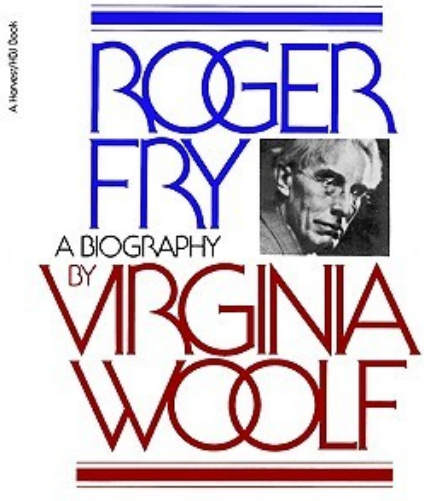

Roger Fry: A Biography

Virginia Woolf

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Roger Fry: A Biography Virginia Woolf
Virginia Woolf's only true biography, written to commemorate a devoted friend and one of the most renowned art critics of this century, who helped to bring the Postimpressionist movement from France to England and America. Index; illustrations.

Roger Fry: A Biography Details

Date	:	Published March 15th 1976 by Mariner Books (first published 1940)
ISBN	:	9780156785204
Author	:	Virginia Woolf
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From Reader Review Roger Fry: A Biography for online ebook

Brian Kubarycz says

I'm enjoying this quite a bit, but mostly because I've been reading Bloomsbury scholarship and returning to Freud. So Fry's temperament, as well as his interest in ecstatic color, makes sense enough to me. For the casual Woolf fan or Art History enthusiasts however, this will not be a favorite. If nothing else, the book confirms (as if there were ever any reasonable doubts) that Woolf can write good conventional prose.

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kymdotcom says

I didn't think it was possible for Virginia Woolf to write a book that was more tedious than The Years. And then I read Roger Fry, with its excessive bowdlerising.

Samuel Maina says

I did not understand why this book began with a thank you note from Margaret Fry Thanking Virginia Woolf for taking time to do the Biography of Roger Fry. At the end of the book I realized why.
Virgina took time to go through his correspondences through letters and his life to put up a work of art in itself of a man who began his work in 1866 and continued it with immense energy and inventiveness for sixty-eight years. The man speaks of art, music, mysticism, religion, science and painting et al. flawlessly. I give it to Virginia because she even tried to write about a man's emotions… "His emotions were broken and contradictory. He did not attempt to take up any attitude. He had to find his way, to piece things together, as best he could. "I've given up even regretting the callus that had to form to let me go through with things. Now and then it gives, and I could cry for the utter pity and wastefulness of things, but life is too urgent", he told Lowes Dickinson. He had no creed. The old phrases meant nothing to him. He dreaded most, he said, "shutting myself up in the imprisonment of egotism." The understanding of life, like the understanding of art, must be attempted by following its lead according to his own discovery of the pattern. He laid himself open to all experience with a certain recklessness, because so many of the things that men care for, as he said later, were now meaningless. The centre which would have given them meaning was gone. From this experience sprang both his profound tolerance and also his intolerance? His instant response to whatever he found genuine, his resentment of what seemed to him false"
I get the feeling like Roger Fry was a late bloomer. And was a man of always going against the grain. He does not have kind words for British art (Often in later life Roger Fry was to deplore the extraordinary indifference of the English to the visual arts, and their determination to harness all art to moral problems.) and is in awe of French art (Renoir, Cézanne and Monet) in all its form. He seems stuck in a groove in the past and at the same time has an appreciation for "young artists" His interest in "The old masters" is intriguing perhaps an indicator that they must have made a very deep and permanent impression on him, not only as a critic but as a painter. I like to see this as an entendre in that perhaps there is no way you can understand the present without a historical background. Nothing is new on the face of this world and perhaps he was alluding us to the fact that many current artists had learnt a thing or two from "The old masters" if not copied. There I said it.
He opines on the old vs the new…. "The older men are all more or less impressionists, that is to say, they approach nature in order to analyse it into the component parts not of the thing seen but of the appearance….

But the younger men, really going back to an earlier tradition, carry the analysis further, penetrating through values to their causes in actual form and structure. This they record, and then adding the particular and accidental conditions of light and shade, and finally colour, regain at last the general appearance. The older group, the impressionists, are painters from first to last, and only draughtsmen and chiaroscurists by accident; the younger men base all their art upon draughtsmanship, and acquire the art of painting as an afterthought…."

The man was a true critic – "On the whole I am coming to the conclusion that the general level of painting in the 15th century was not very high. There was a batch of great men at the beginning, Masaccio, Piero della Francesca and Pisanello, and then no one first rate till Leonardo da Vinci. Also that on the whole the Florentines were a prosaic and rigidly scientific lot. I am trying very hard to see why Raphael is so great but he still leaves me cold and untouched." Again pitting the French against the English – "French books, in particular, tattered and coverless, which led to an attack upon English fiction. Why, he demanded, was there no English novelist who took his art seriously? Why were they all engrossed in childish problems of photographic representation?"

Many artists lead a broke life. In his true opinion "the artist is almost without resources". His need for money led him to journalism and lecturing. I for one do not know of any artist who seemed to break even in their lifetime in whatever trade they pursued. We seem to acknowledge great minds after they are gone and no longer with us. This time that Roger Fry wrote for the magazines refined his criticism. It is not easy being a critic. I see a man who detested fixed attitudes, suspected poses and was quick to point out the fatal effect of reverence. But how could a man who was opinionated to tell the truth compel the admission that he created the warmest feeling of affection and admiration in the minds of those who knew him. I am at pains to quote… "I began to discuss the problems of aesthetics that the contemplation of these works forced upon us". He discussed them in all their aspects with the learned and with the ignorant, in lecture-halls, in drawing-rooms, in studios, in railway trains. And he wrote often in an omnibus or in the corner of a third-class railway carriage. His writing gained a new vigour and depth. He became the most read and the most admired, if also the most abused, of all living art critics."

One must master detachment. But detachment did not mean withdrawal. I will go ahead and quote an incident – "It was a summer evening, late in July 1934, and a friend had brought a picture upon which he wanted Roger Fry's opinion—was it by Degas, or a copy only? The canvas was stood on a chair in front of him, in the same room, looking out on to the same trees where so many pictures had been stood in front of him—pictures by Watts, and pictures by Picasso, school children's drawings and canvases with the paint still wet on them. Again his eyes fixed themselves with their very steady and penetrating gaze upon the canvas. Again they seemed to carry on a life of their own as they explored the world of reality. And again as if it helped him in his voyage of discovery he turned and laughed and talked and argued about other things. The two worlds were close together. He could pass from one to the other without impediment."

Like the frogs at St Remy, he broke the rhythm before it got quite fixed. This man, had something rare in the general life of his time. His Quaker background meant he was bound to be "very narrow in outlook and bounded in interests; very bourgeois as to its members" but we definitely do not see that from Roger Fry… as a Quaker both Oxford and Cambridge were "practically shut" to him; and he chose the law, for which he entertained "no predilection", because it gave him "a justification for asking for College". The college—University College, London—was not Oxford or Cambridge, but it was better than no college at all. It was natural thus, that, though born and bred a Quaker and remaining a Quaker all his life, he was yet highly critical of the sect. He was one of the first to protest against Quaker "peculiarities" and in his old age he wrote that "miserable questions about dress and address and the disputes about orthodoxy produced a chasm in my feelings between myself and systematic Quakerism which I have never got over". Roger was a man who would argue for hours on end with terrific Quaker scrupulosity and intellectual honesty.

On his presence – "His presence seemed to increase the sensation of everything in the room. But at the centre of that vibration was a gravity and a stillness, as in his face too there was that which made him look so often, like a saint in one of his Old Masters?. But he was a saint who laughed; a saint who enjoyed life to the

uttermost. Whereas piety or holiness make goodness stink in the nostrils, he once wrote, saintliness is the imaginative power to make goodness seem desirable. He made goodness seem desirable, as he sat laughing with his friends and looking at the picture. But how describe the pure delight of watching a flower unfold its immense cup of red?"

On classification of Literature - Mallarmé stood with Cézanne among his patron saints. Mallarmé, of course, led to argument.

On happiness - two kinds of happiness, one of tantalising ecstasy, the other of comfortable reciprocity. It was this last that he preferred: there's something infinitely satisfying in the mere mass of affection two people accumulate between them in a number of years of quite close intimacy, but then boredom must never have to be suppressed. With us I feel that it has never begun to occur, but then I'm a lucky one in this at all events and I think I'd rather be fortunate so than have all the other sorts of success?.

On writing vs lecturing - Lecturing was at any rate preferable to writing, and more congenial to him. The audience stimulated him, and the picture on the screen in front of him helped him to overcome the difficulty of finding words; he improvised. He had, too, natural gifts. A beautiful speaking voice, and the power, whatever its origin, to transmit emotion while transmitting facts. But he had to develop a technique, and the practical difficulties were at first very great. It was essential that his lectures should be illustrated, and it was difficult in those days to come by illustrations. He had to send to Italy for photographs and to have them made into slides.

On death – he wrote various things about death to various people…here are the snippets

"It is terrible to have to write happiness out of one's life after I had had it so intensely and for such a short time…. I suppose we learn more from suffering than from happiness. But it's a strange world where we are made to want it so much and have so little chance of getting it."

"… with all the terrible trouble that these years have brought … I do feel a kind of pious gratitude for it all."

"I think I could get used to the dullness and greyness of life without love if it weren't for the constant sense of her suffering. This thing seems to be as diabolically contrived to give prolonged torture as anything could be. If she could only die! …"

"I do believe almost mystically in tout comprendre est tout pardonner. The understanding is generally too impossibly difficult, but when one does understand it's always a pitiful rather than a hateful sight one stumbles on."

On class society and atmosphere – "It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of the landscape in his life. He analysed it in all its vagaries and its moods, its asperities and its charms, as if it were a human being. The atmosphere of the country affected him almost as much as the human atmosphere, to which he was, as he said, "horribly sensitive". "Aren't atmospheres", he wrote, "the reallest things there are?" Les Baux he found too theatrical; Martigues had certain merits but was too like Venice; and so he moved on to Aix, "the holy place" he called it, the home of Cézanne. To his critical eye it was too dramatic. "The illumination is so tremendously definite here that a small change of angle alters the tones a great deal. It hasn't the sharp sculpture of the country round Avignon." After Les Baux and the life there with the peasant poets the bourgeois atmosphere—he was lodging in a respectable hotel—was unendurable. He could no longer tolerate the conventions of his own class."

On religion – I did not understand why he tried to compare religion to science….he lost me there.

"To find God we must reduce all to a desert and then we may see him."

"As to religion—I can't help thinking that you don't see quite enough the difficulty. If religions made no claim but what art does—of being a possible interpretation without any notion of objective validity all would be well—that's what the artist does—but religions all pretend to do what science tries to do—namely discover the one universally valid construction and hence comes all the trouble and hence it is that religions have always obstructed the effort towards more universal validity…. I think what I feel is that for the most part religions are so deeply dyed with wish-fulfilment that more than anything else they have stood in the way of the disinterested study (science) and vision (art) of the universe. I don't doubt they've had to be, because men couldn't straight away get the disinterested attitude, but I think they ought to go, and that one

can't by re-interpreting the word God or any other such methods make them friends of man's real happiness?. I don't think this is altogether the memory of my escape from a creed which really was a very gradual and painless process on the whole. I mean I had no sudden shock, no despair at losing my faith."

On Literature Roger asks "Why doesn't one always re-read the classics? There they are offering the most authentic, the most accessible delights, and why bother about second-rate and third-rate stuff because it's new?"

The thing that moved me the most in this book was Roger trying to link painting and music. He goes… "It is scandalous the musicians don't do more for us. We ought to have perpetual concerts going regularly through all the old music so that at least we should know what it's like…. I was terribly moved by Monteverdi's Orfeo. I see that to be deeply moved I must be at a certain passing distance from the actual emotional situation—hence all the trouble with the Dostoievskis and the others…. I suppose Gluck isn't a very great musician, but Lord what a gift of melody, and how right in feeling he is! It's a fascinating idea—that eighteenth-century notion of the Greek. They just give it a sort of sweetness and tenderness which is all untrue, but which doesn't spoil the bigness of the contours. How I like works of art which don't break the line—that's partly because I ain't musical enough—because I see that in painting some of my greatest loves are people who do break the line—the Rembrandts, and after all Cézanne himself…."

Phrases
"It gives me pure delight"
I conceived that nothing could be more exciting than to see the flower suddenly burst its green case and unfold its immense cup of red"
"lack of simple humanity"
"It goes beyond any analysis of which I am capable"
"The sun shines perpetually", he wrote home, "and if only the flies didn't bite it would be an earthly paradise."
"drilled to implicit obedience"
"first great disillusionment"
Quotes
A free man thinks of death least of all things; and his wisdom is a meditation not of death but of life. – Spinoza
"He was among the priests, to use his own definition, not among the prophets, or the purveyors."
"Perhaps human nature, until we have more knowledge of psychology, is inexplicable; we are only beginning, he would insist, to know anything about this very queer animal man."
"I feel so infinitely less confident about anything I have to say than I used to be. It's dreadful how diffident getting a little deeper into things makes one—one sees too much to say anything."
"I've always hated families and patriarchalism of all kinds…. I have so little family feeling, so little feeling that it's by the family that one goes on into the future."
"The free man thinks less of death than of anything else and all his wisdom is the contemplation of life? or very nearly that."
"Ideas must be sketched on other people's minds. Theories must be discussed, preferably with someone, like Charles Mauron"
"It is only by helping other people to overcome their troubles that one can forget one's own"
'After all, there is only one art: all the arts are the same'
"Privately, unhappiness is much greater than happiness."
"I think there is a great deal of spontaneous music in the Italians…."
Theory

“I am getting an idea of what is the great thing in design, namely to have the greatest possible amount of interplay between the volumes and the spaces both at their three dimensionalist. Do you understand? It means that both volumes and spaces function to the utmost against one another as it were? If you look at a Raphael and then at, say, a Titian, perhaps you’ll see what I mean?”
“Now I no longer think that there is a right way or a wrong way of painting, but every possible way. Every artist has to create his own method of expression in his medium, and there is no one way, right or wrong. But every way is right when it is expressive throughout of the idea in the artist’s mind? And he went on to deliver a very lucid and technical disquisition upon mediums; upon washes and pastes; upon the use of the thumb; upon what is meant by rhythm and what is meant by movement; and gave Mr Ringrose and the experts who crowded to hear the case a learned and brilliant lecture upon art in general and the style of Leonardo in particular.”

How could Roger Fry die after having written “It’s odd that for some time before this I’d this feeling of impending menace and my first thought after the fall was—that’s it, I’m killed. But I almost instantly recovered and began to consider the facts.” Mysticism?

Ode to Mc Taggart - “This slow silent movement through doors into the unknown is … a perfect symbol of the inevitable mechanism of things and of the futility of our protests against its irresistible force”.
The English – “It was the English passion for morality, he supposed, and also the English climate. The light, he pointed out, was full of vapour. Nothing was clear. There was no structure in the hills, no meaning in the lines of the landscape; all was smug, pretty and small. Of course the English were incurably literary. They liked the associations of things, not things in themselves. They were wrapt in a cocoon of unreality. But again of course the young were all right. He had great hopes of the young.”
“The English, it seemed to him, always attack an original idea; then debase it; and when they have rendered it harmless, proceed to swallow it whole…. Snobbism was ineradicable. The failure of the Omega and incidents connected with it no doubt did something to confirm him in his conviction that art “in this vile country” is hopeless.”
“If the English despised him, the French at least, who did not suffer to the same extent from the “snobbery of genius”, took him seriously. Even when nobody praised his work, and he was oppressed by the conviction that art after the war must be esoteric and hidden like science in the middle ages—“we can have no public art, only private ones, like writing and painting, and even painting is almost too public”, he wrote (to Virginia Woolf), he still went on painting.”
Mad respect to Athenaeum.
Charles Mauron and Roger Fry always wanted the dangerous delight of helping to translate Mallarmé into English: we of course know some consider Mallarme one of the French poets most difficult to translate into English. The difficulty is due in part to the complex, multilayered nature of much of his work but also to the important role that the sound of the words, rather than their meaning, plays in his poetry.
I like that he finally refused the Slade Professorship at Cambridge.

What a book! I need to re-read it.

Amanda says

It was interesting to see how Woolf, master of the subconscious, would attack a biography of a real person. While we get a picture of his whole life, the biography really centers on his work as an artist and a critic. Woolf seems to take real pleasure in his pure pursuit of art. Following, I assume, the culture of the time we

don't get much of a sense of the shape of his wife's madness or he relationships with his family but we do get a good sense of who he was to the public and his friends.

H says

To live fully, to live gaily, to live without falling into the great sin of Accidia which is punished by fog, darkness and mud, could only be done by asking nothing for oneself. It was difficult to put that teaching into practice. Yet in his private life he had during those difficult years forced himself to learn that lesson. "It was a kind of death to me", he wrote of that long struggle, "and it is a pale and disembodied ghost that's survived. . . ." (215)

"Why is it that I, who am a good critic, am so helpless in front of my own work?--is everyone? I alternate between fits of thinking--now this time I've done something, and sheer disgust." Perhaps he was letting himself become "too terribly subordinated to the thing seen. . . . I don't think I'm au dessus de mon sujet as Poussin said one should be--and I think he was right . . . but I think all the same that a period of subjection to the thing seen fills one with a lot of new possibilities of forms and colours which one may use later more freely. But perhaps I'm only persuading myself because I do get so excited by what I see every day. . . ." Once more his favourite word was "excited". (225)

For by lecturing not only did he make a living and support his family, but he did something to encourage ethe individual to enjoy the rarest of his gifts, the disinterested life, the life of the spirit--"I use spiritual", he wrote with his usual care to make his meaning plain, "to mean all those human faculties and activities which are over and above our mere existence as living organisms". (236)

"we can have no public art, only private ones, like writing and painting, and even painting is almost too public" (238)

"I'm certain that the only meanings that are worth anything in a work of art are those that the artist himself knows nothing about. The moment he tries to explain *his* ideas and *his* emotions he misses the great thing." Then "poetisation", making things out more interesting than they really are, that imposition of the writer's personality for which there is no exact critical term, was another sin that he discovered in the work of another friend. (241)

"When I was a young man I thought the Italian masters had got hold of what I considered the right technique. . . . At that time I really believed that there was a right way of painting and a wrong way of painting. I honestly confess that I have changed my mind. Now I no longer think that there is a right way or a wrong way of painting, but every possible way. Every artist has to create his own method of expression in his medium, and there is no one way, right or wrong. But every way is right when it is expressive throughout of the idea in the artist's mind." (250)

"As to religion--I can't help thinking that you don't see quite enough the difficulty. If religions made no claim but what art does--of being *a* possible interpretation without any notion of objective validity all would be well--that's what the artist does--but religions all pretend to do what science tries to do--namely discover *the* one universally valid construction and hence comes all the trouble and hence it is that religions have always obstructed the effort towards more universal validity. . . . I think what I feel si that for the most part religions are so deeply dyed with wish-fulfilment that more than anything else they have stood in the way of the disinterested study (science) and vision (art) of the universe. I don't doubt they've had to be, because men

couldn't straight away get the disinterested attitude, but I think they ought to go, and that one can't by re-interpreting the word God or any other such methods make them friends of man's real happiness. . . . I don't think this is altogether the memory of my escape from a creed which really was a very gradual and painless process on the whole. I mean I had no sudden shock, no despair at losing my faith. (271-2)

Jill says

Virginia Woolf's only biography, with many insights to both the life of visionary Roger Fry and to the Bloomsbury circle of which he was part.
England discovers both Modernism through his lectures and books, and the Omega Workshops which he ran and founded.
The latter lasted for only for six years (1913-1919) at its London address, 33 Fitzroy Square, London.

Timothy Deer says

While the introduction is interesting, I'm not sure these few pages merited an individually published volume. They are brief and clearly in draft form. All the same, it is always nice to discover a little of Woolf's writing that hasn't been published elsewhere.

Joe Mossa says

I was browsing through my fav used book store when I saw what I thought was a bio of virginia wolfe. It so happens that it was a bio of Roger Fry a famous British art, culture critic written by virgina wolfe. I pay close attention to my reading..lol. I have started reading it and find it quite interesting . It is interesting to see how critics come to their opinions of works of art and at times the critic becomes frustrated that his own painting isn t received too well by the buying public.

Susan says

This came up as "recommended" because I liked Realms of Gold. I have read it. Had been wanting to read after reading a biography of Vanessa Bell, and it was one of the few VW books I had not read. Enjoyed it very much. He was absolutely a major force in the art world in the early 1900's--not just in England but at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC. Reading about his personal and professional life from the point of view of an intimate friend was very interesting.

Chris Purser says

This biography of her brother-in-law and friend is very good. You get to know a period of English life so touching and endearing. Society, Religion, Education, Art, all springing from the life of someone that was

her friend.

Martha says

Not her best work but interesting to see how she wrote a biography without telling secrets that all of Bloomsbury knew but had to be hidden from the world to protect Roger Fry's family.

Valentina Truneanu says

I didn't know anything about Roger Fry before reading this book. I loved how Virginia Woolf told a biography that sounds so close and human, as well as documented. His development as an art critic, his struggles as an artist and a lecturer, his friendships and his jobs show that every life is unique and interesting with its joys and frustrations. Woolf provides a vivid account of the art world at that time and Fry's influence in the reception of Post-impressionism in England.

At the same time, it surprises me that Woolf narrates from a distant perspective, although she was his friend and Vanessa Bell (who had an important role in Fry's life) was her sister.
