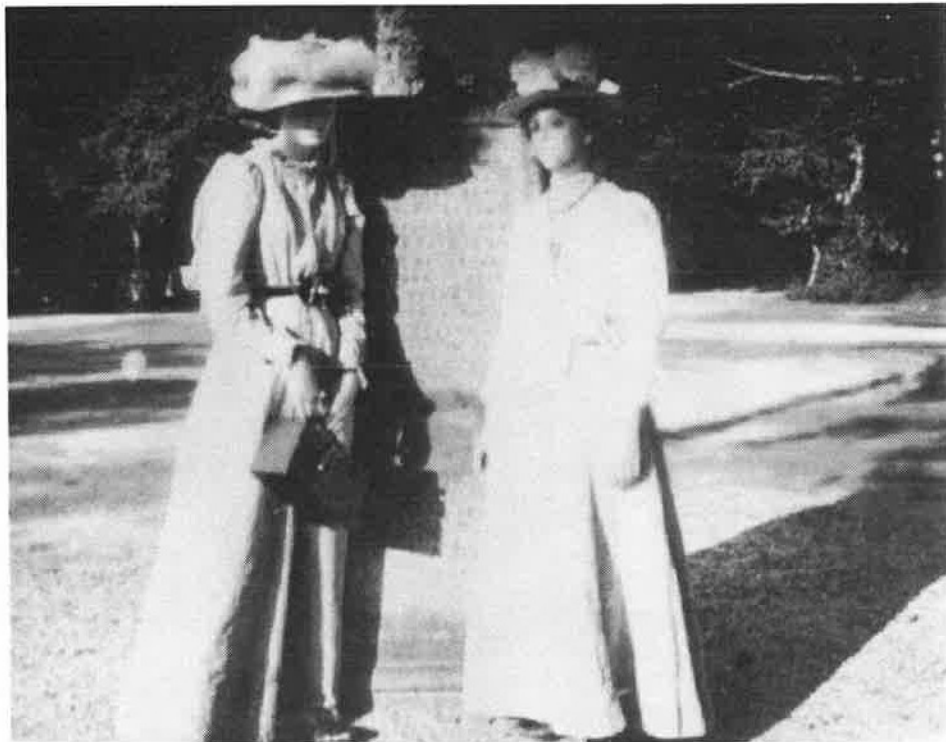


Fig.19 Virginia Stephen and Margaret Booth (1900)

Woolf was later to recall:

Two different ages confronted each other in the drawing room at Hyde Park Gate. The Victorian age and the Edwardian age . . . the society in which we lived was still the Victorian society. Father himself was a typical Victorian. George and Gerald were consenting and approving Victorians. So we had two quarrels to wage; two fights to fight; one with them individually; and one with them socially. We were living say in 1910; they were living in 1860. (*Moments of Being* 160-61)

Woolf, writing here of the period of these photographs, seems to anticipate the ideas behind A.S. Byatt's *Angels and Insects*:

Hyde Park Gate in 1900 was a complete model of Victorian society. If I had the power to lift out of the past a single day as we lived it about 1900, it would give a section of upper middle class Victorian life, like one of those sections with glass covers in which ants and bees are shown going about their tasks. (164)

Of George himself, Woolf remarks—using appropriately Victorian evolutionary language—that he “accepted Victorian Society so implicitly that to an archaeologist he would be a fascinating object. Like a fossil he had taken every crease and wrinkle of the conventions of upper-middle-class society between 1870 and 1900” (165). As Woolf places him under the microscope with these comments, George is rendered a “fascinating object” for the archaeologist or entomologist, and interestingly in some of these pictures too we see a reversal of what we understand to be the conventional dynamic of power whereby the photographer commands the gaze of his subject.

Woolf herself was a keen amateur photographer and began taking photographs of her family and friends in 1897. In the photograph with Margaret Booth (fig.19) she is pictured holding a box camera. More interesting still, in relation to the subjectification of the gaze, is the 1897 photograph (fig.20) in which her face is entirely hidden from George's view, as she lines up her own camera. What she has framed in her camera's viewfinder is not visible, but the modern viewer is nevertheless given a glimpse of alternative visual spaces. Is she planning to snap him snapping her? Or looking at some other photographic subject in Painswick Rectory Garden? The uni-directional focus of George's camera is troubled by the other camera in his sights which signifies the dynamic and multidirectional nature of the gaze. As Mavor (explicating Lacan) suggests: “We are always being *gazed* at on all sides from all directions . . . one is in a space of ‘radiated reticulation’” (82).

This notion of the gaze as a kind of visual constellation serves as a useful figure for the photograph itself—for its uncontainability, for its resistance to visual and semantic control. At the beginning of *The Photograph: A Strange, Confined Space* Mary Price declares that “if use determines the meaning of photographs, as I believe it does,

no single meaning is absolute”(1).² Photography is a medium that articulates particularly effectively the kind of ambivalence that characterised Woolf’s relationships with her half-brothers and her father. In this photograph the young Virginia’s camera unsettles a simple model of the appropriative masculine gaze by returning it, thereby resisting the specular subject position. By the same token the album as a whole refuses empiricist classification as another “tiny crumb of evidence” at the Bloomsbury feast by inviting the modern viewer to enter into a more imaginatively inflected engagement with this particularly over-determined Victorian childhood.



Fig.20 Vanessa and Virginia Stephen (1897)

² See also Hirsch’s argument in *Family Frames*.

Works Cited

We are extremely grateful to the Hon. Mrs Katherine Duckworth for generously giving us access to George Duckworth's album and for her permission to reproduce a selection of the photographs it contains. These photographs cannot be further reproduced without her express permission. We also thank colleagues who have offered helpful comments and information, in particular Gail Jones.

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