

**“Wild Swimming”
by Gill Lowe**

Virginia Woolf and Rupert Brooke use water throughout their work as a metaphor for powerful emotional states. In “A Sketch of the Past,” (1985) Virginia uses an arresting simile, “I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream” (*MOB* 92). She recognises her passivity. She is alive, aware, alert to experience but not actively swimming; held, static, in the current of what seems to be her mother’s invisible influence.¹ Water is frequently troped as female. In *Waterlog: A Swimmer’s Journey Through Britain*, Roger Deakin, high priest of wild swimming, describes water’s “welcome embrace like all our mothers soothing and kissing us cool” (196). This paper will suggest that for Rupert Brooke, unable to cast off a puritanical, maternal inheritance, swimming became a necessary cleansing that was sometimes calming but, more often, a desired cold, sharp shock.

Both Rupert and Virginia were reliant on powerful mothers but had ambivalent feelings about their influence. Both were ambitious, both physically fragile, both frequently ill and treated by the same nerve specialist, Dr. Maurice Craig. Both were sexually ill-at-ease. The Edwardian period was perplexing and difficult for them.² Virginia, uncomfortable with a stifling nineteenth century heritage, actively embraced modernism as a clean start. Influenced by Swinburne, Baudelaire and Wilde, Rupert chose an aesthetic, decadent world-weary image on going up to Cambridge in 1906. This façade transformed during his short life; he assumed several elaborate acts, depending on who was watching.

Virginia seems to have appraised his habit, noting her essay, “The Intellectual Imagination” (1919) that he “made friend after friend, and passed from one extreme to another of dress and diet” (*E3* 134). He next tried an abstemious, Fabian, “back-to-nature” role. Finally, traditional, reactionary values reclaimed him. In 1913 in a letter to his first female love, Noel Olivier, he writes, “I’m the most conservative person in the world” (*Song of Love* 243). The truth was more extreme. By then, he had become stridently misogynistic, anti-Suffragist, homophobic, anti-pacifist and anti-Semitic.

Virginia Stephen stayed with Rupert at the Old Vicarage between the 14th-19th August, 1911. According to her 1918 essay, “Rupert Brooke,” he was “consciously and defiantly pagan. He was living at Grantchester; his feet were permanently bare; he distained tobacco and butcher’s meat; and he lived all day, and perhaps slept all night, in the open air.” His nature was, she writes, “self-conscious in the highest degree” (*E2* 279). William Pryor, in *Virginia Woolf and the Raverats*, quotes a 1925 letter to Virginia from Gwen Raverat where she observes, retrospectively, “All that about bathing and food and bodies was a pose” (176). Repeatedly, in his letters, Rupert asserts his chosen act, “I am becoming a wild rough elementalist. Walt Whitman is nothing to me” he wrote to his cousin, Erica Cotterill, in August 1908 (*RB Letters* 139). Again to Erica, from Devon in March 1909, “I am leading a healthy life. I rise early,” ... “eat no meat, wear very little, do not part my hair, take frequent cold baths, work ten hours a day, and rush madly about the mountains in flannels & rainstorms for hours. I am surprisingly cheerful about it- it is all part of my scheme of returning to nature” (*RB Letters* 159). Virginia recognised the necessity for him of this scheme, writing that, “Like most sensitive people, he had his methods of self-protection; his pretence now to be this and now to be that” (*E2* 279).

Always attuned to the inauthentic, she wrote, “You might judge him extreme, and from the pinnacle of superior age assure him that the return to Nature was as sophisticated as any other pose” (E2 279). “The Intellectual Imagination” (TLS 11th December, 1919) was Woolf’s review of Walter de la Mare’s lecture, “*Rupert Brooke and the Intellectual Imagination*” which had been delivered in memoriam on March 27th 1919 at Rugby School. In this essay Woolf re-states that “Rupert Brooke was never for a second unconscious” (E3 135).

“Wild swimming” refers to the liberation of entering what might be seen as an outlawed element; a secret “skinny-dipping”. No watchers are implied, or, if they are there, they are voyeurs. Wild swimming suggests abandon: euphoric, endorphin-inducing plunging and larking. For Jay Griffiths, in *Wild: an Elemental Journey*, wildness is “rebellious, breaks the rules, subversive and quintessentially revelrous” (343). During Virginia’s stay with Rupert, they swam naked together, causing her more adventurous sister, Vanessa, to versify to Saxon Sydney-Turner, “I heard from Virginia. She bathed with her Brook [sic]/ And now they’re at Firl. For what next must we look?” (VB Letters 106).

Hermione Lee refers to a letter of the 25th August, 1911, to Clive Bell from Adrian Stephen who was looking forward to seeing “the Goat” that day, to “hear how her Rupert romance is going on. She told me that he said he did not want to marry for several years at any rate but did want to copulate occasionally and promiscuously. I am afraid that her bathe has not been taken quite seriously enough for her taste but perhaps she will now

have gone a step further” (295). Her siblings’ presumptuous expectations would be dashed.

Christopher Hassall, uses a significant line from W. B. Yeats as the epigraph to his biography of Brooke, “There is always a living face behind the mask”. Hassall draws attention to Rupert’s dual nature which he calls “both puritanical and romantic at once” (277). In a letter to Gwen Darwin (later Raverat), Rupert writes, “*We* go for both; we join up Puritan and Hedonist: we have (once more) only connected” (262). Rupert’s close friend, Frances Cornford, recognised that, “Deep-ingrained in him, and handed down to him I should imagine through generations of English ancestors, was the puritanical spirit. I remember how clearly it showed ... nobody could miss it, whoever saw the scorn and sternness in his face when he spoke of things that he hated, things corrupt and unclean” (277-278). Hassall suggests that Mrs Brooke’s strength lay in her Puritanism but he implies that this might have been a problem for Rupert, “It was there hardly less in her son, where, in that divided nature, it could create a conflict under stress and so might become a source of weakness” (144).

Jonathan Rutherford writes that, while he lived at Grantchester, Rupert manufactured “his own romantic identity as a *naïf*, child poet” (49-50). This was the perfect part to adopt to help control disturbing natural impulses and to evade adult responsibilities. I suggest that Rupert found the pastoral aesthetic appealing and useful as a means of managing the division in his nature. Faced with perplexing personal dilemmas, rustication became a reassuring escape. Styling himself as a “neo-pagan” was a calculated decision and, inevitably, he found it difficult to be casual about this role.

Rupert's poetry is imbued with an elegiac longing for certainty and safety. The countryside is portrayed as place of stability and continuity; a defence against change. Nature is conventionally represented as feminine: lovely, regenerative and comforting. Rutherford adds a nationalist layer to this idea, "The depiction of England as a mother to her sons became a powerful motif in imperialist ideology" (52). Like other spiritually-doubtful Edwardians, Rupert sought to escape his urban existence by creating his own Arcadia, two miles outside Cambridge. In May 1908, in a letter to Jacques Raverat, Rupert portrays Cambridge as "speciously arrayed in a pretence of heat and light green buds" but it is actually corrupt. He goes on to choose a ghoulish Websterian simile; the city is "a swollen corpse, and we buzz on it like flies" (*RB Letters* 127).

For the Greeks, Arcadia was an innocent, pre-adolescent, asexual place. Rupert was obsessed by *Peter Pan* (*RB Letters* 25th March 1905, 19; 31st December 1905, 33; 10th January 1906, 38) and Keith Hale, in *Friends and Apostles*, writes that he saw it at least ten times (25). Perhaps this was because J. M. Barrie's play "restructures the ideal world according to the parthenogenetic model of women as mothers but never as wives or lovers" (Cecil Degrotte Eby, cited by Hale in footnote, 25). Pastoral is stylised and highly aesthetic. It is an artefact. As it commonly associates the City with degeneracy, pastoral can be seen as a highly moral concept. Rupert rejected Christ, in favour of the ambiguous, pagan Pan. Rutherford suggests that, "Brooke is afraid, because Pan symbolises both what he most wants and what he most fears. Pan is a metaphor for his turn to nature in search of sexual potency and identity. But he is also the figure of unrepressed sexuality" (62).

Virginia is often credited with the invention of the term “neo-pagan” but she borrowed it from the Pre-Raphaelites and the social reformer, Edward Carpenter. His follower, J. H. Badley, founded the co-educational, progressive Bedales School, advocating nudism, mixed bathing and camping to keep an innocent mind and healthy body. Several neo-pagans attended Bedales. The group was anti-intellectual, standing for freedom and spontaneity.³ Despite all this apparent liberty, the body was seen as androgynous and relationships were mostly platonic.

David Garnett describes the physically daring Olivier girls climbing fearlessly, making dens, skinning and eviscerating rabbits but, sometimes, “as unthinkingly cruel as savages” (99). He writes about a camping trip in the summer of 1909 at Penshurst.⁴ They were river swimming by the light of bicycle lamps. “[W]e took running dives into the unseen river. It was exciting- the moment of doubt before one struck the water, and then swimming rapidly out of the next diver’s way. The smell of new-mown hay, of the river and weeds, the curious polished smoothness, that fresh river-water leaves on the skin ... all heart-aches were purged and healed and an immense happiness and gratitude to my friends filled me. Soon we were sitting round the blazing fire, Noel’s eyes shining in welcome for the new arrivals and the soft river-water trickling from her hair down her bare shoulders” (169-170). Rupert, one of these new arrivals, gradually fell in love with Noel but chose to cast her in his mind and in writing as a mythic Grecian goddess or elusive dryad. He became irrationally protective once their relationship was over; anxious that she would be kidnapped; revolted that another might possess and sully her.

Virginia may have misunderstood the essentially chaste qualities of most of the neo-pagans. On 18th April, 1911, planning a holiday in France with “My Neo Pagan [Ka] Cox” (*LI* 460), she writes a bold letter to Clive Bell, “I mean to throw myself into youth, sunshine, nature, primitive art. Cakes with sugar on the top, love, lust, paganism, general bawdiness, for a fortnight at least; and not write a line” (*LI* 462). Writing to Jacques Raverat in 1925, she retrospectively mocked her yearning to be liked by the group, “You made me smoke one of Sir George’s cigars—& I so much wanted you to admire me, & thought I was a desolate old stick compared with the younger generation” (*VW and the Raverats* 139). Rupert swam with Gwen Raverat, Rose Macaulay,⁵ Ka Cox, Phyllis Gardner amongst others. He appears evangelical in his wish to involve his friends in a shared therapeutic cleansing.

There exists a notebook, a pencil manuscript, catalogued as RCB/M/6 in the Papers of Rupert Chawner Brooke in the King’s College archive, Cambridge. Inside is a draft of a talk called “From without,” written for the Carbonari Society and dated Michaelmas 1909. In it Rupert praises the revivifying and calming qualities of nature and aligns himself with the rural community. He addresses his academic audience as, “you little people, you noisy, quick-witted, little, dark, shifty eyed, bitter-tongued, little men of the city. You think that peace is ignoble, dull and dulling, a thing of sloth. You laugh at us of the country, because we will stan[d] for hours together over a gate, watching our sheep. You confuse nimbleness of mind with depth of emotion” (RCB/M/6).

After a few more lines he writes, “We of the country abide, perdurable, slow of brain, with hearts that change from glory to glory, like a pool in evening.” In the next

paragraph, he continues, “Eh, I am an alien here, & homesick & shy, reading my rough words with an archaic Arcadian burr, with all your clever bright eyes glittering round me, & your whirring brains—.” A few lines later he writes about day-time swimming, “Two or three days ago I wandered out for my customary dip in the river. It was in the afternoon, about the time you were all sitting in your great-coats over the fire roasting chestnuts for your tea. I ran across a field, through a wood, & stripped in a little clearing” (RCB/M/6).

After a break in the text, he describes a swim on a night with “a great many stars but no moon.” “I stood naked at the edge of the black water in a perfect silence. I plunged. The water stunned me as it came upwards with its cold, life-giving embrace. Was it the splendid shock that made me think the river was quivering” (RCB/M/6).

What is remarkable about this description is that Rupert is not swimming privately, but has an imaginary audience. He hears the water roaring in his ears as “a tumult of applause from all the world around.” To him, the trees are personified as “incredulous”. They sway “like a crowd at a football-match & the stars waving downwards like a million white finger ends” (RCB/M/6). This swimming is far from “wild” but, rather, a morally enlivening, stirring public event. Far from being a subversive activity this sort of swimming is a shock to the system. It is a cold, therapeutic purge, reminding the swimmer of his corporality. A few lines further on he seems to feel that nature is chastising him; the wind begins to blow and dark clouds form. He runs off “homeward through the wood,” “moodily feeling that somehow, somewhere, I had been a fool” (RCB/M/6).

Rupert was acutely aware of his physical charisma. He often comments on the effect he had on his audience. According to Timothy Rogers, Rupert once asked Gwen Raverat, “Will you please disarrange my hair; I’ve got to read poetry to some old ladies” (2). He writes in January 1912, to Ka Cox, “I’ve always enjoyed that healthy serene, Apollo-golden-haired, business” (*RB Letters* 341). Hassall writes that he traded on his boyish appearance “to charm the elderly and eminent” (277). Having met Henry James, Rupert told Frances Cornford, “Of course I did the fresh, boyish stunt, and it was a great success” (277). His friend Edward Marsh, cites Rupert’s statement in a letter written in his last year at school, “I am an actor and spectator as well, and I delight in contriving effective exits” (30). Paul Delany, and other biographers, mention a celebrated, but (because of its physiological implausibility) perhaps apocryphal, anecdote. This was Rupert’s trick of diving into the river to resurface with an instant erection (132). Apparently, he was not merely aware of his audience but, also, prepared to give a standing ovation to his own performance.⁶



Rupert Brooke, 1913 NPG P101(b)
by Sherrill Schell, glass positive, (305 mm x 254 mm)

Nigel Jones writes that Rupert’s friends impertinently referred to Sherrill Schell’s iconic shirtless portrait as “Your favourite actress,” although Rupert himself thought it “rather silly” (316). In *Beginning Again* Leonard Woolf recalls meeting Rupert for the first time, and thinking, “that is exactly what Adonis must have looked like in the eyes of Aphrodite.” According to Leonard, Schell’s well-known portrait, “neither flatters nor libels him. It is almost incredible but he really did look like that. The photograph, of course, does not show his colouring—the red-gold of his hair and the brilliant complexion.” He considered Rupert to be a “professional charmer” with a “very pronounced streak of hardness, even cruelty” (19).

Rupert's severe mental breakdown in early 1912 followed the troubled affair with Ka Cox which had probably led to a miscarriage. He had idealised Ka as a dependable mother-surrogate but, once he had slept with her, became obsessed with the idea that she was no longer pure, describing his feeling for her as, "like having black-beetles in the house" (*RB Letters* 337). The man, whose thesis was on Webster, became imbued with a Jacobean sensibility. His letters to Noel Olivier are increasingly fastidious, full of images of poison and dirt (*Song of Love* 65, 83, 118, 127, 230). Physical love and ageing are consistently seen as "filthy" and "disgusting". Blaming Lytton Strachey for his break with Ka, he began to associate Bloomsbury with all that was to him "rotten", "treacherous & wicked" (176), specifically female emancipation, Jewishness, homosexuality and pacifism. He longs to bathe to get clean, sane and healthy. He writes to Geoffrey Keynes, from Cologne, on 24th June 1912, "My soul is on its last legs. Have you any cure for syphilis of the soul?" ... "still I stink; & still I peal [*sic*]. It may be there is a herb growing at the bottom of the river just above the pool at Grantchester, & that if I dive & find it & bring it up—it will heal me" (389).

At the British Library I have been transcribing an unpublished memoir and letters between Rupert and the woodcut artist Phyllis Gardner. The manuscripts begin in 1911 and shed light on this unstable time in Rupert's life. The most remarkable section, from November 1912, concerns wild swimming. Phyllis describes Rupert's "wild irresistible drowning force" (BL 74742, 46). One evening, he offers her sixpence to jump in to "the swirling and bubbling" waters of the mill weir near Byron's Pool. She refuses.

Next Sunday, by moonlight, they begin to wade in the shallows of the Granta. She writes, “The wood was primeval and full of strange things that crawled unseen: and in the little stream through it were snags that looked like alligators” (BL 74742, 36-37). They take off their clothes and wade into the water. She gets his boots wet and asks him, “Will you kill me?” He answers, “Perhaps.” They see water rats, swim in the cold, black water and then get out. He tries to catch her, knocking her over. He offers to dry her “with his hair: it was wild and tousled and standing on end like a mop, and I could see his keen eyes burning under the shadow of his brows” (BL 74742, 46). She lets down her long soft red hair and rubs it over his back. “I understood how an animal that loves you feels when it rubs you with its head, and I went on rubbing in a kind of ecstasy.” He asks her if she is afraid, then seizes her throat, pressing her Adam’s apple with both thumbs and asks, “Supposing I were to kill you?” He says she “couldn’t resist—much—.” She chokes, tries to stop him from “strangling” her and asks how long would it take? “Oh, two or three minutes,” he says. He spreads her “out flat.” “And he looked at me, and felt me, and then said in an off hand kind of way, ‘you’ve rather a beautiful body’” (BL 74742, 40). It starts to rain heavily; they return to the Old Vicarage, Grantchester.

By 1913 Rupert wanted to break with Phyllis. Condescendingly calling her “Child”, he tells her that she is a puritan (BL 74741, No. 55); “made for love and marriage” (BL 74741, No. 65); not “strong enough to stand unconventional emotional life” (BL 74741, No. 50). He, however, is a restless “wanderer.” Phyllis writes that “he had been drawn into a vortex of would-be original people, who to satisfy their own base natures had made inconstancy a principle, and went as much as possible on the negative morality that he who breaks a rule is greater than he who makes it” (BL 74742, 69).

It was only later, in 1913, having escaped to an authentically wild paradise, that Rupert found contentment without sexual guilt with a Tahitian woman, Taata Mata. He writes in *Letters from America* that in the South Seas “the intellect soon lapses into quiescence. The body becomes more active, the senses and perceptions more lordly and acute. It is a life of swimming and climbing and resting after exertion. The skin seems to grow more sensitive to light and air, and the feel of water and the earth and leaves. Hour after hour one may float in the warm lagoons, conscious, in the whole body, of every shred and current of the multitudinous water” (87).

The outbreak of war released him from this atavistic idyll. Influenced by a political group, including Wellesleys, Asquiths and Winston Churchill, Rupert assumed a stirring new patriotic role which was exemplified by the poetry he wrote at the start of the Great War. In the famous 1914 sonnet “Peace,” God has,

“ caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,
To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,

Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,
Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move.
And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,
And all the little emptiness of love!”

This revivifying image of swimmers vigorously and readily jumping into “cleanness,” as an escape from ordinary mundane existence, also suggests that it is an ethical imperative

to enlist in the service of the nation. This paper has explored the ways in which, for Rupert Brooke, wild swimming became an essential cleansing, both literal and metaphorical; a splendidly shocking alert against stagnation, “a cold, life-giving embrace” (RCB/M/6).

Notes

¹ In “Reminiscences”, Virginia’s mother is seen as a swimmer who is struggling to master the element of water. Virginia writes about Julia’s weakening efforts, “she sank, like an exhausted swimmer, deeper and deeper in the water, and could only at moments descry some restful shore on the horizon to be gained in old age when all this toil was over” (*MOB* 11).

² Virginia lost her father in 1904 and her brother, Thoby, in 1906; Dick Brooke died in 1907 and Rupert’s father in January 1910.

³ The “neo-pagan” contingent was fluid but at various outdoor camps included: Godwin Baynes, Justin Brooke, Rupert Brooke, Ka Cox, Gwen Darwin (later Raverat), Frances Darwin (later Cornford), David ‘Bunny’ Garnett, Harold Hobson, Bill Hubback, Geoffrey Keynes, Bryn, Daphne, Margery and Noel Olivier, Hugh Popham, Sybil, Ethel and David Pye, Maitland Radford, Jacques Raverat, Gerald Shove, Eva Spielman and Dudley Ward.

⁴ The Penshurst group included Rupert Brooke, the Olivier girls, Godwin Baynes, Maitland Radford, Harold Hobson, Dorothy Osmaston, Walter Layton and Dudley Ward.

⁵ Rupert was tutored by George Macaulay, Rose’s father, and seen as family friend. She was a keen swimmer and swam with him at Grantchester. At this time, Rose wrote *The Secret River*, John Murray, (1909); her protagonist, Michael, is said to be based on

Rupert Brooke. Jane Emery writes, in *Rose Macaulay: a Writer's Life*, "Rupert enjoyed mixed bathing for yet another sensation: the exciting tension between innocent childlike pleasure and suppressed adolescent titillation. For, simultaneously puritanical and sensual, he was persistently torn between love for a very young, beautiful, elusive dryad type and for an emotionally and sometimes sexually generous partner of either gender—whom he subsequently devalued" (109).

⁶ In her 1917 essay, "The New Crusade," Virginia writes about the "peculiar irony of his canonisation" and implies that, later in Rupert's life an adoring audience became undesirable, that the "romantic public took possession of his fame" leaving an "unmerited and undesired burden of adulation" (*EII* 203).

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