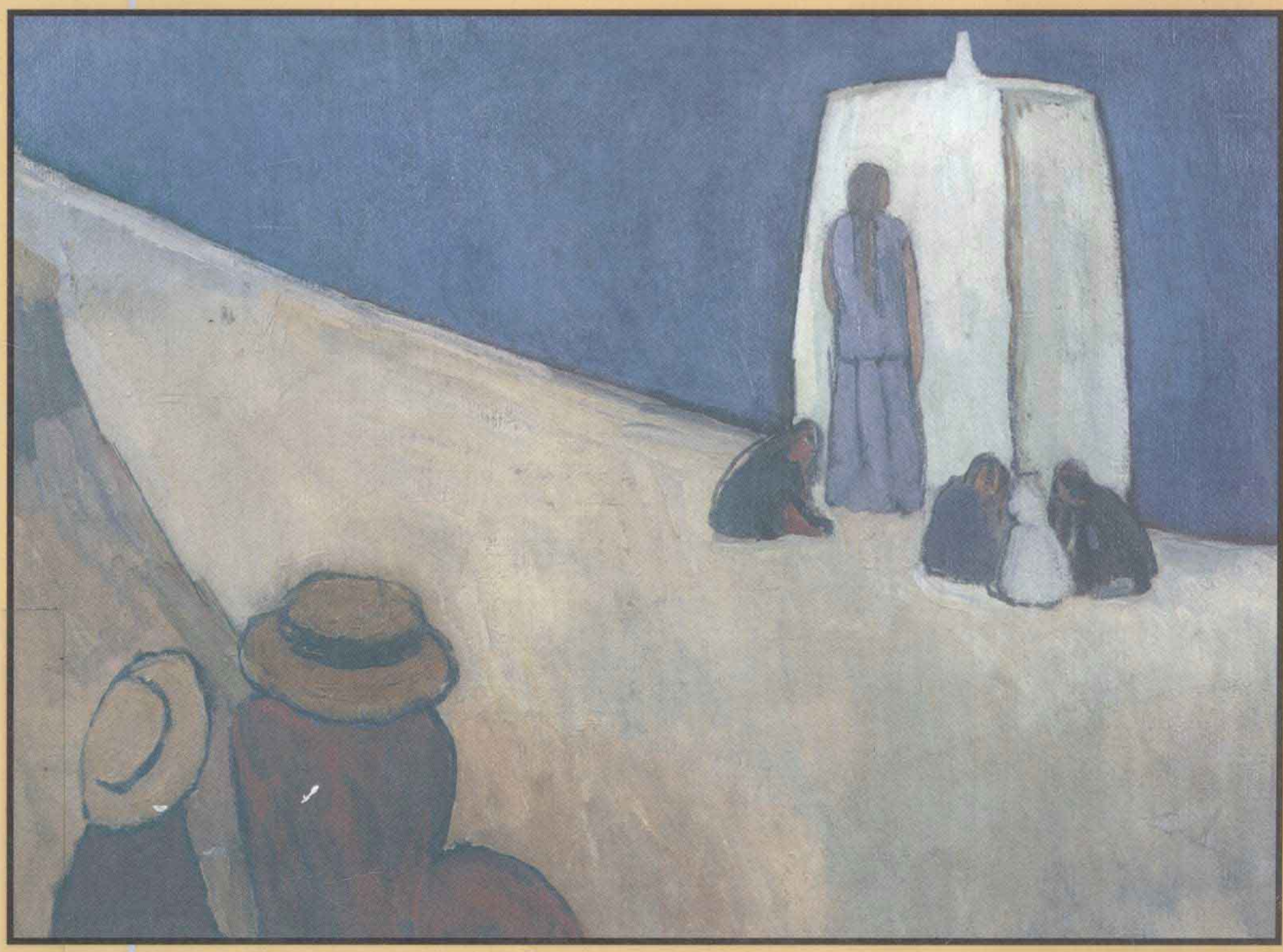
ON OR ABOUT DECEMBER 1910

EARLY BLOOMSBURY AND ITS INTIMATE WORLD



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Harvard University Press

Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
Second printing, 1997

First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 1997

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Stansky, Peter.
On or about December 1910 : early Bloomsbury and its intimate world / Peter Stansky.
p. cm.—(Studies in cultural history)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-674-63605-8 (cloth)
ISBN 0-674-63606-6 (pbk.)
1. Bloomsbury (London, England)—Intellectual life—20th century. 2. Woolf, Virginia, 1882–1941—Friends and associates. 3. Authors, English—England—London—Biography. 4. Intellectuals—England—London—Biography. 5. Bloomsbury (London, England)—Biography. 6. Artists—England—London—Biography. 7. Bloomsbury group. I. Title II. Series.
DA685.B65S73 1996
820.9'00912—dc20 96-17588
[B] CIP

Illustrations

On or About December 1910

Contents

Introduction

Unexpectedly and perhaps belatedly, England in 1910 entered the story of a modernism that since the turn of the century had had a number of its major events occur on the Continent. One might assume that England ought to have claimed an important role in the story earlier, if only because it was so dominant in so many other ways—though its leading position in the West was being challenged by Germany. That fateful rivalry climaxed in the two world wars, both of which England "won" and both of which marked the decline of England's power.

But there was a very special quality to what was happening in England in the years before the First World War. As elsewhere in Europe, there was a triumph of opulence, indeed vulgarity, alongside the continuation of intense poverty, the more paradoxical in England because of its acknowledged position of being the head of the most powerful Empire in the world. Perhaps the symbolic culminating event of those prewar years was the funeral in 1910 of the rich and vulgar king Edward VII, attended by a panoply of monarchs. In retrospect, looking back after the devastation of the First World War, that Edwardian event was taken to represent the funeral of the Europe, or certainly the England,

of the nineteenth century, and what the historian G. M. Young called its flash Edwardian epilogue.

In November and December of 1910 the critic and painter Roger Fry assembled in London the exhibition "Manet and the Post-Impressionists" (a term that he invented, and that has become canonical). The exhibition proved explosive. No doubt remembering its impact, Virginia Woolf later wrote in one of her best-known phrases, "on or about December 1910 human character changed." For Woolf character was all important: "our marriages, our friendships depend on it." She was concerned with the more conscious manifestation—character rather than innate nature—but also character in a newer "modern" sense, not the mere externals on which in her view the realist Edwardian novelists, Galsworthy, Wells, and Bennett, had depended, but something deeper and different.

Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown, the essay in which Woolf made her remark, was written in 1924. It arose out of a dispute she was having with Arnold Bennett, who had accused her, in a mention of her novel *Jacob's Room,* of being unable to depict character. Woolf, discussing how a novelist might choose to write of Mrs Brown, a lady seen in a railroad carriage, aligned herself against Bennett the realist with such "modern" writers as E. M. Forster, T. S. Eliot, Lytton Strachey, James Joyce, and D. H. Lawrence, the generation that came to the fore in the decade after 1910. (In the context of the actual events of 1910, there is a certain irony in her attacking Bennett, for he had been an outspoken defender of the Post-Impressionists.) In the paragraph that follows the remark, Woolf admits that such events don't happen quite as suddenly as she had suggested:

> I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; and, since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910. The first signs of it are recorded in the books of Samuel Butler, in *The Way of All Flesh* in particular; the plays of Bernard Shaw

> continue to record it. In life one can see the change, if I may use a homely illustration, in the character of one's cook.

(It is a wonderful image of British society as it was—writing in 1924, Virginia Woolf, a figure on the left in many ways, would nevertheless assume that most of her readers, down to the bottom of the middle class, would employ a cook, and she may well have been right in the 1920s.)

> The Victorian cook lived like a leviathan in the lower depths, formidable, silent, obscure, inscrutable; the Georgian cook is a creature of sunshine and fresh air; in and out of the drawing-room, now to borrow *The Daily Herald,* now to ask advice about a hat. Do you ask for more solemn instances of the power of the human race to change? . . . All human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about the year 1910.[1]

Woolf was having something of a joke in her mention of a specific month, as she acknowledges even in the final sentence of the long passage I've quoted, where she writes "about the year 1910." But her choice of the year and the month will serve as a principle of organization or point of departure for this book.

My discussion will touch on contemporary political events and social disturbances, but its culmination will be the Post-Impressionist show itself at the end of the year. It is not only hindsight that makes that exhibition seem so important. Almost from its first day, it was recognized as significant, even though so many disliked it and thought it a counterpart to the anarchism that they saw about them in political society. It was the challenge of a new world, a new reality.

English writers, especially at the time we are considering, tend to be more deeply embedded within the middle classes of their society than might be true on the Continent. Certainly the Bloomsbury writers, in

revolt though they were in many ways, could not have been more middle to upper-middle class. Indeed, they themselves were far more within the "establishment" than most of the Edwardian writers about whom Woolf complained. Galsworthy was of middle-class background, but Bennett and even Wells—radical though he was—were outsider figures intensely anxious to enter the world that counted. The members of Bloomsbury were in that world already, and hence might treat it with more disdain.

The changes and threatened transformations of the English state—a relation between politics and the making of modernity—have been brilliantly suggested by George Dangerfield in *The Strange Death of Liberal England.* Published first in the United States in 1935, it is a book that remains an extraordinary narrative tour de force. Whether one agrees with him or not, Dangerfield has done much to shape the debate about the prewar period in England, a fine demonstration that insight and imagination are still among the most important of historical skills. He begins his study with one of the major events of 1910, the appearance in the sky of Halley's comet, which Asquith observed on shipboard returning to England from France on May 7, 1910 just after he learned of the death of Edward VII.

During 1910 some of the most important institutions of the English state were being severely challenged. When politics and artistic and personal events are put together, perhaps one can even presume to say that human character changed "on or about December 1910."

It was a time, as Dangerfield emphasizes, when Liberal England was being battered by labor unrest, Irish unrest, and increasingly violent agitation on behalf of votes for women. Between 1910 and 1914 there were some fears of revolution from the left and the right—the right becoming in fact more revolutionary. How valid such fears were can never be known, for the outbreak of the war removed that particular danger. Certainly the state was becoming more anarchic, more uncontrolled, more "modern." So too was the world of art.

Political and artistic divergences reached a semi-crescendo in December 1910, as Woolf, presumably only half seriously, suggests. The

younger members of the Bloomsbury group, among them Lytton Strachey and Maynard Keynes, moving toward thirty, had not yet done a great deal and might almost be called embryos, in the language of the Cambridge secret society, the Apostles, to which Strachey and Keynes belonged. Strachey in 1910 was involved in making a career as a young literary figure in London, having failed to secure a fellowship at Trinity College, Cambridge. Keynes was teaching at Cambridge. Both were pursuing their complicated love lives centering on Strachey's cousin, the painter Duncan Grant. They were also spending much time conversing with Vanessa Bell, now married to their Cambridge friend Clive Bell, and her sister, Virginia Stephen, who would marry Leonard Woolf in 1912. (Woolf, who had also been at Cambridge and an Apostle, had been in Ceylon as a civil servant since 1904, and was now holding the post of an Assistant Government Agent there. He kept in touch through letters, mostly from Strachey.) Virginia was in the country in the early part of 1910, recovering from a nervous breakdown, one not as serious as her similar attacks in 1904 and 1913. Except when ordered by her doctors to do nothing but rest, she was writing a few reviews as well as working fitfully on her first novel, *The Voyage Out*. So far as the public world was concerned the younger members—the heart of Bloomsbury—were quite invisible.

Roger Fry, however, was forty-four and well-known in 1910. He had studied science at King's College, Cambridge, and was an Apostle. Contrary to his family's wishes, he had planned to make a career of painting, at which he was not particularly adept, and as a connoisseur and an art critic, at both of which he was to be much more successful. At first, under the influence of Bernard Berenson, he distinguished himself in the Italian field, and his first book was a study of Bellini. In 1903 he was a founder of the *Burlington Magazine*, and in 1906 he became curator of European paintings for the Metropolitan Museum in New York, then dominated by J. P. Morgan. But Fry could spend much time in Europe on museum business, and in January of 1910 he re-met Clive and Vanessa Bell in the railway station at Cambridge—a chance meeting of three acquaintances that by the year's end would have

reverberations for the history of Bloomsbury and for the history of modernism.

Fry had been on increasingly bad terms with Morgan and was presently fired from the Metropolitan—a relief. He was free now to explore French contemporary art. In the fall of that year he, Clive Bell, Desmond MacCarthy, and Lady Ottoline Morrell went to Paris to select paintings for an exhibition at the Grafton Gallery, which happened to have a gap in its schedule. By creating the name Post-Impressionism, Fry arbitrarily and perhaps misleadingly appeared to create a movement.

The Apostles had been concerned with what they considered the world of appearance and the world of reality, one of the themes of E. M. Forster's *Howards End,* published that year. For Fry himself, at that moment, appearance was possibly the world of appreciation and connoisseurship, while the "new painting" seemed to herald a different reality, where form was more important than the picture it purported to represent, where self-expression and one's immediate reaction were important to the artist, and where the views of one's uneducated cook or maid might have as much significance as those of a highly educated and cultivated viewer. Fry wrote rather vividly about this in his essay "Retrospect," published in *Vision and Design* in 1920:

> I tried in vain to explain what appeared to me so clear, that the modern movement was essentially a return to the ideas of formal design which had been almost lost sight of in the fervid pursuit of naturalistic representation. I found that the cultured public which had welcomed my expositions of the works of the Italian Renaissance now regarded me as either incredibly flippant or, for the more charitable explanation was usually adopted, slightly insane. In fact, I found among the cultured who had hitherto been my most eager listeners the most inveterate and exasperated enemies of the new movement. The accusation of anarchism was constantly made. From an aesthetic point of view this was, of course, the exact opposite of the truth, and I was for long puzzled to find the explanation of so paradoxical an opinion and so violent an enmity. I now see that my crime had been to strike at vested emotional interests. These people felt instinctively that their

special culture was one of their social assets. That to be able to speak glibly of Tang and Ming, of Amico di Sandro and Baldovinetti, gave them a social standing and a distinctive cachet. . . . It was felt that one could only appreciate Amico di Sandro when one had acquired a certain considerable mass of erudition and given a great deal of time and attention, but to admire a Matisse required only a certain sensibility. One could feel fairly sure that one's maid could not rival one in the former case, but might by a mere haphazard gift of Providence surpass one in the second. So that the accusation of revolutionary anarchism was due to a social rather than an aesthetic prejudice. In any case the cultured public was determined to look upon Cézanne as an incompetent bungler, and upon the whole movement as madly revolutionary.[2]

Fry may have exaggerated, and, as with almost everything, there were notable precursors. But there is no doubt that this was the "special moment" for the introduction of modernism to England.

As English society itself was gradually becoming more democratic and "modern," so too, perhaps, were its artistic expressions. A contemporary critic, Christina Walsh, writing in the Labour paper, the *Daily Herald,* remarked: "The Post-Impressionists are in the company of the Great Rebels of the World. In politics the only movements worth considering are Woman Suffrage and Socialism. They are both Post-Impressionist in their desire to scrap old decaying forms and find for themselves a new working ideal."

Fry and his friends assembled a large exhibition, with paintings, drawings, bronzes, and pottery pieces, including twenty Cézannes, twenty-two Van Goghs, and thirty-six Gauguins, as well as some Matisses and Picassos. There were thousands of visitors to the Grafton Gallery. The common assumption has been that the exhibition was received with universal derision; in fact, there were some favorable notices. But such influential defenders of earlier new art as Robert Ross and D. S. MacColl turned vehemently against this latest manifestation. The success of the show and its reception will be among the questions explored in the pages that follow.

Virginia Woolf I

Many dates could be assigned for the beginning of Bloomsbury, beginning with the birth of Virginia Woolf in 1882, or even earlier if one wished to consider her parents. No doubt 1904, the year of Sir Leslie Stephen's death, was an important formative date. That year his four children, Vanessa, Thoby, Virginia, and Adrian, set up housekeeping on their own in the Bloomsbury section in London at 46 Gordon Square. Starting in 1905, Thoby's friends from Cambridge would come to their Thursday evenings. Another crucial date was 1899, the year Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf, Clive Bell, Thoby Stephen, and Saxon Sidney-Turner entered Trinity College, Cambridge.

Serious as these young people might be, and frivolous as well, intelligent as they undoubtedly were, their discussions may not have been, at least at first, especially remarkable, although the level was more serious than at the dinner parties to which George Duckworth dragged Vanessa and Virginia or at the dances during the London season attended by those who were similar to the Stephen children in terms of age and class. Much to the disapproval of their half-brothers, George and Gerald Duckworth, the young Stephen orphans, all over twenty-one, were unchaperoned. (The Duckworth brothers

have, quite properly, received a bad press, and they did great harm to Virginia through their sexual molestations of her. In her memoirs Virginia depicts them, particularly George, as extremely conventional and stupid. But they both had rather interesting careers. George worked as an unpaid private secretary for Charles Booth, assisting him on his great multi-volume *Life and Labour of the People in London,* and devoted much of his life to serving as Secretary of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments. His younger brother Gerald founded the publishing firm of Duckworth, which would publish Virginia's first two novels.)[1]

Undoubtedly it was unusual for a group of young men and women of their class to meet in such a way. Virginia Stephen, and most of her friends, had great pleasure in gossip, and she was a genius at it, making it up when the natural material was not rich enough. One thinks of the young people as chatting away, but indeed they were content to sit in silence if there wasn't anything good enough to say.

Bloomsbury was shaped to a considerable degree by G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica,* published in 1903, in particular his emphasis on the importance of beautiful objects and of personal relations. But it would be wrong to assume that this set of beliefs meant that conversation was warm and loving, although there was a basic assumption that they were good friends. The most-quoted Bloomsbury remark was a question: "What exactly do you mean?" One would not be allowed to get away with sloppy thinking, and received opinions were highly suspect. "Personal relations" did not mean unreflective support. Rather, one had an obligation to be honest and tell others one's opinion, for their own good, of course.

What was unusual about their conversation, unusual even now, but certainly so in England before the First World War, was their willingness to chat openly about their own and others' sexual lives. This did not come about immediately but after they had known each other for some while, after Vanessa Stephen and Clive Bell had married in 1907. Perhaps Vanessa was influenced by Clive's worldliness. After their marriage Bloomsbury had two locations, the Bells remaining at 46

10

Gordon Square; Virginia and Adrian moving to 29 Fitzroy Square and in 1911 to 38 Brunswick Square. The latter address became something of a "commune," with Maynard Keynes and the painter Duncan Grant living on the ground floor and Leonard Woolf, who had returned from Ceylon after seven years there, on the top floor. The men were willing to share with Virginia and Vanessa a sexual frankness, more common among sophisticated undergraduates, that they had developed at Cambridge. Their closeness was intensified by Woolf, Strachey, and Keynes being members of the Apostles, and by Keynes and Strachey's openness about their homosexual pursuits.

In a memoir Virginia captured the moment of this change, in 1908, in a well-known anecdote, perhaps an exaggeration but undoubtedly suggesting the spirit of the group.

> It was a spring evening. Vanessa and I were sitting in the drawing room. The drawing room had greatly changed its character since 1904. The Sargent-Furse age was over. The age of Augustus John was dawning. . . . The door opened and the long and sinister figure of Mr Lytton Strachey stood on the threshold. He pointed his finger at a stain on Vanessa's white dress.
>
> "Semen?" he said.
>
> Can one really say it? I thought and we burst out laughing. With that one word all barriers of reticence and reserve went down. A flood of the sacred fluid seemed to overwhelm us. Sex permeated our conversation. The word bugger was never far from our lips. We discussed copulation with the same excitement and openness that we had discussed the nature of good.[2]

At about this time, Keynes remarked of economics that "nothing except copulation was so enthralling," and he would pursue both in his conversation, the latter perhaps more with closer friends. Clive Bell remembers another episode "of epoch making character" at the same time involving Lytton Strachey, even more vivid, and also in mixed company. "Lytton had described someone or other as 'lowering'. 'How lowering' enquired Adrian. 'To the prick' replied Lytton."[3]

II

There can be no doubt that the Stephen sisters were at the center of Bloomsbury, and virtually its only women. Without them it might have been little more than a group of men friends who continued to meet, having known one another at university. The sisters had committed themselves to careers. They were young, Vanessa having turned thirty and Virginia twenty-seven in 1909, and they were still best known as daughters of the eminent late-Victorian man of letters Sir Leslie Stephen. Vanessa was at work on her painting and Virginia on her writing, publishing her first piece in 1904, a book review of W. D. Howell's *The Son of Royal Langbrith*, in the *Guardian*, an Anglican High Church publication of small circulation. They and their friends might not have been much different from other young people of good birth and small private incomes trying to make their way in the cultural world of London.

In 1904 the four Stephen orphans had given up the family house in fashionable Kensington to move to respectable but distinctly unfashionable Bloomsbury. There was no clear "head of household." Vanessa was twenty-five and for seven years had had the terrifying job of being in charge of the Hyde Park Gate house after the marriage then death of her half-sister Stella. Thoby, then all of twenty-four, studying for the bar, was hardly a figure of substance and maturity, despite his nickname of "The Goth," reflecting his powerful face and build. The four Stephens had a firm position in the "intellectual aristocracy." They were descended through their father from the "high Victorian intellects" of the Clapham sect of the early nineteenth century. Their grandfather was Sir James Stephen, "Mr. Mother-Country," the prominent under-secretary for the colonies, and their uncle, Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, the judge and conservative utilitarian. Sir Leslie had married as his first wife Minny Thackeray, daughter of the novelist. She died in 1875, and he married secondly Julia Jackson Duckworth, a daughter of one of the Pattle sisters, well-known for their beauty and to the more cultivated part of London society through their association with the Little Holland House set. Julia's aunt was the great pioneer photographer Julia Margaret Cameron.