

Proserpine

Anne Ryan Hanafin

Author's Preface

In the late spring of 2006, after attending an International Virginia Woolf Society conference in Birmingham, I treated myself to a Woolfian 'writer's holiday'. I visited Knole and Sissinghurst and travelled to London, where I spent a few days at 22 Hyde Park Gate, the house where Woolf was born and spent much of her childhood. One morning, with no real plan in mind, I went for a walk. It was an incredibly bright spring day, oven-hot in that suffocating way peculiar to London. My feet hurt, my head ached; turning from the endless shimmering asphalt of the high street, I lost my way. And then there was an open door, with dark cool air rushing out from it, and a name I knew beside it: Leighton. And so, completely by accident, I stumbled into the Leighton House Museum.

With its various rooms purpose-built to showcase Leighton's collections and to provide inspiration for his painting, [Leighton House](#) is a place rich in detail and colour, sparks for the imagination. I sat for a long time in the Arab Hall, looking at the Damascene tiles and listening to the fountain. As I walked into one of the drawing rooms, I realised that the garden outside looked towards the site of Little Holland House, a social centre for artists, authors, and bohemians, once owned by the Prinsep family who were cousins of Virginia Woolf on her mother's side. Although the high point of the Little Holland House scene occurred before Woolf was born, her mother, Julia Prinsep Jackson Duckworth Stephen, would have known some of its denizens through family connections and through her own fame as a beauty and sometime artist's model prior to her first marriage.

I stood looking out the drawing room window, wondering idly whether [the Stephen children](#) had ever played in the garden below me. Presently, I felt that someone was watching me; turning round, I found

Georgiana Burne-Jones staring at me from the opposite wall. I had been reading deeply about the Pre-Raphaelites, particularly about the women of the circle, the interconnected web of their lives as artists, writers, models, wives. This spooky, luminous portrait, Georgie's grave grey eyes, seemed to be calling me to some unknown account.

Several weeks later, back at my desk, I was reading material in the online digital Rossetti Archive about the untraced versions of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Proserpine*. A painting, a garden, a little girl. By creative alchemy, the story arrived.

An earlier version of 'Proserpine' was published in the Spring/Summer 2007 edition of the International Virginia Woolf Society's *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*. Since then, it has been used as a teaching text at Villanova University, Pennsylvania, USA, as part of its 'Augustine & Culture Seminar', a required first-year writing and Great Books course. I've participated in two of these seminars, both electronically and in person, and it has greatly encouraged me to find that my initial fear, that the conceit of 'Proserpine' would have little appeal to readers outside a small circle, was unfounded. Particularly with young students, 'Proserpine' fosters discussion about the sources of artistic creativity, and about the interaction between historical fact and the crafting of fiction. I'm pleased that this revised 'Proserpine' will now find a new community of readers in the pages of *Neo-Victorian Studies*.

Proserpine

Dante Gabriel Rossetti created at least ten versions of Proserpine between 1871 and 1882. Of the eight in oils, three were destroyed or lost, and the whereabouts of another are currently unknown. The painting's appearance on the walls of the Stephen family drawing room, and their daughter Virginia's visit to one of Lord Leighton's 'at-homes' in the spring of 1889, are entirely inhabitants of the author's imagination.

The little girl knelt by the fountain. The house around her was cool and dark, especially here in the hall with the blue tiles. There were so many of

them, going up, so far up over her head, all the way up to the ceiling. The girl was listening to the water and watching two greeny-black fish lazily make their way around the bottom of the pool. On his way through the hall, a tall elderly gentleman with a long beard told her that, according to Mr. Linnaeus, the name of the fish was Tinca Tinca. She liked that. Tinca Tinca sounded like the fountain itself, falling endlessly over and over and never running dry.

The old man had patted her on the head and gone off into the garden with Mother and Father and her brothers and sisters. But the girl stayed behind, whispering Tinca Tinca to herself and hoping the fish would come up to say hello. They didn't. So after a while she lay down on a cushioned bench in a latticed alcove nearby, and looked at the peacocks and parrots and other birds that floated across the tiles all round the hall. Perhaps the peacocks belonged to the lovely princesses on the four tiles on that wooden screen. They could be princes *or* princesses, it was hard to say. There were no helpful bumps or beards to go by. But each of the figures curved pleasantly at the hips and held red flowers to their noses, and one wore a beautiful robe covered with blue and white lozenges, like the scales of a fish. So princesses they would be, she decided. And they had come to England in the sleek black ship with the golden sail in the mosaic in the arch. And the peacocks had come along as well, safe in cages piled neatly under the mast.

She had just gotten to the exciting part of the story, where great green serpents rose from the sea at stem and stern, and all were sore afraid, when the housekeeper rose up in front of her and shooed her out of the hall. There was to be a concert in the evening, for Mr. Leighton's most important friends, and herself and Mr. Kemp must get the house ready, and anyway children should be playing outside on such a grand day as this, not mooning about in the dark talking to themselves, and by this time the little girl was so frightened of the hulking broad-shouldered woman, with her jangling keys and meaty fingers, that she bolted through the room next door, narrowly missing both an amused housemaid and a statute of a young Greek man on a pink plinth, and ran headlong out into the garden. It was a bright day in early April, so bright that she stopped abruptly at the bottom of the steps and shut her eyes. She tried to keep the images of the four princesses and their caged birds before her, screwing up her eyelids in the hopes of staying their

flight. But they faded, taking their story with them, and she had no choice but to open her eyes.

It wasn't a particularly nice garden. It was bare and lumpy in places, and there were very few flowers. But there were tall, wind-whispering trees, with inviting benches beneath them, and when the little girl turned round to look at the back of the house, she could see all kinds of life in the ivy growing there. There were ants, and beetles, and sleepy moths, and high overhead a starling, also dazzled by the spring sun, darted in and out of the tangled roots. Halfway along the garden wall was a cherry tree, its white and pink flowered branches spread delicately against the lawn. Father would name that Cheal's Tree, while Mother would call it a weeping cherry. The little girl didn't like either of those names. She had no idea who Mr. Cheal was, and she didn't like to think of the tree being sad or forlorn. She rather thought the branches were reaching down to embrace the earth, that their blossoms were gently stroking the grass, just as if the garden had a headache or the frets.

There was a lady sitting under the cherry tree who was not at all like the other people in the garden. She was sitting alone in a plain wooden chair, far away from the guests drinking tea in the trellised arbour at the side of the house. Like most of the other women in the garden, the lady wore a long black dress. But their dresses had frilly sleeves, and fussy white collars at the neck, and some had belts that seemed to squeeze them uncomfortably high above their waists. The lady's dress was quite different. It was loose, flowing. And her hair was wild and brindly all over like a salt and pepper sheepdog's, not smoothly shining like Mother's. The little girl noticed how the others approached the lady: with deference, only one or two at a time. Mr. James the American whispered something to her, and presented her with a bunch of violets and heart's ease which she held carelessly in her lap. And the old gentleman who knew the names of fish said nothing at all, but only bent down and gently touched his lips to the lady's hair.

All this time, the little girl had been walking slowly across the lawn towards the cherry tree. Soon she found herself standing right beside the lady's chair. Sunlight flickered off the gold chain around the lady's neck. The girl smelled lavender and wood smoke and something like turpentine in

the folds of the heavy gown. And the lady was looking at her, watching her intently under heavy dark eyebrows that swooped down sharply and almost met in the middle. She wanted to laugh at those eyebrows, but could not, because the eyes beneath them, the deepest and strangest blue-grey the girl had ever seen, pinned her in place. They were cold eyes that were also kind, they were wondrous and fearful, and the little girl was torn between wanting to back away and leave the lady in peace under the glowing tree, or stand there forever fixed in that unsettling regard.

“Hello,” the lady said.

The girl had no gifts to give the lady, and wasn't sure it was right to kiss her hand, as she would have liked to do. So she stayed quiet.

“It's all right if you don't want to talk,” said the lady. “I don't say much myself.”

Now that the little girl was standing so close, she realised that the lady's face was quite familiar to her. It was like someone you saw often but rarely spoke to, a face you would miss if it was no longer there, like the postman, or the woman at the sweetshop in Kensington Gardens. The idea that she knew the lady began to prickle and burn behind the girl's forehead, and she twisted a strand of hair about her finger as she thought. For some reason, she was thinking about the aspidistra in the back drawing room at home.

All at once the prickles dissolved, in a flash of colour right behind her eyeballs, and the girl saw herself in the drawing room standing on a chair pulled up close to the wall, with the dusty old aspidistra tickling her nose. Hanging before her, a dim but lucent beacon in the dark room, was a painting of a lady holding a piece of fruit. The little girl watched herself leaning forward to count the seeds in the orange globe in the lady's hand. It was a pomegranate, with six of the seeds missing. The lady before her must be Proserpine, Queen of the Underworld, and perhaps everyone had gathered here today not for Mr. Leighton's concert, but to pay homage to her.

The little girl heard herself say, “I think there is a picture of you in our house.”

Oddly, the lady did not seem at all surprised to hear this. Perhaps she expected her eventual subjects to have her image in their homes.

“Really. What does it look like?” she said.

“Well, there is a tall, beautiful lady, whose hair is black, darkest black all over, and she’s wearing a blue dress, and standing like this –” and the little girl turned to the left, and clasped her left wrist in her right hand, with her long fingers curled close to the base of her neck.

“I see,” the lady said.

But when the little girl looked at the lady again, she had to wonder if what she thought was true. Of course it was early spring, and the Queen had only just arrived back from her exile in Tartarus. She could simply be tired from her journey, which would explain why her eyes were so weary in her drawn face. But the princesses inside, from the land of peacocks: their brilliant slender bodies had swayed so gracefully in the breezes of their far-away land. This lady was all angles and edges. She held herself stiff and upright against the back of her chair, as if she was in pain, and her peculiar dress had faded streaks in its musty skirts.

So the girl said, “Well, maybe it isn’t you after all.”

“Maybe not,” agreed the lady. Something was passing over her face, like fast moving clouds threatening the sun, and she twisted a gold bracelet round and round her brittle wrist. On its strange clasp were two ruby-eyed beasts who seemed to be devouring each other.

They were silent for a moment, watching the coachman hammer croquet hoops into the lawn.

“What is your name?” asked the lady.

“My name is Virginia,” replied the girl, “but everyone calls me Goat.”

The lady made a choked sound in her throat that sounded like a laugh. Or maybe it was just a cough. “Goat?” Virginia nodded matter-of-factly. “Why on earth do they call you that?”

“Because I am clumsy and stubborn and always running into things. My brothers and sisters all have different names.” She pointed off towards the croquet game, which was now in full boisterous swing. “Nessa over there is Ape, and we call Thoby The Grim.”

“And where are your mother and father?” asked the lady.

Virginia couldn’t help feeling that the lady knew the answer to this question already, but just in case she *was* the Queen of the Underworld, she thought it best to respond politely. “The lady under the big sycamore tree is my mother, and my father is standing next to her, talking to Mr. James.”

“You’re Julia Jackson’s child,” said the lady absently.

“Well, Julia Stephen, actually,” said Virginia, who was sorry to have to contradict a queen.

“Your mother is still very beautiful,” said the lady.

“Yes, everyone says so.”

The lady was speaking so quietly that she was almost talking to herself. “Do you think the Goat and the Ape will be beautiful when they grow up?”

“Nessa will, I’m sure,” said Virginia, who was starting to get a little confused. “But it won’t matter what we look like, because Nessa is going to paint, and I am going to write stories, and we will always be together.”

The lady smiled then, and even though it was only a tiny smile, at just one corner of her mouth, seeing it made Virginia feel warm and light inside.

“That is a very good idea, little Goat,” the lady said.

All of a sudden, Virginia’s father appeared. Taking her by the shoulders, he hustled her across the lawn towards the croquet players, whispering far too loudly in his sharp voice, “Now listen here, ragamouse, you mustn’t pester Mrs. Morris, she’s not very well.”

Virginia struggled in his grasp. She wanted to take her leave properly, not just be carried off like a sack of coal. She was so desperate to go back that her stomach twisted itself into a hard knot. Finally, she squirmed just enough so that she could turn around a little, and she was relieved to find that the lady was still smiling at her.

Virginia fully intended that evening to head straight to the back drawing room and see if her suspicion about the lady was correct. But the children, overtired and cranky from running after scatter shots in the unaccustomed sun, were sent home before the concert, which caused quite a bit of upset, and then Virginia tripped over Shag the dog on her way upstairs to the nursery, and banged her head, and scraped her knee besides. Her loud protestations, that she *must* be allowed to find out whether or not Proserpine lived in Mr. Leighton’s garden, had no effect. To bed! bellowed her father from his study, his voice overwhelming, inexorable. On a last dash down the corridor, she collided with her sister Stella, who stretched out her arms and enclosed Virginia safe within them. Stella took her straight to bed, where

she sat beside her, soothing the fuss away with soft words, her long cool fingers laid against the little girl's feverish cheek. Somewhere in the house, water dripped on tile: plink, plink. Tossing in her narrow bed, Virginia fought against sleep. But behind her half-closed eyelids, she glimpsed something: a silver globe, turning in a fountain. She wanted nothing so much as to hold that globe, to turn it slowly in her hands and feel its cool heavy weight. Borne along by the sound of the water, by Stella's voice balanced within it, the girl reached out....

And that was how Virginia Stephen forgot the day she met the Queen of the Underworld under a cherry tree in South Kensington.