

John Halperin

Bloomsbury and Virginia Woolf: Another View

"It had seemed to me ever since I was very young," Adrian Stephen wrote in *The Dreadnought Hoax* in 1936, "that anyone who took up an attitude of authority over anyone else was necessarily also someone who offered a leg to pull."¹

In 1910 Adrian and his sister Virginia and Duncan Grant and some of their friends dressed up as the Emperor of Abyssinia and his suite and perpetrated a hoax upon the Royal Navy. They wished to inspect the Navy's most modern vessel, they said; and the Naval officers on hand, completely fooled, took them on an elaborate tour of some top-secret facilities aboard the HMS *Dreadnought*. When the "Dreadnought Hoax," as it came to be called, was discovered, there were furious denunciations of the group in the press and even within the family, since some Stephen relations were Naval officers. One of them wrote to Adrian: "His Majesty's ships are not suitable objects for practical jokes." Adrian replied: "If everyone shared my feelings toward the great armed forces of the world, the world [might] be a happier place to live in . . . armies and suchlike bodies [present] legs that [are] almost irresistible." Earlier a similarly sartorial practical joke had been perpetrated by the same group upon the mayor of Cambridge, but since he was a grocer rather than a Naval officer the Stephen family seemed unperturbed by this—which was not really a thumbing-of-the-nose at the Establishment. The Dreadnought Hoax was harder to forget, however, and it was one of the first of a series of instances in which the so-called Bloomsbury Group received a decidedly bad press.

Later in the same year—1910—Roger Fry gave London its first real taste of Post-Impressionism at the Grafton Gallery. The exhibition, with its emphasis on the works of Cézanne and Matisse, symbolized another Bloomsbury characteristic: its francophilism. This too infuriated Londoners. For a while Fry was the most hated man in the English art world. Clive Bell as a critic and Vanessa Bell and Duncan

Grant as painters were also involved in the controversy by their public support of Fry. Nor did it help matters that Vanessa and Virginia Stephen went to the Post-Impressionist Ball as barefoot, saronged, nearly naked Tahitian girls. It was whispered, says Quentin Bell, that at Gordon Square, Vanessa and Mr. Maynard Keynes copulated on a dining-room table in the midst of a crowd.²

A few years later came World War I, which Bloomsbury loudly and undiplomatically opposed. It was, to them, horrible, unnecessary, and ridiculous: "a war about nothing, a war that could do no good to anyone," as Quentin Bell puts it in *Bloomsbury*.³ It is perhaps worth comparing Bloomsbury's attitude toward the Great War with that of its arch-enemy D.H. Lawrence: "I am mad with rage . . . I would like to kill a million Germans—two million."⁴ Most of the Bloomsbury people loudly declared themselves pacifists and/or conscientious objectors. At this point public hostility toward them reached a sort of crescendo, and many, says Michael Holroyd, "who had hitherto dismissed the group as a bunch of harmless prigs, now pointed with alarm to the explosive danger, in the very centre of London, of an obviously militant pro-German force."⁵ There is a famous anecdote of these years that goes as follows. An angry old lady asks an elegant young man-about-Bloomsbury if he isn't ashamed to be seen out of uniform when other young men are off fighting for the survival of civilization. "Madame," the young man replies, "I am the civilization they are fighting for."

Bloomsbury very early was perceived as a center of disaffection and license, as well as a purveyor of incomprehensible aesthetics. "An over-serious, self-important Bohemia, Bloomsbury was said to be composed of highly pretentious, ill-mannered dilettanti, who derived a masochistic excitement from casting themselves in the role of super-sensitive martyrs to the coarse insensitivity of the barbarian world of twentieth-century London."⁶ They were supposed to be arrogant, squeamish pedagogues, contemptuous of the less well-educated (symbolized for them by Lawrence, who had a provincial accent and was poor). They were described as insular, awkward in the company of people they did not know, and notorious for their private signal-system of grimaces, sarcasm, and infantile practical jokes. By outsiders these things were perceived, often, as merely the symptoms of a rigid and reactionary (rather than revolutionary) class-system and outlook. Pretending to be ascetic world-shunners, they were instead, it was said by some, in fact ruthlessly ambitious. In his *Modern English Painters*, Sir John Rothenstein says this:

I doubt . . . whether more than a few people are . . . aware how closely-knit an association 'Bloomsbury' was, how untiring its members were in advertising one another's work and personalities They would have been surprised if they had known of the lengths to which some of these people . . . with their gentle Cambridge voices, their informal manners, their casual unassuming clothes, their civilised personal relations with one another . . . were prepared to go in order to ruin, utterly, not only the 'reactionary' figures whom they publicly denounced, but young painters and writers who showed themselves too independent to come to terms with the canons observed by 'Bloomsbury'. . . there was nothing in the way of slander and intrigue to which certain of the 'Bloomsburys' were not willing to descend. I rarely knew hatreds pursued with so much malevolence and over so many years.⁷

After the war Bloomsbury continued to be perceived as exclusive, practicing a supercilious, studiously cultivated priggishness, too clever and too busy to perform ordinary services on behalf of the community, impervious to contemporary events or even charitable causes, yet too "arty" and unreliable to find places in the universities, where they might perhaps have been of some use.⁸

To the extent that Bloomsbury could be said to have sexual attitudes, these too were perceived as unusual and threatening. There is no doubt that, if Bloomsbury had any coherent theories of sex, these were among other things simultaneously homosexual and feminist. Keynes, Strachey, Duncan Grant, Virginia Woolf, and Forster were all homosexual, or at the very least bisexual. Bloomsbury's militant feminism challenged the ethics of a society which saw man as the natural source of power and authority, and so it also found itself challenging the entire system of morality upon which the system was based. In *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Virginia Woolf attacks Galsworthy and Kipling among others for celebrating almost exclusively male virtues and emotions—most of which, she says, are incomprehensible to women. Sex, says Mrs. Woolf, gets in the way of the artist; he must surmount it and become, as an artist, sexless—or, rather, male and female simultaneously. That is, he must have the sensitivity of a woman and the intellect of a man but the prejudices of neither—and thus be, in the least pejorative sense, androgynous. Virginia Woolf especially resented the fact that she was not sent to a university while her brothers were—although, as she remarked once to Clive Bell, "It certainly doesn't seem to have improved all of you much."⁹

Bloomsbury's perceived exclusiveness and snobbery continued to antagonize others for years. "There was no flow of the milk of human kindness of that group of Lytton Strachey and [the] Bloomsburys,

not even a trickle," said Frieda Lawrence, years afterwards. "They were too busy being witty and clever."¹⁰ The poet E.W. Fordham wrote a verse on Bloomsbury's celebrated liberation: "Here verse and thought and love are free;/Great God, give me captivity." Another poem on Bloomsbury, by Roy Campbell and entitled "Home Thoughts on Bloomsbury," goes like this:

Of all the clever people round me here
I most delight in me—
Mine is the only voice I hear,
And mine the only face I see.

According to Campbell, the Bloomsbury equivalent of shaking hands was a pinch on the bottom accompanied by a mouse-like squeak (he must have been trying to shake hands with Lytton Strachey). Indeed, the Bloomsbury "voice," according to another arch-enemy, Wyndham Lewis, reminded one of "the sounds associated with the spasms of a rough Channel voyage" (Lewis never forgave the group for meeting with serene indifference all the scandalous reports he circulated about it). Osbert Sitwell on the "Bloomsbury voice": they were unemphatic except when emphasis was not expected; "then there would be a sudden sticky stress, high where you would have presumed low, and the whole spoken sentence would run, as it were, at different speeds and on different gears, and contain a great deal of expert but apparently meaningless syncopation." David Cecil on Bloomsbury: "It [was] more important to be clever than good, and more important to be beautiful than to be either."

Between the two world wars opinion of Bloomsbury began to change. Its members were perceived less as dangerous and obnoxious rebels than as dreamers who had been living in a fool's paradise, stupidly cut off from the realities of the contemporary world. It is interesting to note that members of the original Bloomsbury Group who remained alive in the late 30s were in the forefront of the anti-fascism forces and among the first to denounce England's neutrality. Nor could any group that included J.M. Keynes and Leonard Woolf rightfully be accused in the 30s of imperviousness to social or political issues.

In 1949 an anonymous essay on Bloomsbury appeared in the *TLS* (17 June), from which I quote the following passage:

For those too young to have known it, the Bloomsbury world is like the memory of a legendary great-aunt; a clever, witty, rather scandalous great-aunt, who was a brilliant pianist, scholar, and needlewoman,

who could read six languages and make sauces, who collected epigrams and china and daringly turned her back on charity and good works. The influence of Bloomsbury can still be found in the adulation of France; in the mixture of delicious food and civilised values, and in 'saying what you mean.' Religion was covered by a belief in the importance of human relationships, and the belief seems reasonable enough, though one gets the impression that the milk of human kindness was kept in the larder and that the tea was usually served with lemon.

This is a slightly less acerbic view of Bloomsbury than that of the previous generation—though still not a complimentary one, certainly. As time passed, perspectives on Bloomsbury became less sharp and less virulent; today it is generally regarded rather complacently as a group of writers and artists who were not particularly pleasant people but who contributed a good many books and paintings to the world's storehouse of art treasures and who can be excused most of their eccentricities on these grounds. Indeed, as time has passed there has been less and less agreement as to what Bloomsbury actually was and what it represented, as to who was in it and when, as to when it began and ended, even whether it ever existed or not. Perhaps all we may ever know for sure is that, in Bloomsbury, "all the couples were triangles and lived in squares."¹²

My own feeling is that since Bloomsbury, like any other artistic movement, consisted of people, all of whom were different from one another, it is impossible to say exactly what it was at any particular time. "Any group," T.S. Eliot remarked in an essay on Bloomsbury, "will appear more uniform, and probably more intolerant and exclusive from the outside than it really is." And he adds that Bloomsbury could never really have been as orthodox and homogeneous in its views as others thought.¹³ "The spectacle of gifted people enjoying themselves is never one to give pleasure to the onlooker," observed an anonymous writer on Bloomsbury in the *TLS* in 1958 (4 July). All one can really say about it, adds this writer, is that it "avoided bores as far as possible, disliked pretences, and felt a marked partiality for . . . friends." Nowadays Bloomsbury seems less revolutionary than reformist; and in as much as its work represents the culmination and ultimate refinement of the aesthetic movement, it seems as much identified with the nineteenth century as with the twentieth. Indeed, in his brilliant biography of Virginia Woolf's father, Noel Annan takes Bloomsbury farther back even than this. Of the intellectual basis of its thought, Lord Annan says:

The doctrine of original sin was replaced by the eighteenth century belief in man's fundamental reasonableness, sanity, and decency. They violently rejected Evangelical notions of sex, tossed overboard any form of supernatural belief as so much hocus-pocus, and set their sails in the purer breezes of neo-Platonic contemplation. And yet one can still see the old Evangelical ferment at work, a strong suspicion of the worldly-wise, an unalterable emphasis on personal salvation and a penchant for meditation and communion among intimate friends.¹⁴

Various members of the Group have of course written reminiscences of it, and most of these accounts differ widely, except insofar as they acknowledge the eclecticism and variety of the group's interests. Vanessa Bell says: "We did not hesitate to talk of anything. This was literally true. You could say what you liked about art, sex, or religion; you could also talk freely and very likely dully about the ordinary doings of daily life. There was very little self-consciousness I think in these early gatherings . . . but life was exciting, terrible and amusing and one had to explore it thankful one could so freely."¹⁵ Vanessa's husband Clive Bell, in *Old Friends*, says this of the Bloomsbury Group: "Beyond mutual liking [the members] had very little in common, and in mutual liking there is nothing peculiar. Yes, they did like each other; also they shared a taste for discussion in pursuit of truth and a contempt for conventional ways of thinking and feeling—a contempt for conventional morals, if you will. Does it not strike you that as much could be said of many collections of young or youngish people in many ages and many lands?"¹⁶

Leonard Woolf has probably said both more and less about the Bloomsbury Group than any of the others—more in terms of square footage, less in terms of information. Of his own Cambridge years, Woolf remarks: "Our youth, the years of my generation at Cambridge, coincided with the end and the beginning of a century which was also the end of one era and the beginning of another . . . We already felt that we were living in an era of incipient revolt and that we ourselves were mortally involved in this revolt against a social system and code of conduct and morality which, for convenience sake, may be referred to as bourgeois Victorianism. We did not initiate this revolt."¹⁷ On the London years of Bloomsbury, Woolf said in 1964:

What came to be called Bloomsbury by the outside world never existed in the form given to it by the outside world. For 'Bloomsbury' was and is currently used as a term—usually of abuse—applied to a largely imaginary group of persons with largely imaginary objects and characteristics . . . Its basis was friendship, which in some cases developed into love and marriage. . . . But we had no common theory,

system of principles which we wanted to convert the world to; were not proselytisers, missionaries, crusaders, or even propagandists.¹⁸

I am inclined, myself, to accept this statement as the truth. The available evidence indicates that far from having an orthodox or consistent position on most matters, Bloomsbury was often racked by internal disagreements, and to expect of it a coherent body of developed views is as absurd as to expect people always to agree with one another. Virginia Woolf attacked Strachey's methods as a biographer in her essay "The Art of Biography"; she said he was not "first-rate." In private she declared that she found his books unreadable (undoubtedly she was also jealous of their huge popular success). Strachey said that Forster's novels were incomprehensible, pronounced Clive Bell's *Art* "utter balls," and thought Bell and Roger Fry were wrong to admire Matisse and Picasso. Strachey disliked Post-Impressionism and Cubism; he also disliked Roger Fry, whom he once called "a most shifty and wormy character," and was delighted by the publication of I.A. Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1925), which went out of its way to attack Fry. Vanessa Bell thought that Fry "managed to reduce (painting) to . . . a dead, drab affair." Forster was less than ecstatic about Virginia Woolf's novels, as we shall see. Leonard Woolf once said that Clive Bell had a "fat little mind" and called Keynes "an effete and rotten old lecher."¹⁹ Fry thought that G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* was "sheer nonsense," and Forster said he'd never read it. Although critics and historians have been fond of seeing Moore's philosophy as the fountainhead of all Bloomsbury theory and wisdom, in fact the only member of the Group who unmistakably shows, in his own writings, that he read Moore carefully is Keynes—and he rejects part of Moore's system of thought. Keynes analyzes Moore's philosophy in *Two Memoirs* (1949). Keynes says here²⁰ that while many of the young Cambridge men of the time accepted Moore's idea that, in religion, "nothing mattered except states of mind"—one's attitude toward one's self—most of them rejected his moral system as too idealistic. This was because, according to Keynes, it placed undue emphasis on the question of the rightness or wrongness of one's actions and conduct. Thus while they accepted the idea that awareness of one's inner nature was important, the "Bloomsburies" rejected the idea that one must always be using this awareness to analyze the moral quality of everything one did. My own impression is that G.E. Moore had as much or as little influence on the Bloomsbury Group as any other philosopher or aesthete of the time, and that he had much less impact upon it than Roger Fry did.

Virginia Woolf, I think, represents much of what is both good and bad about Bloomsbury, and a lot of what is most interesting and contradictory about it. She is at once its most important (and I think she will be its longest-lasting) voice; and she demonstrates, in her life and her work, what seems to me one of the things most typical of Bloomsbury: its brilliant creative energy on the one hand and its paucity of warmth, of human feeling, on the other. No rule decrees that great artists must also be great men and women, and indeed the reverse is often the case. As a diplomat, Chaucer undoubtedly was not fastidious about the services he was paid for rendering. Marlowe, a professional spy with a passion for practical jokes, must often have stretched to the limit the forbearance of his friends. Surely Milton was tiresome to have around the house. Johnson, apparently, rarely bathed. I should not have liked Jane Austen to know me too well, and I am happy that Dickens was not my father. Henry James cast off his friends if their names got into the newspapers, and Robert Frost, apparently, treated his children like vermin. The Russian novelists, between them, seem to have been prey to every known form of psychosis. A list of literary dope addicts and alcoholics would be a very long one. Not every great writer can radiate the warmth and the sympathy of a George Eliot. In the case of Virginia Woolf there are many factors mitigating her obvious unpleasantness. Leslie Stephen was sexually repressed and in many ways maladjusted, and his children undoubtedly suffered under the reign of meanness and puritanism of his household in its later years. Indeed, the portrait of him we get in *To the Lighthouse* shows how the strain of having such a man as patriarch of a family might very well, as Quentin Bell suggests, have driven three of his four children mad.²¹ Certainly Virginia Woolf—despite some recent efforts, rather feeble, to prove otherwise—was periodically insane, and so it may not be fair to subject her to the sort of prying judgments to which we often subject the great and famous. Still, there she is and we may judge her if we wish to do so. In recent years many have so wished. The torrent of volumes about Virginia Woolf—biographies, critical studies, new editions of her obscurest works, publication of letters, diaries, recollections, and so on—especially invites judgment.

It is clear that the most dangerous relationship one could have with her was that of friendship. Her letters and diaries mercilessly attack her friends behind their backs, making one very glad indeed never to have known her. She thought that Duncan Grant should have gone into the Army, Strachey into the Anglo-Indian civil service, and Clive

Bell into law. She believed that if T.S. Eliot had stayed where he belonged—in banking—he would have ended up where he belonged: as a branch manager. Married to a Jew, she was virulently anti-Semitic, as a number of her novels, especially *The Waves*, makes clear. She was arrogant and snobbish. No one, she said, could be an artist who hadn't £500 a year to live on and a room of his or her own. George Gissing, who said no one could be an artist who hadn't starved, was attacked by Virginia Woolf in a silly essay for writing about money so much. It is just what one expects of working-class writers, sneered Mrs. Woolf, who had never had to worry about starving. She was paranoid, and her persecution complex led her to assume, if you praised her latest book, that you disliked its predecessor. When someone remarked to her that it must be hard for her sister Vanessa to stand for long hours and paint, Virginia immediately went out and bought a tall desk and insisted on standing to write, which she did most of her working life. "When the Germans bombed London, she calculated the serious damage in terms of decreased book sales."²² Bitterly jealous of everyone she knew, especially successful artists, Virginia Woolf has also been described as "malicious"—the word keeps recurring—by Alix Strachey, Nigel Nicholson, Barbara Bagenal, Raymor Mortimer, and Christopher Isherwood. "The greater the intimacy the greater the danger of sudden outbursts of scathing criticism," Duncan Grant remarked about his friendship with Mrs. Woolf. "I have the impression that no one had much encouragement (from her) for anything they produced."²³ "She was consumed with . . . neurotic jealousies of other writers," Raymond Mortimer has said.²⁴ Nigel Nicholson reports that she was kind to people to their faces but not behind their backs.²⁵ The weight of the evidence, however, is against Mr. Nicholson; that is, most of Virginia Woolf's acquaintances were perfectly used to her rudeness face to face. On one infamous occasion, Mrs. Woolf remarked to Molly McCarthy (Mrs. Desmond McCarthy) in a loud voice: "Molly, you are dull. DULL, Molly, you are DULL, aren't you?" But Molly, who wrote *A Pier and a Band* and *A Nineteenth Century Childhood* and founded the Memoir Club, in which Mrs. Woolf herself took so much delight, was not dull at all, according to Mrs. Ralph Partridge²⁶, which may well be why she was attacked in this fashion by Virginia Woolf. Alix Strachey's opinion of Mrs. Woolf is in many ways typical of that of most of her contemporaries: "She was not angelic in any way, in fact quite the opposite . . . she had a rather mocking spirit. Her laugh could be . . . malicious too, but unlike

other members of the Bloomsbury Group she was malicious not [only] behind one's back but to one's face." And: "the sensibility which was evident in all her writing was not really present in her daily life." Whereas Lytton Strachey was rude to people on purpose to annoy them, Virginia Woolf did it neither knowing nor caring how they would react: "To her, people were rather like cardboard figures; she did not expect them to mind at all."²⁷ This jibes with Stephen Spender's opinion that Mrs. Woolf regarded anyone outside the Bloomsbury Group as merely a two-dimensional figure and David Cecil's feeling that she was "out of touch with the warmth of common-humanity."²⁸ William Plomer says: "I wouldn't single her out as a woman with an exceptional power for putting everybody at their ease and keeping them there."²⁹ She "enjoyed the embarrassment and discomfiture of a victim" of her sarcasm, according to Rosamond Lehmann.³⁰ Angelica Garnett recalls that Virginia Woolf enjoyed conversationally demolishing the defenseless.³¹ Arrogant, conscious of being part of an intellectual dynasty, the Stephen girls "were very much born in the . . . purple and keenly aware of it," Raymond Mortimer remarks.³² Angus Davidson thinks that if Virginia Woolf had been unfortunate enough to have children, they would have suffered. She probably would not have disliked them, he says, whenever she happened to remember their existence.³³ Plomer says Mrs. Woolf was overly confident in her own judgment, and others also found her dogmatic. She wished, said Clive Bell, to be treated by others less as an equal than "as a superior."³⁴ Almost everyone who knew her agreed that she disliked the younger generation, especially those among it who were aspiring artists and writers. She did help some (such as Eliot and Isherwood) and made a point of insulting others (such as Lawrence and Joyce; her rejection of *Ulysses* for the Hogarth Press was not even polite). If she happened, despite precautions, to find herself in a room with young people, she preferred them to be smart and frivolous rather than dowdy and intellectual, according to Mrs. Partridge. She called the next generation "the smarties" and thought the new poets (Auden, Spender, etc.) both too introverted and too ambitious, too desirous of getting into print. She disliked "my generation," says John Lehmann.³⁵ Rebecca West says that Virginia Woolf was no judge of writers of her own day, especially of Joyce, of whom, says Dame Rebecca, she "wrote . . . in an astonishing, almost stupid way."³⁶ The younger generation on the whole reciprocated her feelings. "This afternoon is sad brilliant autumn sunshine," Isherwood wrote to Spender in 1932, "the sort of

afternoon . . . on which Virginia Woolf looks out of her window and suddenly decides to write a novel about the hopeless love of a Pekingese dog for a very beautiful maidenhair fern."³⁷ Nor did Isherwood and his friends mistake Mrs. Woolf and her circle for avant-garde bohemians. "The Woolfs," says Isherwood—others sometimes called them "the Woolves"—"The Woolfs belonged to the previous generation, and their press, despite its appearance of chic modernity, tended to represent the writing of the twenties and the teens, even the tens."³⁸ (In all fairness, when one remembers that Isherwood was happy to let the Hogarth Press bring out six of his books—including *The Memorial*, his second novel, which no other publisher would touch—one has difficulty seeing this as a particularly devastating attack on the taste of "The Woolfs.")

There is a famous scene in James's *The Spoils of Poynton* in which, during an intense conversation between two people having tea, a biscuit falls on the floor and a third party, intruding unexpectedly, deduces all sorts of information about the intimacy of the situation from the fact that neither of the others has stirred to pick the biscuit up. Duncan Grant tells the story of the first visit of Lady Strachey to Virginia Woolf, in the course of which Virginia's dog Hans relieved himself on the rug of the drawing-room. Neither lady alluded to it, or even indicated that anything amiss had occurred.³⁹ This sounds a very Victorian scene. It also suggests that Virginia Woolf must have been a fastidious woman, but, as so often when one deals with her, one is surprised to find something else quite unexpected. For it appears that, despite the elegant photographs of a well-groomed woman with which we are all familiar, she was not, in terms of clothes and cleanliness, fastidious at all. Beautiful, delicate-featured, distinguished-looking, yes; clean, no. She looked, remarked Henry James after seeing her in 1908, "as if she had rolled in a duck pond." According to Rebecca West, she usually appeared as if she'd "been drawn through a hedge backwards . . . Virginia was not well turned out."⁴⁰ Madge Garland says her first impression of Virginia Woolf was that of a "beautiful and distinguished woman wearing an up-turned wastepaper basket on her head."⁴¹

We may ask how a woman so obviously indifferent both to humanity and to individual human beings could write such brilliant fiction, especially fiction in which, more than most that I know, the relationships between people are so fully, so carefully, so skillfully defined. The answer, I think, is this. Like Keats, whom she admired, Virginia Woolf had the capacity to enter into her creations body and soul, a

capacity for a sort of negative capability or, as she put it herself, as we have seen, a sort of androgyny in relation to the world around her. She lived fully in her art and there was very little of her left over for the population of her real life. So as a person who had finished her daily stint of writing, she was naked, sharp, almost defenseless against the world's irritations; unlike her contemporary Edith Wharton, she was unable to organize a personal life outside of her study. "I find the climax immensely exaggerated," she admitted.⁴² As an artist she was a genius; as a person she was a flop. The same has been true of other great writers. Virginia Woolf, moreover, was writing, let us remember, a particular sort of literature, a literature in which what was important was sequence, cause and effect, the relationship of the parts to one another; a type of literature, in short, indifferent to the fate of *real* human beings in its single-minded devotedness to the fates of its fictional people. Like Trollope, she cared less about real people than about the people in her novels, less about the real world than the world of her novels. This makes for good novels and bad lives. Ortega, remember, says that "realistic" fiction has to abolish "outer reality" in order to establish the autonomous "reality" of its own inner world; Virginia Woolf's fiction is the best example I know of fiction that is "realistic" and "autonomous" in this way. *To the Lighthouse*, whose last section is actually *about* its first section, also strikes me as being as perfect an example as there is of Fry's concept, much more influential upon Bloomsbury than anything G.E. Moore said or wrote, of "significant form": it is a novel *about itself*, organically self-referring and self-sustaining.

This is not to say that some of the characters of *To the Lighthouse* cannot also be based upon real people, or at least people known to the author; for of course some of them are, especially the Ramsays. In *A Writer's Diary* Virginia Woolf described the novel as an act of exorcism, an attempt to see her parents more clearly by surrounding them and herself with scenes from her childhood, especially their summer house at St. Ives (Cornwall; this is the actual setting, not the Hebrides, as the novel suggests: as several critics have pointed out, her flora and fauna are wrong for the Hebrides). Mrs. Woolf says in the *Diary*: "the centre is father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting 'We perish each alone,' while he crushes a dying mackerel." Forster observes in *Aspects of the Novel* that each of us feels there is always something, a secret life of some sort, behind every life we see revealing itself in action.⁴³ *To the Lighthouse* is an example of this. It reveals

Virginia Woolf's interest *as an artist* in her family and in other people, and it shows, by contrast, how so little of this interest and warmth was ever translated into her real life, her relationships with other people. All life, the novel tells us, is equally important; or, conversely, equally unimportant. In revealing a brilliant mind and a sophisticated artistry on the one hand and, on the other, the failure of these things to be part of the writer's real life, *To the Lighthouse* (1925) becomes for me the perfect Bloomsbury novel, thus I have singled it out for attention here. It is evidence at once of Bloomsbury's genius and of its heartlessness, the heat of its creative originality and the damp soul of its self-absorption. Bloomsbury's appeal is to the brain, never to the heart. It doesn't care, as the Victorians did, for us as readers; it cares only for itself and its own creations. Carlyle described Mill's *Autobiography* as "the autobiography of a steam-engine"; I would describe much of the art produced by the Bloomsbury Group as in the same tradition: self-interested, self-referring, oblivious to its reader's feelings, just as Virginia Woolf, according to most accounts, was oblivious to people's feelings most of the time.

This need not prevent *To the Lighthouse*, of which I wish to say a little more, from being a great novel, one of the very best English novels ever written. It is a brilliant expression of the isolation of the individual human spirit and at the same time a reaffirmation of the power of art to bring everything together, to find meaning in chaos, to bring coherence out of seeming disorder. Unlike *Howards End*, where the same things are attempted, *To the Lighthouse* lucidly achieves these ends. Almost everything initiated at the beginning of the novel is completed or understood by the end, though some of the characters have to disappear to bring this about. Mrs. Ramsay's effects on her surroundings go on long after her death; her real significance is seen only posthumously. Like her own *boeuf en daube*, which to Mrs. Ramsay "seemed always to have been, only was shown now, and so being shown struck everything into stability," Mrs. Ramsay's impact on others can be measured only retrospectively, at the end of the book when James has at last gotten to the lighthouse; when he and his sister have finally made peace with their father; when Lily Briscoe has been able to finish her painting, which in Section I depicted Mrs. Ramsay as only "a triangular purple shape." Lily in Section 3 goes on asking herself Mrs. Ramsay's favorite question: "What does it all mean?" and the answer comes to her at the end. The answer is that each of us has his or her vision of things and that vision, for each of us, is reality.

"With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision." And yet vision, reality, is a constantly shifting, constantly changing phenomenon, different for everyone in every situation, never static. At the end of the description of the dinner party (which must be one of the greatest pieces of narrative ever written; Virginia Woolf always thought it her own best bit of work), Mrs. Ramsay, remember, turns, goes out of the room, and then looks back for a moment; the scene she sees, we are told, actually becomes the past as she looks at it; becomes, that is, internalized, part of the mind rather than part of objective reality. The scene she reviews, the dinner party itself, still in progress as she thinks of it, illustrates the general plan of the novel by exposing us to multiple consciousnesses, moving from one place at the table to another in order to show us how each of us is imprisoned within his own subjectivity no matter how close, physically, we are to others. Nonetheless, as the novel also shows us, through our consciousness of others we are constantly attached to them, inseparable from one another no matter how physically distant we may be from them—even from the dead, as in the case of Mrs. Ramsay, whose spirit and memory give the third section of the novel its peculiar resonance and illumination.

In a famous passage in her essay "Modern Fiction" (written in 1919), Virginia Woolf says: "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?"⁴⁴ It is this quality of life, of consciousness, Mrs. Woolf wants to describe and convey to us in *To the Lighthouse*. The characters in Section 3 exist largely in relation to themselves and others as they were in Section I. So Virginia Woolf, in her novel, writes in middle-age of her parents and her life when she was a little girl (the action of the novel begins in 1893, when Virginia was 11, and ends in 1903, the year before her father's death). Mrs. Ramsay is Julia Duckworth Stephen, Mr. Ramsay is Leslie Stephen (his children used to call him "the cold bath," and this aspect of his personality comes through to us very directly indeed from the novel's opening scene onward), and the house, as I have said, was their summer home in Cornwall (from which, as a matter of fact, the St. Ives lighthouse is

visible in the distance, the house being high up and having no obstacles to vision in front of it). *To the Lighthouse* is a record of Mrs. Woolf's consciousness not only of others but of her own past, her own childhood.

As one might imagine, Virginia Woolf's fiction brings structuralists of all stripes galloping out of the closet, the chief result being that more rubbish has been written about her work than that of any other twentieth-century writer, with the possible exception of Joyce, who in my opinion deserves his critics. The structuralists on Virginia Woolf may felicitously be ignored; but it might be interesting to conclude by looking briefly at what her Bloomsbury colleague E.M. Forster has to say of her work. Forster wrote two major essays on Mrs. Woolf. The first, called "The Early Novels of Virginia Woolf," was written in 1925 and first published in *Abinger Harvest* in 1936. This discussion begins as follows: "It is profoundly characteristic of the art of Virginia Woolf that when I decided to write about it and had planned a suitable opening paragraph, my fountain pen should disappear." At her worst, says Forster, Mrs. Woolf's novels give no sense of exterior reality, being merely bad reproductions of the traditional English novel: "an inspired breathlessness, a beautiful droning or gasping, which trusts to luck, and can never express human relationships or the structure of society." At her best, Forster declares, she *sees* beautifully, and is especially good at showing how a human brain works: "to convey the actual process of thinking is a creative feat, and I know of no one except Virginia Woolf who has accomplished it," though he thinks Joyce may be trying to do some of the same things. For Forster, Mrs. Woolf's chief contribution to the English novel (as of 1925) was the attempt to advance the novelist's art by solving the problem of how to render character in fiction.

Forster goes on in this essay to admire Virginia Woolf for, as he perceives it, her theme of bridging gaps and bringing people together, of, no doubt he thought, "connecting." And certainly this is an important part of Mrs. Woolf's work, as it is of Forster's (it is interesting to note how singularly unsuccessful both were at achieving "connection" in their private lives; perhaps this is why they wrote about it so much). *Mrs. Dalloway*, in fact, is precisely about the need for communication, for bringing people together out of their disparateness. Again we encounter the seeming contradiction, the interesting question: Why should someone so personally aloof and cold as Virginia Woolf be so concerned with bringing people together and bridging gaps? Because, perhaps, she wished she could be a warmer person, more outgoing, less tense with others.

In his other major essay on Virginia Woolf—actually a memorial lecture given at Cambridge in 1941 and published ten years later in *Two Cheers for Democracy*—Forster says that Virginia Woolf never really tells a story or creates a memorable character. He is, as so often, wrong; for if Mrs. Ramsay isn't a memorable character then there is no such thing as a memorable character in literature. Of course Mrs. Ramsay in a sense is not a "character" at all but a real person. Julia Duckworth Stephen, however, died when Virginia was 13, and so for the novelist the portrait of her mother was only partly a product of memory and very largely a brilliant act of creation, or rather of recreation. If Virginia Woolf's genius lies anywhere, beyond her brilliance as a stylist, it surely lies in her portraiture, which is almost always in sharp focus. One can say this of very few novelists, and Forster is not one of them. He goes on, somewhat more charitably: "she reminds us of the importance of sensation in an age which practises brutality and recommends ideals." He criticizes her for not doing justice to "the Auden-Isherwood generation", especially to its experiments in technique, even though she herself was such an innovator. She remained detached from public events, committees, appeals, and so on, says Forster, because she felt women should ignore a world made and controlled by men; but her withdrawal, he observes, may also be explained by her snobbery: "This detachment from the working classes and labour reinforces the detachment caused by her feminism, and her attitude toward society was in consequence aloof and angular." Here, it seems to me, he is on firmer ground. But surely it is ironic that Virginia Woolf liked his novels so much more than he liked hers when she was patently so much the better novelist.

"Her going," said Rose Macaulay, "seemed symbolic of the end of an age."⁴⁵ Miss Macaulay does not name the age, but clearly she does not mean the modern age. Virginia Woolf, a child of the Victorians, a grandchild of the Clapham Sect, and a hater of the contemporary, always looked more to the past than to the present, and her literary subject matter often reflects this choice. Whatever one may think of her as a personality, one may conclude with no more eloquent praise of her as an artist than that grudgingly given by Forster at the end of his memorial essay. "Virginia Woolf," he says here, "got through an immense amount of work, she gave acute pleasure in new ways, she pushed the light of the English language a little further against the darkness. Those," Forster admits, "are facts."

NOTES

1. *The Dreadnought Hoax* (London, 1936), pp. 10-11.
2. Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, Vol. I (London, 1972), p. 170.
3. Quentin Bell, *Bloomsbury* (London, 1968), p. 45.
4. *Bloomsbury*, p. 46.
5. Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group* (London, 1971), pp. 41-2.
6. Holroyd, p. 38.
7. Sir John Rothenstein, *Modern English Painters* (London, 1956), p. 14.
8. See Holroyd, p. 38.
9. *Virginia Woolf*, I, 98.
10. *Bloomsbury*, p. 46.
11. Holroyd, pp. 40 and 51.
12. Holroyd, p. 39.
13. See "The Bloomsbury Group," *Horizon*. Vol. 3, No. 17 (May 1941).
14. Noel Annan, *Leslie Stephen* (London, 1952), p. 126.
15. Quoted in *Bloomsbury*, p. 41.
16. Clive Bell, *Old Friends* (New York, 1957), p. 131.
17. Leonard Woolf, *Sowing* (London, 1961), p. 132.
18. Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again* (London, 1964), pp. 22-3.
19. See Leon Edel, *Bloomsbury: A House of Lions* (Philadelphia and New York, 1979), pp. 212, 219, and 234, respectively.
20. J.M. Keynes, *Two Memoirs* (New York, 1949), pp. 83 and 98, *passim*.
21. See *Virginia Woolf*, I, Chapter 3.
22. Holroyd, p. 28.
23. Joan Russell Noble (ed.), *Recollections of Virginia Woolf* (London, 1972), p. 29.
24. *Recollections*, p. 207.
25. *Recollections*, p. 158.
26. *Recollections*, p. 95.
27. *Recollections*, pp. 137-38.
28. *Recollections*, p. 222.
29. *Recollections*, p. 120.
30. *Recollections*, p. 71.
31. *Recollections*, p. 103.
32. *Recollections*, p. 205.
33. *Recollections*, p. 71.
34. *Recollections*, p. 89.
35. *Recollections*, p. 46.
36. *Recollections*, p. 112.
37. See Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind* (New York, 1976), p. 113. The letter quoted is dated 14 November 1932.
38. *Christopher and His Kind*, p. 97.
39. *Recollections*, p. 26.
40. *Recollections*, p. 110.
41. *Recollections*, p. 208.
42. Edel, *Bloomsbury*, p. 198.
43. See *Aspects of the Novel* (London, 1927), Chapter 3.
44. See *The Common Reader* (London, 1925), p. 154.
45. *Recollections*, p. 202.