

FOREWORD

Like many as a child, I made friends with characters in books. It's a strange tie between reader and writer. We come to know a lasting poet or novelist more intimately than we do people of our own place and time; closer in a way than love and friendship. Growing up in a provincial town, I was drawn to outsiders and especially to girls like Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*, a restless, intelligent girl who cannot find a home for her aspiring nature – much like her creator, George Eliot herself. Later, I loved Virginia Woolf's sightings of the night where she sees into hearts and minds of outsiders whose shadow-selves fade in the glare of day. I was a convert to Emily Brontë's full-throated contempt for 'the world without' in favour of 'the world within'. All were outsiders during their lifetimes, and painful though this was, their separations from society did release what they had to say.

As a child with an ill mother, I knew about pity for those set apart; but at the same time I was struck at an early age by the possibilities of the outsider who, like my mother, could use her apartness to see the world afresh. The outsiders who have meant most to me tell us not who we are, but who we might be.

I have chosen five extraordinary outsider voices rising in the course of the nineteenth century: a prodigy, a visionary, an outlaw, an orator and an explorer. To my mind, they came, they saw and left us changed. Each differs in her own place and situation, but what Mary Shelley, Emily Brontë, George Eliot, Olive Schreiner and Virginia Woolf also have in common is

the way they inform one another, and us, across the generations. All five were readers before they became writers, which is to say each heard those who came before her in a chain of making. I want to look at the links in this chain as each successive woman brings to birth a new genus. On 2 January 1846, when Emily Brontë was writing *Wuthering Heights*, her unfettered voice powers its way past its time. She declares, 'No coward soul is mine.' The American poet Emily Dickinson, taking in that voice in 1881, and Virginia Woolf, hearing it in 1925, seize on the same word: this writer is 'gigantic'.

I'm curious how an outsize voice came to each of the five writers. How did they become writers despite the obstacles in a woman's way? Their lives appeared changeable to the point of metamorphosis. It was improbable that Mary Godwin at the age of sixteen should have found a great poet, Shelley, keen to encourage her wish to write. It was improbable that Emily Brontë should have had two sisters of congenial genius who contrived to publish her almost against her will. Doctors and nurses did not expect Virginia Woolf to recover from her mental illness in 1915, let alone emerge in the 1920s as a leading novelist. George Eliot could have been an evangelical teacher; Olive Schreiner could have remained a governess.

In each, I see at the outset of their lives a shadowy being, half-awake to untested potency, surfacing in a letter or murmuring to herself in her journal, but always improvising, indeterminate, as she veers from the path laid out by custom. Passion was part of their emergence, as was sexuality: George Eliot fell for a man who could not love her in the way she wished. Mary Godwin (later Mary Shelley) was headlong in her love for a poet to whom, she felt, she could 'unveil' all she was. Olive Schreiner was explicit about arousal, extraordinarily so for a single woman in the 1880s, to the future psychologist of sex, Havelock Ellis, who made notes as she spoke.

In the nineteenth century it was a truth universally acknowledged that nice women were quiet. They did not indulge in utterance in a public arena. To do so was immodest, unwomanly; assertion or egotistical display was thought unnatural. Remarkably then for three insubordinate spirits, their novels spoke instantly to their time: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

(1818), George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), and Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1883). The even bolder words of Emily Brontë and Virginia Woolf, however, did not reach a wide audience till well after their deaths.

These lives and books, as they commune with one another across time, converge in their hatred of our violent world. Emily Brontë brings home the horror of domestic violence together with the misogyny and hate-speech Heathcliff hurls at all comers. Both Mary Shelley and Olive Schreiner witnessed the barbarous impact of war on civilians. Virginia Woolf wakes from mental illness to the madness of war: the senseless slaughter going on in the trenches.

Four of these five writers began in unpromising situations. The exception is the first, Mary Shelley, who produced *Frankenstein* before she turned twenty. For though she became, like the others, an outsider – in her case, a social outcast – she started with an unprecedented advantage as the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, the pioneer of women's rights. Her father, William Godwin, was almost as famous as her mother, a political philosopher admired by the best writers of the day, Coleridge, Lamb, Byron and especially Shelley.

All five of my choices were motherless. With no female model at hand, they learnt from books; if lucky, from an enlightened man. Common to all five was the danger of staying at home, the risk of an un-lived life. But if there was danger at home, there was often worse danger in leaving: the loss of protection; estrangement from family; exploitation; a wandering existence, shifting from place to place; and worst of all, exposure to the kind of predator who appeared to offer Olive Schreiner a life – marriage – when she went to work as a governess at the age of seventeen.

In a period when a woman's reputation was her treasured security, each of these five lost it. Each endured the darkness of social exclusion. How far was it willed – how far, for instance, did Emily Brontë will her unpopularity at a Brussels school, or was it involuntary? Were the acts of divergence necessary if each woman was to follow the bent of her nature? Mary Ann Evans fled a provincial home where a brainy girl was regarded as odd. In London, she called herself an 'outlaw' before she became one by living with a partner outside the legality of marriage. Yet it was during her

years outside society in the late 1850s that George Eliot came into being.

Virginia Stephen (later Virginia Woolf) settled in Bloomsbury as part of a group. Her brothers, sister, and their mostly homosexual friends, E. M. Forster, Lytton Strachey and Maynard Keynes, provided a shield. In such stimulating company, Virginia and her sister turned themselves into unchaperoned young women, flaunting words like 'semen' and 'copulation' in mixed company until all hours of the night. It was scandalous, but not dangerous. Danger, for Woolf, was the threat of insanity, bound up with what Henry James called 'the madness of art'.

No one, of course, can explain genius. Women are especially hard to discern outside the performing spheres assigned to them in the past, the thin character of angels in the house. In contrast, Virginia Woolf explores the secret thing: women's enduring creativity as it takes its way in shadow; in her generation and before, it did not proclaim itself.

What we now know is that after these writers' lifetimes, families concocted myths, playing down the radical nature of these women. George Eliot's widower presented a flawless angel; at the opposite extreme, Schreiner's estranged widower branded her with his annoyance. The devoted son and daughter-in-law of Mary Shelley cast her in the Victorian mould of timid maiden and mourner. But voices sing out past the tombstones of reputation. The words of these five altered our world; certainly they changed the face of literature. We do more than read them; we listen and live with them.

To say I chose these writers was actually wrong; they chose themselves. For each had the compulsion Jane Eyre expressed when she said, '*Speak I must*'.