



The Phantom Table

Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism

Ann Banfield

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of Modernism*

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Preface

This book came out of the seminar on Virginia Woolf I taught my first year at Berkeley in 1975. One of the series of “senior seminars” on a “major author” in the English department curriculum, it was the first devoted to Woolf because, as a senior member of the department explained, Woolf had not been till then considered a “major author.” (At that time, the Penguin edition of her works still identified her as Leslie Stephen’s daughter and Leonard Woolf’s wife.) In the fall of 1977 I completed a draft of a paper on Woolf and Cambridge theory of knowledge in which G. E. Moore played a large role. By the succeeding draft, Bertrand Russell had supplanted him. I periodically revised the paper between other projects, until it became clear that it was too long to remain an article. The subject’s importance began to impress itself on me with increasing force, dictating prolonged research. For underlying Woolf’s art was a thought, a philosophical project worthy of new attention. This was the theory of knowledge Russell developed and synthesized between 1912–14, reconnecting in the process with the empiricist tradition Leslie Stephen was instrumental in rediscovering. Inspired by Moore’s “Refutation of Idealism” and his sense-data theory, Russell’s strange theory of “sensibilia,” to which Whitehead made important contributions, emerged in the period of his encounter with Wittgenstein. That encounter took place in the pre-war intellectual ferment out of which Bloomsbury developed. Recent interest in the history of early twentieth-century British philosophy has only begun to reconsider this theory, but there has been little suspicion of its importance not only for Woolf’s novels but also for her aesthetic.

Woolf herself, writing about the “influence of my mother” (*MB*, 81), contrasts it with one which “should be more definite” and “capable of description,” “for example the influence on me of the Cambridge Apostles” (*MB*, 80), that philosophical society which

counted Moore, Russell and much of male Bloomsbury among its members, as well as, in an earlier generation, Woolf's uncle Sir James Stephen. Yet that exemplary influence has yet to find its full description. S. P. Rosenbaum's 1971 ground-breaking essay "Virginia Woolf's Philosophical Realism" makes the first strong case for the importance of Moore's epistemology for Woolf. Jaakko Hintikka's 1979-80 "Virginia Woolf and Our Knowledge of the External World" focuses on Russell, reassuring me that the unexpected predominance I gave Russell was not misperceived. But the work of reconstructing the edifice of a representative achievement of literary modernism so as to discern the "transformations" of thought into art remained to be done. The critical celebration that has changed the perception of Woolf as a "major author" since 1975 continues to ignore a central aspect of her work. The maternal influence has by now been "described" on numerous occasions;¹ it is the "Cambridge Apostolic" (*RF*, 270) influence that, on the paternal side of the inevitable Bloomsbury family tree, has yet to be explored in all its ramifications.

The theory of sense-data and sensibilia is set upon the foundations of a logical philosophy. It has connections to Russell's theory of naming and descriptions,² as well as to the whole issue of foundations themselves, of "principles." Not the least of the unexpected discoveries of the Apostolic influence is the importance of the logical framework for what it is legitimate to speak of as Bloomsbury's "Principia Aesthetica." For Woolf, untrained in logic, mathematics and philosophy, it is Roger Fry's theory of Post-Impressionism that provides the crucial link between the logical underpinnings of Cambridge theory of knowledge and her theory of "modern fiction."

The principles of their aesthetic that emerge in the course of this study challenge assumptions in the present reassessment of modernism on issues like its relation to realism, philosophical and otherwise. I have not chosen to engage these assumptions explicitly, however, preferring to let a coherent statement of what amounts to a philosophy of painting, in Fry's case, and of the novel, in Woolf's,

¹ See, to name two, Abel's *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis* and Ellen Rosenman's *The Invisible Presence*.

² And to the theory of time and "Cambridge changes" set forth as early as *Principles of Mathematics* as a response to Bradley's and McTaggart's denial of the reality of time. The extensive material on time in Woolf originally conceived as an integral part of this work had largely to be omitted solely for considerations of length.

stand as alternatives to the current orthodoxy. But the wider implications are there to be explored. William Butler Yeats, in passages cited by Rosenbaum, thought that “[c]ertain typical books – *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*, Mr. Ezra Pound’s *Draft of XXX Cantos* – suggest a philosophy” like that of sensibilia, with “mental and physical objects alike material”; he invoked, à propos of Joyce, Pound and Proust, “that form of the new realist philosophy which thinks that the secondary and primary qualities alike are independent of consciousness,” citing Moore’s “The Refutation of Idealism” as its source. The debate about modernism stands in need of a new formulation which takes into account its revolutionary conception of the objects of sensation, at once physical and subjective.

That such a new formulation should call upon analytic philosophy challenges the other assumption of contemporary understanding of modernism – that the only philosophy of relevance to twentieth-century art and literature is continental. This includes the importance accorded Wittgenstein, whom the prevailing opinion, until recently, saw as above all Viennese and largely unmarked by the exchange with Russell. It required a French philosopher with the necessary distance from British philosophy to reinstate Russell as the culmination of one of the two important directions of modern thought. The philosopher was Michel Foucault. He identified “the nineteenth century’s double advance, on the one hand towards formalism in thought and on the other towards the discovery of the unconscious – towards Russell and Freud” (*The Order of Things*, 299). There is a relation between the two “advances” suggested in Foucault’s speaking of them together. It converges on Bloomsbury, centrally positioned to receive and propagate Russell’s logical philosophy and led by a compatible intellectual bent to present to the English-speaking world Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. In this light, the present work is a natural complement to Elizabeth’s Abel’s study of Woolf’s response to Freud. But Bloomsbury’s espousal of the new French painting turns out to be equally compatible with its philosophical predilections. The otherwise inexplicable fact that “[t]he first extensive and serious analysis of Cézanne’s early painting was published by the English critic Roger Fry” (Lewis, *Cézanne’s Early Imagery*, 3) could be seen to follow from Fry’s encounters with the authors of *Principia Mathematica* as a member of the Apostles; Fry was uniquely situated to recognize and theorize Cézanne’s response to the formalism which was beginning to define modern thought.

“Formalism” is the key word in Foucault’s statement. While most examinations of the conjunction of “literature and philosophy” have concentrated on themes, it perhaps requires the distance of time as well to recognize how far-reaching have been the advances in modern logic and the foundations of mathematics that characterize one domain of early twentieth-century thought. Foucault’s “archeology” of nineteenth-century biology, political economy and linguistics is a major attempt to understand formalism as it expressed itself in three disciplines – unfortunately this aspect of Foucault’s work has been largely ignored by his English-speaking readers. It should not be surprising that the major movements in art at the beginning of this century should also have been “formalist,” and yet there has been little recent acknowledgement that the formalism of modern art, if not necessarily the result of the influences of formalism in mathematics and logic, was nonetheless a phenomenon in some way possible and explicable only as part of the intellectual history that produced Cantor and Frege, Peano, Whitehead and Russell.³ The nature of the response to mathematization and logical formalism in modern art is quite varied. But one obvious place to begin exploring the operation of its influences is where it is most documentable, as is the case for the activity of Bloomsbury artists and writers.

The project has even wider implications. The question of how thought informs art and literature and how new ideas are assimilated is more complicated than is frequently assumed. For one thing, to establish that such and such a thinker was a major point of reference in a certain period is not to establish that his or her *thought* is discoverable in the artists and writers who refer to the *thinker*. For anyone who has lived through the period in which linguistics was such a point of reference, it is apparent that many works produced during it are unquestionably marked by the “linguistic turn.” But this in no way means that linguistics was universally understood, and indeed many of the works that refer themselves to linguistics have something else as their real source – a way of thinking certainly central in various domains which is nevertheless often a misunderstanding of the linguistic theories it invokes. Intellectual history reveals that the most revolutionary ideas are often the victims of a revisionism which frequently disguises the old thinking under the

³ James Joyce, for instance, took notes from Russell’s *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* for *Ulysses* and from the *The ABC of Relativity* for *Finnegan’s Wake*. See Joyce, *Joyce’s Notes and Early Drafts for Ulysses*, 49–53 and 102–11.

terms for the new. Even though the early stage of "structuralism" in various disciplines arguably did grasp something profound in linguistics, its many misconceptions made way for the revisionism called "post-structuralism." So an intellectual historian would be misled in taking the linguistic theories and the texts which set them forth as reliable guides to the interpretation of every work that seems to acknowledge the existence of linguistics. In the light of this historical example, it would thus seem prudent to approach the influence of Russell on Woolf with skepticism. The conclusion that Woolf's grasp of the whole import of Russell's philosophy was at best vague and at worst wrong is not, however, the conclusion of this study. On the contrary, given the difficulty of the philosophy in question and Woolf's lack of formal training, it is the more striking the way her work and her aesthetic seize the real possibilities of Russell's thought for art which he himself could not see. For the "archeologist" of knowledge, this perhaps points to deeper tendencies and conditions of modern thought from which both Woolf and Russell follow.

The conduit via which Russell's work came to reach a wider audience, it is our argument, is the 1914 theory of knowledge, a kind of incipient philosophy of science. The important link in the philosophical tradition between the logic and the theory of knowledge for Russell is Leibniz, on whom he wrote his dissertation in 1900. Russell's rediscovery of Leibniz was itself perhaps a response to some of the deeper forces invoked above. Marcel Proust, who was under the sway of a philosophy Russell had expressly distanced himself from, that of Bergson, was, as Gilles Deleuze has shown, profoundly marked by Leibniz, a philosopher, Proust tells us, too old-fashioned for the young Marquise de Cambremer, follower of intellectual fashions. When Russell came the closest to suggesting that modern logic might have something to say to someone producing works of the imagination, it was significantly in a Leibnizian language: "logic," he wrote, "instead of being, as formerly, the bar to possibilities, has become the great liberator of the imagination, presenting innumerable alternatives which are closed to unreflective common sense, and leaving to experience the task of deciding, where decision is possible, between the many worlds which logic offers for our choice" (*PP*, 148). That exercise of the imagination must be preceded by another philosopher's project: "It is necessary to practice methodological doubt, like Descartes, in order to loosen the hold of mental habits; and it is necessary to cultivate logical

imagination, in order to have a number of hypotheses at command, and not to be the slave of the one which common sense has rendered easy to imagine. These two processes, of doubting the familiar and imagining the unfamiliar, are correlative" (*OKnExW*, 242). These two processes would not only define the dual stages of Russell's 1914 theory of knowledge but Fry's paired theories of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. It is as a skeptical attack on common sense and an analysis of the familiar world that Fry conceived the Impressionist project. Out of the idea of possible worlds comes the strange theory of "sensibilia." They become the basis for a "post-impressionist" reconstruction of the external world doubt had analyzed away. From these dual processes Woolf would take the principles of "modern fiction." Creating a formally self-contained world, it did not, however, abjure any relation to "the real world." Instead, it gave its own critique of common-sense realism for which Moore's and Russell's philosophical realism furnishes the abstract scaffolding, the "principles." Hence, this study is also a complement to Alex Zwerdling's *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*.

Woolf's work thus follows a logic. To pursue its logic is our purpose. Its products are novels, each with its characteristic shape, its individual date, in each succeeding one the accent falling differently than of old, multiply reshaping itself. But because the logic knitting together the parts of the vision scattered throughout the works is our goal, any chronologic will be ignored, any differences between individual works. The repetition of themes, of images, makes the oeuvre, in this conception, like the unconscious in its ignorance of time. Such a conception need not be incompatible with a notion of development within it – only it is not our purpose to describe this development but simply the principles generating that constantly shifting yet equilibrious logic of the work as a whole.

The word "logic" permits me to add one final comment on the importance that Russell and, perforce, formalism, has assumed in this work. "Mere formalism" has long been a term of contempt for the left which is perhaps not aware that, currently, it is the one aspect of aesthetic theory and practice which right and left are agreed in dismissing. But, from a distanced perspective, it emerges that – again, this is Foucault speaking – "formalist culture, thought, and art in the first third of the 20th century were generally associated with critical political movements of the Left – and even with

revolutionary movements,”⁴ their aesthetic precursor or accompaniment, regardless of the political affiliations of individual practitioners, from the Russian Revolution to May 68 and even including the neo-classicism of the French Revolution. Only when such revolutionary moments were over – defeated or distorted – did what is more conventionally thought of as political or social literature appear. It is in this light that the otherwise paradoxical eclipse of Russell and rise of Wittgenstein as the philosopher of engagement can be understood. In Derek Jarman’s *Wittgenstein*, only Russell appears throughout in an academic gown, incongruously vested with the symbol of a function – a Cambridge Lectureship – which he did not exercise between 1916, when he was removed because of his active pacifism, and 1944. The film’s faulty memory relegates him to the “ivory tower” become now the primary political arena for an academic left whose conception of political practice comes down to interpreting the world. The place of formalism in the life and work of a thinker also interested in changing the world – Russell had approved Marx’s conception of the philosopher’s dual role – thus needs elucidation. One thing that would have to be made clear is that the acknowledgement of formalism’s limits cleared a space – elsewhere – for political activity which was in no way exhausted by the important activities of what Russell called “academic mankind” (*ML*, 77). For there is always another world than the one we occupy where something is happening which may affect our world, whether we are aware of it or not. Precisely because it is not appropriate to discuss that other Russell here, his existence elsewhere, in a separate political sphere, his “world of existence,” is the counterweight to any charge of “mere” formalism.

Elizabeth Abel, Ann Smock and Alex Zwerdling all read my original essay. François Rivenc, whom I met on a gravestone in the Cimetière Montparnasse during Simone de Beauvoir’s funeral and whose seminar on Russell at the Ecole Normale Supérieure I attended in the spring of 1986, commented on several occasions on my readings of “le Père Russell.” Stephen Neale, Martin Jones, Peter Hanks and once, long ago, Pierre Jacob, were also helpful on Russell’s logic. Conversations with Joseph Emonds, Jean-Claude Milner, Hans Sluga and Richard Wollheim have, sometimes unbeknownst to them, answered various questions for me. Sean Burke,

⁴ Foucault, “How Much Does It Cost for Reason to Tell the Truth,” 235.

T. J. Clark, Teri Darmisch, Anne Wagner and Patricia Waugh all made contributions. Zelda Boyd read the longest version of the manuscript, as did Joseph Emonds. Michael Rogin gave its many stages innumerable careful readings. Robert Kawashima was indispensable in the final stages. A University of California President's Fellowship in 1993–4 and a stay as a Scholar-in-Residence at the Villa Serbelloni, Bellagio Study Center as a guest of the Rockefeller Foundation in 1994 allowed me to give uninterrupted attention to Cambridge theories of time. The Collège International de Philosophie gave me the opportunity to present the book's argument in five lectures in Paris in fall, 1993. A generous subvention from the University of California, Berkeley, Committee on Research made it possible for the book to appear in something near its full length. I thank the King's College, Cambridge, Modern Archive Centre, which allowed me to look at early papers of E. M. Forster and John Maynard Keynes, and the Librairie des Lettres of the Ecole Normale Supérieure, rue d'Ulm. Finally, I want to thank Jonathan Miller for his imitation of Lord Russell and Quentin Bell for walking on a stage at Beaubourg in 1983 looking like the ghost of Leslie Stephen. I end by paraphrasing the close of the preface Jaakko Hintikka wrote to his 1998 *The Principles of Mathematics Revisited*. My thanks too "are due to Cambridge University Press" and to two readers and one editor, Ray Ryan, who so well understood the project. For me too it is "a special compliment" for a work treating Cambridge philosophy "to share a publisher with Russell and Whitehead."

Paris/Berkeley, August, 1998

Abbreviations

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| <i>AAA</i> | Leslie Stephen, <i>An Agnostic's Apology and Other Essays</i> |
| <i>ABCA</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>The ABC of Atoms</i> |
| <i>ABCR</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>The ABC of Relativity</i> |
| <i>Aims</i> | Alfred North Whitehead, <i>The Aims of Education and Other Essays</i> |
| <i>AutoBR</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell</i> |
| <i>BA</i> | Virginia Woolf, <i>Between the Acts</i> |
| <i>BeAg</i> | Leonard Woolf, <i>Beginning Again</i> |
| <i>CE</i> | Virginia Woolf, <i>Collected Essays</i> |
| <i>Cé</i> | Roger Fry, <i>Cézanne</i> |
| <i>CPBR</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell</i> |
| <i>CSFVW</i> | Virginia Woolf, <i>The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf</i> |
| <i>CW</i> | Virginia Woolf, <i>Contemporary Writers</i> |
| <i>Diary</i> | Virginia Woolf, <i>The Diary of Virginia Woolf</i> |
| <i>EssaysVW</i> | Virginia Woolf, <i>The Essays of Virginia Woolf</i> |
| <i>HET</i> | Leslie Stephen, <i>History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century</i> |
| <i>HK</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>Human Knowledge</i> |
| <i>H-M</i> | Roger Fry, <i>Henri-Matisse</i> |
| <i>HWP</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>History of Western Philosophy</i> |
| <i>IMP</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy</i> |
| <i>IMT</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth</i> |
| <i>JR</i> | Virginia Woolf, <i>Jacob's Room</i> |
| <i>LettersBR</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>The Selected Letters of Bertrand Russell</i> |
| <i>LettersLW</i> | Leonard Woolf, <i>The Letters of Leonard Woolf</i> |
| <i>LetltersRF</i> | Roger Fry, <i>The Letters of Roger Fry</i> |
| <i>LettersVW</i> | Virginia Woolf, <i>The Letters of Virginia Woolf</i> |
| <i>LK</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>Logic and Knowledge</i> |
| <i>LL</i> | Roger Fry, <i>Roger Fry: Last Lectures</i> |
| <i>Matter</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>The Analysis of Matter</i> |

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|---------------------|--|
| <i>MB</i> | Virginia Woolf, <i>Moments of Being</i> |
| <i>MBook</i> | Leslie Stephen, <i>The Mausoleum Book</i> |
| <i>Mind</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>The Analysis of Mind</i> |
| <i>ML</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>Mysticism and Logic</i> |
| <i>MrsD</i> | Virginia Woolf, <i>Mrs. Dalloway</i> |
| <i>MyPhD</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>My Philosophical Development</i> |
| <i>ND</i> | Virginia Woolf, <i>Night and Day</i> |
| <i>O</i> | Virginia Woolf, <i>Orlando: A Biography</i> |
| <i>OKnExW</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>Our Knowledge of the External World</i> |
| <i>OP</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>An Outline of Philosophy</i> |
| <i>PE</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>Philosophical Essays</i> |
| “ <i>PhilBerg</i> ” | Bertrand Russell, <i>The Philosophy of Bergson</i> |
| <i>PM</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>Principia Mathematica</i> |
| <i>PofM</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>Principles of Mathematics</i> |
| <i>PP</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>The Problems of Philosophy</i> |
| <i>PS</i> | G. E. Moore, <i>Philosophical Studies</i> |
| <i>RF</i> | Virginia Woolf, <i>Roger Fry: A Biography</i> |
| <i>Room</i> | Virginia Woolf, <i>A Room of One's Own</i> |
| <i>SMW</i> | Alfred North Whitehead, <i>Science and the Modern World</i> |
| <i>SO</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>The Scientific Outlook</i> |
| <i>SomeMain</i> | G. E. Moore, <i>Some Main Problems of Philosophy</i> |
| <i>ST</i> | <i>Scientific Thought</i> |
| <i>TFW</i> | Henri Bergson, <i>Time and Free Will</i> |
| <i>TG</i> | Virginia Woolf, <i>Three Guineas</i> |
| <i>TK</i> | Bertrand Russell, <i>Theory of Knowledge</i> |
| <i>TL</i> | Virginia Woolf, <i>To the Lighthouse</i> |
| <i>TR</i> | Roger Fry, <i>Transformations</i> |
| <i>V&D</i> | Roger Fry, <i>Vision and Design</i> |
| <i>VO</i> | Virginia Woolf, <i>The Voyage Out</i> |
| <i>VW</i> | Quentin Bell, <i>Virginia Woolf</i> |
| <i>W</i> | Virginia Woolf, <i>The Waves</i> |
| “ <i>WM?</i> ” | Leslie Stephen, “What is Materialism?” |
| <i>Y</i> | Virginia Woolf, <i>The Years</i> |

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CHAPTER I

Introduction: table talk

He was a curious figure thus sitting often dead silent at the head of the family dinner table. Sometimes he was caustic; sometimes to Thoby especially instructive. He would ask what was the cube root of such and such a number; for he always worked out mathematical problems on railway tickets; or told us how to find the "dominical number" – when Easter falls was it? And mother would protest; no mathematics, she would say, at meals.

(Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 111)

"Andrew," she said, "hold your plate lower, or I shall spill it." . . . resting her whole weight upon what at the other end of the table her husband was saying about the square root of one thousand two hundred and fifty-three. That was the number, it seemed, on his watch."

(Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 158–9)

The universe of Virginia Woolf's novels is a monadology whose plurality of possible worlds includes private points of space and time unobserved, unoccupied by any subject. Its principle of unity is not a pre-established harmony conferred ahead of time by authorial intention. It is constructed *ex post facto* via a style and an art. This art grounds itself on a philosophical system, a theory of knowledge. The theory begins with an analysis of the common-sense world. Objects are reduced to "sense-data" separable from sensations and observing subjects to "perspectives." Atomism multiplies these perspectives. Objects familiar because seen, heard, sensed, observed, tucked cosily into the observer's viewpoint, lose their familiarity once rendered unseen, unheard, unobserved, revealed to have a sensible existence independent of an observer. A perspectivized style records the vision mutely, imparting its strangeness to the vision. The first conclusion of this logic is the idea of death as the separation of subject and object. The second starts from that conclusion, deriving from it an

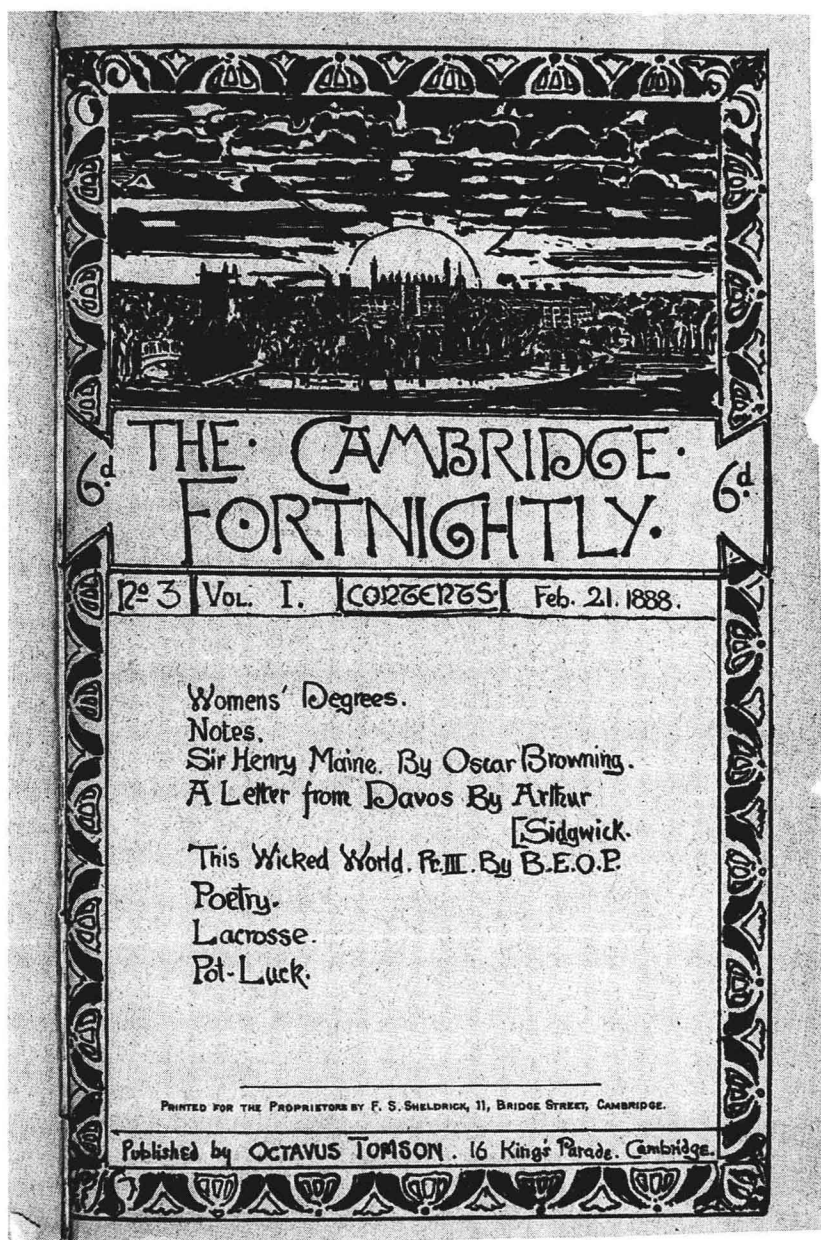


Figure 1. Roger Fry, frontispiece to *The Cambridge Fortnightly*, 1888.