OLIVIA FROM BLOOMSBURY TO THE *NRF*

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Dorothy Bussy, the author of *Olivia*, an autobiographical novel published in 1949 when she was in her eighties, has had an interesting destiny which illustrates many of the subtle difficulties encountered by an intelligent woman born in the Mid-Victorian period. She can be defined briefly as the daughter of Sir Richard Strachey, a general and scientist with great responsibilities in British India until 1871, as an elder sister of Lytton Strachey the writer, and James Strachey the translator of Freud, as the wife of Simon Bussy, a gifted but neglected French painter, and as the translator and close friend of the French novelist André Gide. Thus her career can be seen as subordinate to the careers of the men around her. By the same standards, she could be considered to have had a very full life, first in London at Lancaster Gate, as a member of a remarkably intellectual family, then after 1903 at Roquebrune on the French Riviera among artists. She had a daughter, Janie, born in 1905, who was a constant joy, and her friendship with Gide, struck in 1918, introduced her into the world of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. She, for her part, introduced her French friends to the artistic and intellectual coterie of Bloomsbury. She played the part of an intermediary, passing every year from Roquebrune to London via Paris; she played it in print as Gide's main translator and also in her many letters. Her correspondence with Gide has been published in full by the *NRF* and a selection by Oxford University Press (Lambert 1979; Tedeschi 1983), it is interesting to see in those letters the European network of intellectual relations to whom this woman without a 'salon' effectively belonged.

That she stood her ground with people like Gide, Martin du Gard, Matisse, Roger Fry or Lytton Strachey is proof of her quality. A single conversation in the train was enough for John Lehmann to be impressed, and he was Rosamond Lehmann's brother and had been in daily contact with Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press. But Dorothy was not, like these younger women, a creative writer; at least she was not at the time of this encounter and it did not seem likely that she would ever turn to the novel. She had tried her hand at other things, for writing was not at all unusual for women in her family. Her mother, Lady Strachey, had published some tales of her own and edited the memoirs of an aunt, Elisabeth Grant, under the title of *Memoirs of a Highland Lady*. This book, which is still in print a century later, tells the story of a girl of talent who could not develop her gifts fully because of the circumstances but who managed to maintain her family in times of crisis by selling her stories to the magazines. There was a tradition of genteel but moderate female creativity on the Grant side of Dorothy's family. But Lady Strachey knew the difference with creative genius, since she had belonged to the small circle of younger women around George Eliot until the novelist's death.

Marriage or teaching were apparently the two careers open to Dorothy. She had received a good education for a woman of her times, but her parents had not sent her to a

university. Her younger sisters, Marjorie, Pernel and Pippa, went to Cambridge and became typical 'New Women', graduating to become dons in their turns and very active in feminist circles. None of them married. On the contrary, her elder sister, Elinor, had married on coming back from her French finishing school, and Dorothy had been expected to follow her example. That she did not may have influenced her parents' decision concerning their younger daughters.

The education received by Dorothy was to be her main source of inspiration when she turned to creative writing. She wrote a play called *Miss Stock* which relates her experience at an Evangelical boarding-school in the late 1870s where she felt out of her depth because of her agnosticism. She was not victimised - the teachers kept their promise to respect her attitude - but she had to fight her own instinct to conform. It was an experience which helped her later to appreciate the personality of Gide; she sent him the play, which he read and admired, but it was never published. After this traumatic experience, she was sent to the French finishing school Elinor had attended and there she fell under the influence of a remarkable woman, Marie Souvestre, whom she has portrayed in *Olivia* as Melle Julie. Marie Souvestre and the friend with whom she kept the school near Fontainebleau, had met Lady Strachey in Italy some years before; Lady Strachey had a gift for lasting friendships and she entrusted her daughters to her friends.

Great was Dorothy's delight at the freedom enjoyed by the boarders at *Les Ruches*; for the first time in her life she had a room of her own and she was encouraged to develop the aspects of her personality which her puritan upbringing had thwarted. Her description of the discovery of the sensuous pleasures caused by good food or great poetry endows the first chapters of *Olivia* with a freshness, an immediacy, which is very attractive. It is not easy to interest a reader with a description of happiness; it is one of the great virtues of Dorothy Bussy's novel that she succeeds so completely. But the attraction exerted on her by Marie Souvestre was too strong and she suffered her first disappointment in love. She left *Les Ruches* at the end of her two years with an aching heart. This heartbreak is the subject of the novel *Olivia*, which must not be read as a blow by blow rendering of real events but as a work of fiction with a strong autobiographical bias.

She came back to Lancaster Gate and she declined several offers of marriage, much to her mother's disappointment. She made herself useful with the younger children; she was particularly close to Lytton, fourteen years her junior, whom she taught and even nursed when he was obliged to go to Egypt for his health in 1892. But she had a secret attachment to a married man who came almost daily to Lancaster Gate and this platonic but intense relationship was never suspected by her mother, though it went on for years, until a serious illness of the young man allowed his wife to gain complete authority over him. He was to die at the time when Dorothy gave birth to her daughter Janie and the news was kept from her by her devoted husband for a while for fear of a mishap. Dorothy had an opportunity to exercise her talents as a teacher when Marie Souvestre came to England to found a new school near Wimbledon and engaged her to teach there. Eleanor Roosevelt was one of her pupils. Dorothy seemed marked out for spinsterhood when she surprised her family in 1903 with the announcement that she was marrying the impecunious French painter Simon Bussy whom the family had

befriended. He had been recommended to the Stracheys by another French friend of Lady Jane and her son-in-law Auguste Bréal. Lytton Strachey was staggered by the audacity of his favourite sister; he admired her defiant gesture but it took him some time to be reconciled to the fact that the couple were in love and happy in their small cottage of *La Souco* at Roquebrune, with what he defined, when he visited them, as 'the finest view in Europe'.

There was no more teaching for Dorothy, except for the daughter of their Belgian neighbours, the future painter Zoum Walter, and her own daughter Janie, neither of whom could attend the local school. Simon did not command high prices for his pictures and she supplemented their income by taking paying guests; many of Lytton's friends came to La Souco, as university students to brush up their French, or later. Sometimes the house was let, when the Bussys were in Britain, for instance. They came over every year and Dorothy looked after her ageing mother while Simon worked at his pastels which found a more eager public in London than in Paris. Dorothy also attempted to earn something by her pen: she translated Auguste Bréal's book on Velasquez for Duckworth, then another French book on Watteau and finally wrote one on Delacroix in 1907 for the same series. No other opportunity appeared for a long time; she seemed at a dead end.

The great change in her life occurred in 1918 when she met André Gide. Her mother had taken a house near Cambridge for the summer and Auguste Bréal had given Gide a letter of introduction. When Gide mentioned that he wanted to take English lessons, Dorothy volunteered to teach him, and when Madeleine Gide in her grief at learning that he was in England with Marc Allegret burnt all his letters, he was sufficiently at ease with Dorothy to entrust her with the secret of his suffering. He little realised at the time that Dorothy had fallen in love with him. A year later she reminded him:

> Oh! happy Cambridge days, when I was just your dictionary and your grammar, convenient and helpful ... Oh! happy days, when I could love you safely and comfortably without your knowing it, without knowing it myself, without being afraid of anything. (Tedeschi 1983, 35)

She never ceased loving him and he soon learnt the truth when they started the correspondence which was to last until his death. He was embarrassed and kept her at a distance without ever wishing to break with her. He could only offer his friendship but it grew into deep affection. She suffered from jealousy and expressed her anxiety in her letters to him, but she soon had the opportunity to write to him also "on business", for she attempted a translation of *La Porte Etroite* in 1919, which she submitted to him and steps were taken to get it published. Henceforth she kept on translating, mostly his works but sometimes other French writers. Gide was very generous; he would bargain for the best terms on her behalf or divide his American rights equally with her. He knew that Dorothy's pen was the main resource of the family and was glad that Simon, for whom he had a sincere regard, was thus able to carry on his experiments in oils, over

which he agonised and which did not sell so well as his pastels or portraits. Gide introduced the Bussys to his friends of *La Nouvelle Revue Française* and Bussy had the opportunity to draw Paul Valéry and Roger Martin du Gard, as he had drawn Roger Fry and Lady Ottoline Morrell in Bloomsbury.

The discipline of translation taught Dorothy many lessons and she could have lost all gifts for self-expression in her mimetic interpretation of Gide's prose, but her personality was too strong. Her letters testify to her fierce independence of mind and judgement. Still, she surprised him with a postscript to her letter of December 5th 1933:

> A deadly secret! I have written a book. A very short one but I'm dying to show it to you. No one else in the world knows nor probably ever will. (Tedeschi 1983, 153)

His reaction was polite and the following remark was indeed perceptive: "Three evenings I delved into those pathetic reminiscences. How few are the ashes that even today cover so much flame!" (Tedeschi 1983, 155). But he did not suggest that she should publish what he called, years later, her 'little masterpiece'. Dorothy, who had been taken at her word, was certainly pained, but she did not complain; she did not even remind him of her MS. She kept silent on the subject for over fourteen years. It was not her first experience of the kind; she had sent a puppet play to Max Beerbohm in Rapallo some years before. The former dramatic critic of the *Saturday Review* was no judge of the acting potential of written drama and could only be embarrassed by her request. The little play went into a bottom drawer and only reappeared at the sale of Beerbohm's library in 1961, without an attribution.

The war came. The Bussys remained in Nice as *La Souco* was let; Gide wrote to them from North Africa and they were visited by Martin du Gard who found them in poor health. After the war, they went to England to recover from their hardships and Gide exerted himself on behalf of Simon: an important exhibition of his works was organised at the Galerie Charpentier in Paris. He also used his influence with Gallimard to get Dorothy's method of English for adults published. It took Gallimard more than four years to bring out *Fifty Nursery Rhymes*, so that Dorothy would not let them have the translation of *Olivia*. Probably encouraged by the new freedom enjoyed by women in Britain after the war, Dorothy had submitted the *MS* of *Olivia* to some friends there: Rosamond Lehmann was enthusiastic and Leonard Woolf offered to publish it at the Hogarth Press. Dorothy plucked up her courage and reminded Gide of his copy. He promptly read it and recognised his mistake:

> At the same time I recognised it all and discovered it all; for it all came to life anew, from inanimate letter it became palpitating life, suffering flesh, poetry and reality at once. Freud alone could say and perhaps explain what scales covered my eyes the first time I read it ... Only this matters; your *Olivia* seems to me an extraordinary tale, as accomplished and perfect as possible in its feeling, its decorum and tact, its secret lyricism, its restraint in

> indiscretion, its wisdom acquired through reflection, in the moderation of its ardour (without the ardour being in any way diminished), in its eloquent reserve, in its quality at the same time of modesty and candour.... (Tedeschi 1983, 284)

Olivia by Olivia - Dorothy insisted on her anonymity- was an instant success in Britain and it was published soon after in a translation by Martin du Gard 'and the author', not by the *NRF* but by Stock. This reminded Gide of Dorothy's play, *Miss Stock*, but she refused to have it published. Dorothy sold the film rights for *Olivia* to Jacqueline Audry who showed tact and talent in her adaptation for the screen. Dorothy at last was freed from money worries.

Olivia transformed Dorothy's life, though she pretended not to be affected by the opinions of the critics; they were, indeed, laudatory, but she resented their insistence on her age and on the influences they detected:

> That you and Roger should be accused of being the authors of *Olivia* is so silly, however, that I can't even take it as a compliment though you might more justifiably take it as an insult to you! (Tedeschi 1983, 290)

The late flowering of Dorothy's talent brought her a more secret and more intense satisfaction: Gide grew fonder. In his letter of August 22nd 1948, carried away by his momentary use of English, he wrote the words she had been so long waiting for ' ... *what about my Beyrouth lecture*?? ... De tout mon coeur bien fatigué, *I love you*, André Gide" (Tedeschi 1983, 286).

She was afraid to believe him and wrote back on all the other subjects of the letter: his health, the lecture, the cover of Olivia to be done by Duncan Grant, the success of Graham Greene' s *The Heart of the Matter*, to conceal her emotion, as she had been accustomed to do, but her emotion broke out - as usual when she was deeply moved - in the last lines:

> I hope all this stuff won't bore and tire you. Dear Gide, at any rate it won't make your heart beat as one sentence in your letter made mine beat this morning. But then I say to myself, 'He doesn't know English well enough to quite realise what he was saying!' (Tedeschi 1983, 287)

She tries to laugh off her feelings: "Oh dear! what nonsense from your friend aged 83 last birthday 24th July." But there is a postscript:

> PS One word more - a postscript - the postscript to my life. I do believe these three English words in your letter. I believe, I know, you understand, you mean them. (Tedeschi 1983, 287)

Yet there was another message in the famous line of Gide's: "my very tired heart". It was all too true. He wrote to fewer and fewer people but kept up his correspondence with her who had become indispensable. Their last letters bring their story to a fitting close: he tells her of his efforts in favour of her unfortunate book, *Fifty Nursery Rhymes*, and of a projected journey to Morocco as he needs a sunny place to spend the winter in and she is happy to tell him that they are to leave Nice for Roquebrune as their tenant has at last consented to vacate *La Souco*. She obviously hopes to welcome him there again, but it was not to be, as Gide died a few days later.

She had wished to survive him; her wish had been granted. She was destined to survive Simon, who died in London in 1954 and to end her days in Bloomsbury. She declined slowly and died at 51, Gordon Square a fortnight after the accidental death of her daughter Janie, in 1960.

Fear no more the heat o' th' sun (Cymbeline)

She had been subjected, indeed, to the "heat of the sun", as her letters and her novel testify. In the persona of Olivia, she confessed in the introduction to the novel: "Love has always been the chief business of my life" (Bussy 1987, 10) a declaration so stark that she corrects it, in a style which is voluntarily more colloquial, more confidential and intimate, "the only thing I have thought - no, felt - supremely worth while" and the short correction of "thought" into "felt", so important psychologically, allows the solemn word "supremely" to lose its stiffness and become an honest appreciation of one's beliefs. And still the voice carries on: "and I don't pretend that this experience was not succeeded by others" (Bussy 1987, 10). A double negation, which replaces this episode in the perspective of a lifetime. The tone of the whole book is given: it is honest, but the writer is in control. Already, much to Martin du Gard's indignation, Dorothy had made Olivia admit on the very first page that there is a distance between life and autobiography: not only has Olivia "condensed into a few score of pages the history of a whole year" but "its truth has been filtered, transposed, and, maybe, superficially altered, as is inevitably the case with all autobiographies" (Bussy 1987, 9). Now this is disingenuous, because Olivia is not simply Dorothy under an assumed name, Olivia is the heroine of a story, "a short, simple one, with two or three characters and a very few episodes. It is informed with a single motive, tends to a single end, moves quickly and undeviatingly to a final catastrophe" (Bussy 1987, 9). This is the recipe for a classical story and *Olivia* belongs to the same category as *La Princesse de Cleves*, just as Dorothy had intended. The very tempo of this sentence is classical. That *Olivia* is a *roman à clé* only reinforces its classical character and it is fitting that Melle Julie should cast her spell on Olivia when giving a private reading to her pupils of a masterpiece by Racine.

Olivia justifies her choice of this episode of her life by the intensity of the feelings of her young self of sixteen; she insists on her innocence ("ignorance", "I didn't know") which allowed her to be "more utterly absorbed than was ever possible again" (Bussy 1987, 10). That first time "was pure emotion". Since then, she has always questioned her own reactions "standing aside, comparing, analysing, objecting; 'Is this real? Is this

sincere?"" (Bussy 1987, 10). A running commentary on the experience of the innocent heroine is conducted in the novel by her older self, and many passages are devoted to this assessment of emotion, as recollected in the tranquillity of old age, the sceptical old age of a woman who has read widely and suspects the influence of the poets: "the psychologists, the physiologists, the psycho-analysts, the Prousts and the Freuds", who "poison the sources of emotion" (Bussy 1987, 10). For the girl of sixteen, there was no antidote to the "poison of passion" and her older self is full of tender pity: "How should I have known...", "My case was so different, so unheard of" (Bussy 1987, 11). This is irony, for school-girl crushes are common enough, but it is also true - and Dorothy Bussy chose not to sign the novel for this reason - that the depiction of the passionate feelings of a teen-age girl for a mature woman was an infringement of a taboo in polite literature. Olivia confesses that she had felt at the time, "by a deep-rooted instinct" that it was "something to hide desperately" but now, "after many years, the urgency of confession" was upon her and she could "indulge it" (Bussy 1987, 11-12).

A passionate attachment which must be concealed is an experience which Dorothy had known more than once: with Marie Souvestre, certainly, with the young man of Lancaster Gate, and now with Gide, and only in the second case had her love been reciprocated with the same warmth. It was inevitable that the study of Olivia's emotions at sixteen should often merge with the emotions of the woman of sixty as revealed in the letters. The passage on Julie's reading and the revelation of physical beauty is followed by a digression on the difficulty of describing a face but a careful reader notices the similarities with certain letters addressed to Gide; and - even more revealing of the superposition of these two passions of her life - is the paragraph that follows, on the "strange relationship between the reader and his listener" (Bussy 1987, 27). The narrator has digressed, fallen into a day-dream and now shakes it off: "But all these are reflections of a later date" (Bussy 1987, 27). Such moments in the book, which reveal the many layers of emotion to which we are given access, give to this story of a youthful adventure the density of the confession of a lifetime.

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