

A
PERFECT
DARKNESS

ANDREW LANYON

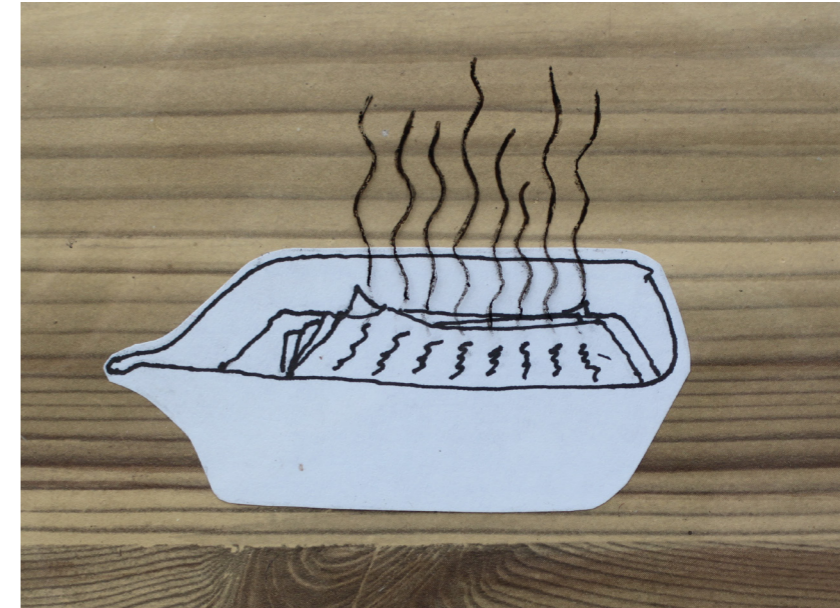
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PERFECT DARKNESS

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*Cover: The American cover to the paperback version of Vera's paper.
Chris James.*

A year after the publication by an American institution of Vera's paper on wisdom, she was approached by them regarding another of her 'follies'. Follies is what for years The English Psychoanalytical Society (EPS) called every one of Vera's papers. She learnt this from the Society's secretary, Zelda, who also acted as Vera's spy in that 'Nest of Angst', as she referred to the EPS.

'Vera's Follies' is what the society had written over her pigeon hole in their London HQ. Whenever a new work arrived, this is where it was put and where it remained unread. As soon as there was a large enough pile, it was Zelda's job to trip down into the basement and slide the lot into a tray of bleach, so the society could re-use the paper.



This second of Vera's follies which the Americans were keen to publish was entitled 'A Perfect Darkness'. As far as publication in England was concerned, due to its chemical dunking, the work had given up its ghost.

Despite learning that the envelopes in which she was sending her papers were not even being opened, Vera still continued to forward her latest tracts, so as not to blow her secret agent's cover.

There was never any question as to which were Vera's envelopes because in the 1930s the GPO had provided Rowley Hall with its very own postmark. This was in recognition of having initiated the world's first postal service early in the fifth century. The staff employed by the Rowleys to run this were mostly retired gentlewomen, each supplied with a donkey, some portable scales and a franking machine. Later, in the eleventh century, one of Mervyn Rowley's ancestors came up with a profitable sideline – 'The Filthy Farmyard Postcard'. Since these raised enough eyebrows to build a substantial hedge halfway across Dorset, those risqué views were superseded by the much more acceptable 'Naughty Farmyard Postcard'. (see opposite)



Debbie Prosser



Another in the series. Cleverly this was one of a sixteen part flick book which meant people were encouraged to buy the whole set.

Debbie Prosser

When eventually one of Walter's ancestors invented a steam engine, at last the railway could chuff out of St. Ives and across the rest of the world via St. Erth. Then 'The Naughty Seaside Postcard' came into its own, as well as an urban variant 'The Naughty Factory Floor Postcard'. Today, the farmyard cards are highly sought after. But the earlier rare filthy variety, if they have two figures in them, fetch two figures, three three, four four and so on. The painter Hieronymous Bosch is known to have bequeathed a complete set of these cards to a favourite nephew.

While the naughtier cards offer good old down-to-earth, bucolic jollity, involving bronzed mowers and ruddy cheeked milkmaids, the saucy seaside sort thrive on visual innuendos associated with bathing machines, bulging tents and small towels in a wind. It seems there was a far greater sense of 'frolic' in seaspray than in the sweat of those in heat on a haystack.

In her paper 'A Perfect Darkness', Vera does not deal with the sort of darkness which Stella Gibbons' 'something nasty in the woodshed' deals with, nor Conrad's more profound but no less unsettling 'Heart of Darkness' in the middle of a forest. Vera describes various darknesses, one of which is simply 'ink', good old burnt wood, diluted for scratching onto thin slices of bleached timber ready for taking fossilised sounds in the form of words, as well as all the pictures and numbers with which we recreate our world.

Vera proposes that, in order to communicate with each other during the hours of darkness, we developed a sound based system. When the spoken word became the dominant all-round-the-clock form, our hands threw up their hands, packed their bags and took the lift up into that penthouse suite with a better view, the head. And when the hands moved in, the very first thing they did was create an apartment each. Although elevated, these surrogate hands were still operated by the real pair below and even today the ones on the ends of our arms continue to pull the strings (otherwise why on earth are they waving around?). Since hand movements had for so long formed all our thoughts, as well as been instrumental in expressing them to others, it is hardly surprising if we are still run by their shadows thrown onto sheets behind our eyes.

Vera wrote, 'Having designed words in order to communicate with and then having absorbed them for thinking, we should not be misled into believing that they do actually have much to do with how we think. Perhaps words are just toys the mind throws us to play with, to keep us quiet. As Vera puts it, 'Rows of text are the static warp around which the kinetic weft of thought weaves freely'.

Before writing her paper about darkness, Vera warmed up by metaphorically cutting down Conrad's forest, then burning a bit of it to make charcoal and ink, while milling the rest to make paper and keeping back just enough to build a replica of Stella Gibbons' woodshed at 'Cold Comfort Farm', to keep some mystery in. In 'A Perfect Darkness' we learn that paintings have clear edges, but images conjured by words have much vaguer borders, so that described scenes just peter out.

To quote a passage: 'A painting only gives us a single moment in a narrative. Thus a scene appears out of the blue, is confined within a frame and goes nowhere else. But the scenes we imagine in our heads have no clear borders so beyond them lies an obscure, timeless void.' This then is where Vera's perfect darkness lies.



Chris James

‘As the rain and wind piled into us, we sought edges, those borders we call walls. Walls and roofs came first, finally floors. Floors and all their detailing came a lot later. Moving up onto a wooden first floor above hot animals was a smart move. When at last we invented impervious layers, we moved the animals out and came downstairs whistling, in carpet slippers to check the fridge.’

‘While walls led to those vertically inclined enclosed spaces now known as paintings, roofs became the horizontally enclosed areas filled with words we call books. We hear the rain on roofs but not on walls, which supports the idea that books are noisy, paintings quiet. Through painting and writing, humans in houses expressed versions of adventure in which odds were usually overcome. In a dramatic painting, we might witness the look of a ship struck by lightning. It is as if such a scene is injected via little parasols poked into our eyes. But an account of the same scene in a book detonates charges pressed by words deep in our ears. Through the words we can hear the ocean hiss and spit, the wind, the cries, the creak of the timbers and the giant wave breaking above us, over the tipping ship. A painting invites us to observe coolly, but words drag us onto that doomed boat.’

Corners were invented by the Rowleys. Vera says it was a pity really they didn't patent them, because if they had, progress might have been curbed. She wondered whether corners had in fact been invented before walls, the latter formed later by extending the corners towards one another. Having invented four corners, four points of the compass soon came along, as well as the four winds and the four corners of the world. Later still, one of the corners was designated for the fool in the dunce's cap, the only person left able to think for themselves – beyond all the borders.

In a picture our eyes are designed to bounce off its edges, but in scenes conjured by words there are no corners, just changes in direction, ones to accelerate around.

At the end of her paper, Vera devotes a whole chapter to full stops, which hop from i to i before landing exhausted at the end of sentences and paragraphs. All such pauses lead to that ultimate darkness, the final full stop.

‘The soft edges of scenes conjured by words enable us to brush with wildness. A written scene’s proximity to the untamed means writing is open to undergrowth creeping in and growing all over the order.’



Worming its way indoors, a bramble commandeers a flowerpot, in order to adopt the persona of a treasured perennial.

‘Writers and their readers struggle forward together hand-in-hand in a blizzard or a sandstorm. Every passage a reader reads is built in collaboration with the author, who’s there just ahead, helping construct each scene behind our eyes, passing us pieces bit by bit in a protracted present tense.

‘If writing is a tract of thatch so thick it silences rain, the sound echoes all the louder in our heads for being imagined. Only written scenes surrounded by a ragged unkempt edge allow us access to A Perfect Darkness.’

THE END

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