

# Addressing Virginia Woolf after 9/11

Suzanne Bellamy

Lisa Williams. 2005. *Letters To Virginia Woolf*. Hamilton Books. 92 pp.

**This** small book of creative letter writing has the intensity of a nucleus blasted into form by the impact of terrible external forces, releasing and exposing in its aftermath intimate treasures. Its brevity and delicacy of structure hold together poignant stories of birth and its struggles in the new territory of medicalized fertility, death and its releases from abuse and family drama, and ordinary life in the cities of the new terrorism. Here is an experimental form of life writing, illuminating the changing distinctions in what is considered private and public and drawing those fine lines against a landscape where experience is exposed to the intrusions of new forms of survival and threat. The illusion of choices about one's destiny and one's life story is tested when time itself adds and takes away those choices, and when notions of autonomy and the reality of chance are balanced against both the small and monumental uncertainties of the times.

With so many books and memoirs about the impact of September 11th coming to public gaze now, what about this book might give it an edge and make it speak something new in a new way? Can the form of private letters

to a dead writer be a sufficiently tough vessel to hold fragments of memory, public commentary, diary, traditional narrative threads, and literary exposition as well as leave readers with some feeling of critical engagement with the writer's work? Lisa Williams is a teacher of creative writing, Virginia Woolf scholar, and native New Yorker who was very directly affected by the events of September 11, 2001. To explore her experience of that day and beyond, she chooses the trope of the letter, which is fruitful and helpful in her writing task. Williams takes from Woolf herself the idea of writing very personal and revealing letters to a celebrated author. Readers of Woolf will be familiar with the way that letters recur in her work, particularly in her political essay "Three Guineas," written in 1938. Woolf's most famous discussion of war and violence, the essay is constructed around the receiving and answering of letters from individuals and societies wanting to end war. For her part, Williams uses letters to Woolf to interrogate the older writer's entire body of work in a search for themes to open up her own pathways to storytelling. It is clear from Williams' text that this method works well as a thematic gateway, but not so clear that it works as well to open up new insights into Woolf's work. Nor is it clear initially if saying something new about Woolf's writing is also part of Williams' intention.

The uses to which contemporary writers have put Woolf's work raise interesting critical and imaginative questions. To give just one example, novelist Michael Cunningham in his book *The Hours* gives us a reading of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* that has been seen by some as a complex, brilliant homage to Virginia Woolf but by others as a disrespectful misuse and distortion of her intentions, a celebrity-driven cult possession or, passionately, as some other kind of outrage. The level of interest in these intersections between Virginia Woolf and contemporary writers has made it almost compulsory to question the relationship between their texts and the myth of Virginia Woolf. A two-way conversation between contemporary writers and Woolf's early twentieth-century modernist texts has become something of a literary phenomenon, itself worth careful critical attention. What is it about Woolf that speaks so powerfully to these writers and to these new times? How useful has this muse and musing been to Lisa Williams in this fascinating and uneasy book?

She has divided her journey into several sections, each containing a bundle of letters of no particular uniformity, and she moves comfortably back and forth through many time zones and voices as she asks us to consider the ironies of her life so far. Sometimes she talks directly to Woolf, working off significant quotations from Woolf's texts; at other times, she

immerses herself in moments of intense pain and uncomfortable detail so specific and grounded in the body as to be almost pungent with the present. In this mix of commentary and personal detail, she shows us something of her understanding of the diversity of Woolf's own writing. Multiple voices, multiple consciousnesses, and shifting lenses of interrogation are all familiar to readers of *The Waves*, the *Letters*, the *Diaries*, *Moments of Being*, *A Room of One's Own*, and "A Sketch of the Past."

The refreshing discursive freedom of Williams' text is bolted together in the safe form of individual letters, flimsy fragments, and pieces of living, and somehow that form holds together more than would mere sections or chapters. There is a sense of some special permission being taken by the writer and given by her muse that provides a way for Williams to expose and explore the self and its story in a safe zone. Of course, there is no safe zone really, either in the writing or in the life of the city where the book's events happen after the towers have fallen. Some of the most powerful writing in the book gives an insight into the state of shock itself, what that shock might feel like to a writer who has to invent herself past silence and into a frame of reference for speaking again about what matters, what remains, what she wants us to know about her, and what she might decide to keep and to remember. Here it is especially clear how much assistance Williams' special relationship with Virginia Woolf's texts gives her, and here also it becomes clear to an informed Woolf reader that Williams does not really use Woolf's texts as props so much as a place where a shared sensibility can fruitfully speak of a particular kind of woman's reality, unfashionable as that might have become in recent times. The idea of a woman's reality was not alien to Woolf, and for Williams that "little language" Woolf herself named opens out, previously taboo forms of women's life stories rising to the surface.

Williams' central conversation with Woolf is about the body itself and writing about the body, as well as all the ways have been hidden and unnamed, buried in a silent language and a lack of tradition. She quotes Woolf's essay "Professions For Women": "telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet. The obstacles against her are still immensely powerful and yet they are very difficult to define." Williams establishes the theme of a woman's embodied experience and then creates an awkward counterpoint by invoking Woolf's shell-shocked warrior in the urban landscape: Septimus Smith from *Mrs. Dalloway*, who commits suicide. Williams writes, "as I stroll around the streets of New York City, I think of Septimus. Septimus

solved the whole problem by simply not feeling. Those days after September 11 were strange. It was as if the very structure of the cosmos had been altered" (7). At the end of her journey, he returns. Williams writes, "It is Septimus I long for" (77). Her conversation with Woolf enters a difficult territory here. There is in her engagement with the text and the character an intertextual confusion that is the least successful aspect of the conversation. Invoking a reduced and overly simplistic Septimus, as she also invokes the artist Lily Briscoe from *To The Lighthouse*, interferes somehow with Williams' own heightened narrative moments. If one knows the originating text, it is irritating. If one does not know the text, has it any meaning at all?

Equally difficult is her self-consciousness when writing of a visit to Woolf's house in Sussex, which again blurs the boundaries of text and author, of the work and the life: "I have journeyed there to retrace the life you dared to live. I was struck by the chaste and monastic life you did lead. I hated to leave your summer house" (8). This series of projections would read oddly to the author of *Orlando*, the lover of Vita Sackville-West. However, there are no rules here. Williams is not writing exegesis, and there are as many ways to take thoughts and ideas from a life as there are readers. Williams clearly strikes out in a very different direction from Jeanette Winterson, another of the many writers deeply influenced by Woolf. It is in fact fascinating to consider all the ways sexuality expresses difference in the book, as Williams writes of her body's desire to bear a child, to be pregnant, and to hold onto some sanity during the intrusive medical nightmares this choice involves. Indeed, paradoxically, the central success of this intertextual partnership is the story of giving birth, which occasions the most interesting writing in the book. Williams immerses herself in the strong narrative of trying to become pregnant, miscarriages, infertility, hospitals, failures, self-hate, and a personal struggle with her own "angel in the house," just as Woolf had struggled to write with freedom. Finally, there is a birth.

This book unsettles the surfaces it travels, invokes the company of perhaps the greatest life writer of all, and along the way explores many voices and forms. This process sometimes works well, as when zones of intimacy and safety emerge and whole stories can float to the surface. It is most problematic and interesting when Williams' relationship with her literary companion breaks into invention and the focus blurs. Woolf herself knew well this territory; it is the relationship of Dante and Virgil passing through hell; she also talked of needing to write things down to make them real, which Williams has done. Lisa Williams emerges as a strong creative

voice, tempting hubris on all levels, walking honestly through a shock of personal and global dimensions, and finally, standing with Virginia Woolf as a woman whose country is the whole world.