1

ANDREW McNEILLIE

Bloomsbury

The entry on Virginia Woolf in the old *Dictionary of National Biography*, a piece by David Cecil (who married a daughter of the Bloomsbury Group), speaks of 'the shimmering felicities of her style' and concludes that in her work 'the English aesthetic movement brought forth its most exquisite flower'.[1] In such light, where the language of biography trespasses upon eulogy and teeters floridly towards obituarese, we might recall how Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, the *DNB*'s founding editor, pursued a policy of 'No flowers by request' when briefing his contributors.[2] Stephen died in 1904. The incumbents at the dictionary in Cecil's day were obviously more relaxed about floral arrangements. They let him get away with not just a flower (a Wildean lily?) but a whole bouquet. For what after all is or was the *English* aesthetic *movement?* To put the question is not to suggest that there are no lines of relation between the diverse stock of, say, John Ruskin, Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, and that of a no less diverse Bloomsbury Group. Rather it is to ask, what is the nature of that relation? If it is at all important, how important is it in the cultural formation of Bloomsbury?

For present purposes let us take Bloomsbury to include, but not always or equally to involve: the novelists Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) and E. M. Forster (1879–1970); the literary journalist Desmond MacCarthy (1877–1952); the critics Roger Fry (1866–1934, also a painter) and Clive Bell (1881–1964); the biographer and essayist Lytton Strachey (1880–1932); the painters Duncan Grant (1885–1978) and Vanessa Bell (1879–1961, Virginia Woolf's sister); the political writer and worker, publisher and autobiographer Leonard Woolf (1880–1969); and the economist John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946). To give an example specifically concerned with aesthetics, Clive Bell's book *Art* (1914), a radical formalist polemic, owes more, and acknowledges its debt, to the writings of the Cambridge philosopher G. E. Moore and to Roger Fry than it can begin to be said to owe to Pater, or to Wilde (with whom its thought is considerably at odds), while its Ruskinian

legacy is more pervasive than is perhaps generally appreciated. Yet Forster would declare that he believed in art for art's sake, alluding to Wilde in what English readers might regard as 'eighteen-eighties' language, rather than a more Bloomsburyean formulation.[3] The phrase 'art for art's sake' – as *l'art pour l'art* – derives from nineteenth-century France.[4] Whatever else informs it (including Pater's Hellenism and Roman religion) 'English aestheticism' of the 1880s is significantly French in derivation. This is not a tradition to which Bloomsbury belongs in any direct sense. Paterian theories certainly acted as a stimulant in the formation of Woolf's ideas of art and beauty. So later did aspects of Moore's distinctly Platonic philosophy. (His Socratic methodology too was mediated to her in imitations by her male friends, as we will see later.) But we look elsewhere, to Woolf's extensive, independent reading in Plato, her fascination with 'Greek', for another grounding to her aesthetic values (prior, as far as Bloomsbury is concerned, if consanguineous) and for the Socratic roots to many of her most deeply held humane beliefs, concerning sexuality, androgyny and personal relations.

Movements are active fictions, involving differences as well as difference, whether formed by minorities or majorities, and even when highly disciplined and organised into political parties. But it is more than doubtful that there was ever anything that might truly be described as an English aesthetic movement, extending from Pater to Woolf, still less, as we have seen, a specifically English aesthetic. Was Oscar Wilde ever an Englishman? Was Théophile Gautier? Was Immanuel Kant? Pater was of Dutch descent. And were even the members of Bloomsbury English? Desmond MacCarthy was descended from Ireland. Leonard Woolf was a Jew. Duncan Grant and the mother of the Stracheys were Scottish aristocrats ('Is Mary Garden in Chicago still / And Duncan Grant in Paris – and me fou'?' wrote Hugh MacDiarmid, making ironic waves for his Scottish renaissance, in 'A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle', 1926).[5] And while Roger Fry certainly was English, his contempt for the philistinism of his compatriots was only equalled by the passion of his francophilia. Otherwise, we might just say, Bloomsbury was in origin Victorian and by acculturation securely British upper-middle class, if in more cases than Fry's alone conspicuously francophile, especially with regard to the visual arts. (Beyond the visual arts, Gautier and Baudelaire can scarcely be said to have concerned them; though Mallarmé and Proust, belatedly, did.)

Among the Bloomsbury Group's forebears and relations were noted opponents of slavery, belonging to the Clapham Sect,[6] lawyers and civil servants, members of the judiciary, agents of Empire, Cambridge dons, Quakers,

manufacturers of chocolate, coal-owning huntin'-shootin'-and-fishin' self-styled gentry,[7] at least one eminent Victorian agnostic, but not for generations a peasant, and never it seems a proletarian. Bloomsbury was neither an organisation nor self-consciously a movement (or part of a movement), still less a political party, which is not to say it had no politics. It did not organise itself, though for periods some of its members edited and/or owned influential organs (e.g. *Nation & Athenaeum*, eventually absorbed into the *New Statesman*).[8] It had no manifesto, notwithstanding at least one attempt to claim *Art* as a platform for the group cause.[9] Whatever else it was, it was a group of friends, held together by ties of marriage and affection. It placed great emphasis on 'personal relations': 'personal relations are the important thing for ever and ever, and not this outer life of telegrams and anger', wrote Forster, and, more famously, 'if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country'.[10] This is a position regarding patriotism that Woolf, in her feminist polemic *Three Guineas* (1938), radically took further, into the realms of telegrams and anger, in sisterly solidarity, with regard to women and war, much to the embarrassed disapproval of her Bloomsbury friends. She certainly thought women should either weep or unite[11] and withhold their co-operation from the male-run state intent on war – it was a perilous hour at which to go public with so radical a view. Nor for a moment was it appeasement she had in mind (it is important always to make this clear). In *Three Guineas* Woolf offended Bloomsbury's rationalism, by which they set such store. They had otherwise discovered their version of patriotism (a word so close to patriarchy), in the face of rising fascism (which in 1937 had killed Woolf's nephew in a tragic incident during the Civil War in Spain).[12]

The issues raised by *Three Guineas* were highly serious, on both sides, but Bloomsbury, however 'highbrow', was quite commonly conceived as wanting seriousness, as being frivolous. Privilege and frivolity in public life may always make a provoking sight. Bloomsbury enjoyed the potent privileges of their class, if not always as tangibly as they would have liked, however much they warred within and against that class. Raymond Williams has most accurately described them as a dissenting 'fraction' of the upper class, a civilising fraction.[13] Their heightened sense of 'difference' in this respect wasn't so readily visible to others, though their works betrayed it amply (consider for example Clive Bell's pamphlet *Peace at Once*, 1914, destroyed by the authorities, or the tenor of his book *On British Freedom*, 1923; or J. M. Keynes's *Economic Consequences of the Peace*, 1919; or Leonard Woolf's radical condemnation of imperialism in *Empire & Commerce in Africa*, 1920). Bloomsbury were serious but not serious in the overwhelming

style of such acquaintances as Sidney and Beatrice Webb (Fabian socialists prepared to have their heads turned by Stalin). They believed in laughter. (Laughter, in all its registers, from cruel to merry, resounds in Woolf's work, not least in her diary and letters.) Laughter, it should be said, satirical and otherwise, plays a key and provocative role in Bloomsbury aesthetics, as satire does more generally in modernism. In Bloomsbury's case it may be related in part to the ethos of the Cambridge Apostles and their concern, as described by Henry Sidgwick, 'to understand how much suggestion and instruction may be derived from what is in form a jest – even in dealing with the gravest matters'.[14] It would be a naive reader who believed that Strachey's purpose in *Eminent Victorians* (1918) isn't profoundly serious, for all the witty tricks he plays with the genres of history and biography. In a far more flamboyant and fanciful case, the same can be said of Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928). (The practice of the 'new' biography, of the biographical essay, and of the autobiographical memoir – life-writing as Woolf called it – was to one degree or another common across Bloomsbury. In many ways Bloomsbury ensured its continuity by recycling its life in common through the art of memoir.[15])

When in the culture wars of the first half of the twentieth century Bloomsbury came under attack, as it commonly did, its enemy, whether (self-styled) Wyndham Lewis or F. R. Leavis in *Scrutiny*, or any number of others (including, famously, D. H. Lawrence), might at last be accused, in Quentin Bell's quaint rural expression, of 'firing into the brown'.[16] The challenge offered, as by Clive Bell, was for the enemy to target names, to relate charges to individuals. The same must apply to critics with regard to claims concerning the lives and works of the so-called Bloomsbury Group. Which is where the rub resides, the paradigmatic difficulty. How can we speak collectively of 'Bloomsbury' and make defensible sense? 'Only connect' was Forster's epigraph to *Howards End* (1910). Just as in the study of any other disparate cultural formation, or even a single author's *œuvre*, how to connect, and not compromise, is the commonsense task in hand here. (It is a minor irony that the most peripheral, yet still major, figure within Bloomsbury, E. M. Forster, is the one writer whose ideas critics are generally happiest to cite as representatively Bloomsburyean.)

The most comprehensive literary historical attempt to grapple with the difficulty of connecting Bloomsbury has recently been made by S. P. Rosenbaum, across a number of surprisingly extensive volumes.[17] These cover their ground by monarchical epoch: Victorian, Edwardian, and Georgian, in a minutely graded chronological progression. Their scholarship is unequalled but their very methodology precludes the provision of a synoptic view. To provide that, it is necessary to begin before Bloomsbury

was anything but a name on the map of London. For present purposes perhaps the most convenient place and point in time at which to make such a start is in Kensington, London, in 1897, the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee (an event viewed in procession, by Woolf and her siblings, from a vantage-point at St Thomas's Hospital).

Before Bloomsbury

The Stephen family, and Duckworth step-family, lived in Kensington, at 22 Hyde Park Gate. In 1897 their lives were still painfully shadowed by the death two years before of Stephen's second wife, Julia, *née* Jackson, *quondam* Duckworth, model-to-be for Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). A woman of noted 'beauty', descended from the upper but also from the artistic echelons of Victorian society (the pioneering photographer Julia Margaret Cameron was her aunt), Julia Stephen was a devoted wife and mother. The tragedy of her death was to prompt her daughter Virginia's first mental breakdown. Julia seems to have worn herself out prematurely in devotion to her family and, through good works, to the service of others less favourably circumstanced (she was the author of *Notes from Sick Rooms*, 1883, as well as a number of stories for the diversion of her children). In her abnegating and caring way, she had been especially adept at the management of her husband's palpably thin-skinned ego, a role bequeathed to her Duckworth daughter, Stella, and to Virginia's older sister Vanessa. Stella was now, in 1897, herself shortly to die, of peritonitis, under the surgeon's knife. It was a most grievous death hard upon her marriage and it redoubled the misery at Hyde Park Gate, deepening the 'Oriental gloom' that had begun with Julia's death.[18]

The phrase 'Oriental gloom' might serve to prompt us, in the present shorthand, and with Bloomsbury's decorative aesthetics in mind, to consider the general gloom of Victorian domesticity: gaslit and darkly furnished with cumbersome pieces from William Morris's repertoire, and the staggeringly lifeless painting of G. F. Watts, as found at No. 22.[19] (The Pargiters' home in Abercorn Terrace, in the 1880 opening chapter of Woolf's novel *The Years*, 1937, evokes such a world, as more directly do Woolf's memoirs '22 Hyde Park Gate' and 'A Sketch of the Past'. A similar scene is described in Lytton Strachey's 'Lancaster Gate', an essay which begins, with appropriate emphasis upon the gulf between generations: 'The influence of houses on their inhabitants might well be the subject of a scientific investigation . . . Our fathers, no doubt, would have laughed at such a speculation.'[20]) As to that despotic 'Oriental' itself, we might also pick up in passing an intriguing

interest of Julia Stephen: Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium-Eater* (1822).

This wonderful classic of Romanticism, a text claimed for modernism in French translations by Baudelaire,[21] is a drug addict's account of life both down and out and high, in London and elsewhere. According to Woolf it was also one of her mother's favourite bedside books. What in De Quincey's confessional might attract a respectable Victorian lady of Julia Stephen's probity? We might suppose (though the Stephen family were dyed-in-the-wool Thackerayeans) that it was the proto-Dickensian, transparently humane elegist to the street-life companionship of Ann that enthralled and compelled her interest, and not, surely, so much as the slightest tincture, even by proxy, of the drug itself? For that you must turn to Mr Carmichael, the somewhat anachronistic emergent war poet in *To the Lighthouse*, with the tell-tale yellow stains in his beard; De Quinceyean aesthetics are in fact central to the 'Time Passes' section of that novel. Indeed, De Quincey was a writer on whom Woolf wrote at some length (her essay 'Impassioned Prose' was composed as she simultaneously worked at *To the Lighthouse*).[22] One of her earliest published articles, and one of her longer pieces at this time, 'The English Mail Coach' (1906), is about him.[23] He is at least as important to her aesthetics as Walter Pater on whom she only ever comments briefly in passing. In fact the most extensive of her few published observations on Pater occurs in 'The English Mail Coach', which ends in praise of De Quincey's rapid and reverberating style, a style incapable of being groomed to suit a Paterian sentence, or tamed and housed in a Paterian architecture. Woolf's father also wrote a study of De Quincey, describing him as being 'like the bat, an ambiguous character, rising on the wings of prose to the borders of the true poetical region'.[24] But then Stephen, alpinist extraordinaire, conqueror of the Schreckhorn (and celebrated as such in a poem by Thomas Hardy), was a post-Romantic Victorian, a Wordsworthian, if of Whiggish cast, as well as, paradoxically, given Wordsworth's religious belief, the post-Darwinian author of *An Agnostic's Apology* (1893).[25]

Stephen was a prolific and formidably accomplished man, if not the genius he had wanted to be, and, for all the reductive rhetoric so often couched against him, an attractive figure, in his liberalism and hard-thinking scepticism, and the passion with which he held what were in those days controversial views, sufficient to cost a conscientious man his living as a Cambridge don. He resigned his fellowship for which he had been ordained on acknowledging that he did not believe, and never had believed, in the literal truth of the Bible. Anyone doubting Stephen's passion and its humanity should read his pamphlet *The Times on the American War* (1865), or, more accessible,

consider the letter from America he wrote to Anne Thackeray in 1868.[26] As befitted a descendant of the abolitionist Clapham Sect, he held the Southern cause in sharp contempt. Stephen was admired by women, and played manipulatively to their admiration. He was revered and loved by male friends from, to focus upon the literary, George Meredith to Thomas Hardy and Henry James. He knew and was respected by all the great literati of his day: Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, George Eliot, Alfred Tennyson, Anthony Trollope. But he was not just a literary man, successor to his one-time father-in-law, the novelist Thackeray, as editor of the *Cornhill Magazine*; a biographer and a literary historian, he also had philosophical ambitions. He was an ardent disciple of J. S. Mill and an historian of the utilitarian philosophers, as well as the failed exponent of *The Science of Ethics* (1882, the year of Virginia Woolf's birth).

It is important to bear these matters in mind if we are to begin to understand the intellectual ambience at Hyde Park Gate, and to do any kind of justice to Stephen, or to the profoundly ambivalent love his daughter bore him, and the ineradicable esteem in which she held him, throughout her life, for all that in his last years he became an emotional bully and domestic tyrant, one whom she, in the last years of her life, would excoriate in her memoir, 'A Sketch of the Past'. The household Stephen presided over, we should note, was by now one in which his stepson George Duckworth, a somewhat dim-witted and sentimentally 'well-meaning' socialite, might impose upon Virginia, already traumatised by a multitude of griefs, late-night sexual fumblings as she lay in her bed, and other equally unwanted diversions as her social chaperone, criticising her manners and her choice of clothes, with who knows what consequences for her social self-assurance and sexuality? 'I shrink from the years 1897–1904,' wrote Woolf in 'A Sketch of the Past', 'the seven unhappy years' (*MB*, 1985, p. 136).

In 1897 Adeline Virginia Stephen celebrated her fifteenth birthday (on 25 January) and had just begun (3 January) to keep a diary.[27] This almost daily shorthand record of the year reveals its author's great humour and resilience in the midst of the little comedy, and greater tragedy (as now Stella dies), of life at Hyde Park Gate. But of more immediate interest here, in mapping the years before Bloomsbury, is the account the 1897 diary provides of her literary education or, more accurately, the extent of her uncommon common reading. Her booklist is monumental: Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot, Trollope, Hawthorne, Washington Irving, Henry James, W. E. Norris form the lighter part of it (and mark the beginnings of the uncanonical catholicity of her subsequent critical career, something characteristic also of her father's critical output). The more forbidding

works and authors consumed, eminent Victorians furnished by her father, include: Mandel Creighton's *Queen Elizabeth*, Froude's life of Carlyle, Carlyle's *French Revolution*, *Life of Sterling* and *Reminiscences* (for the second time), Sir James Stephen's *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, Lockhart's life of Scott ('my beautiful Lockhart') in ten volumes, Macaulay's history of England. Stephen escorts her to Cheyne Row to visit Carlyle's house. They walk together in Kensington Gardens almost daily. He tells her stories about Macaulay 'and various old gentlemen'. At night he reads to the family, from Thackeray's *Esmond*, Scott's *Antiquary*, Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, or recites Wordsworth, Tennyson, Arnold, Meredith. Only once or twice do we glimpse the parent prone to tantrums, with whom we may already be familiar in the guise of Mr Ramsay, as when a reading of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* goes wrong and almost ends in the middle 'furiously'. In October she attends classes in Greek and History at King's College, London. The history lessons, for which she had to write essays, seem to give way by early 1898 to a diet of Greek from Dr George Warr (a founder in 1877, note the terminology, of the 'Ladies Department' at King's) and later that year of Intermediate Latin, consisting, if we can trust to her account, of reading Virgil under the guidance of Clara Pater, Walter Pater's sister. (She was acquainted with both Paters socially.)

In the next year her older brother Thoby left his public school, Clifton College in Bristol, and entered Trinity College, Cambridge, and so began to filter into Hyde Park Gate news of embryonic Bloomsbury and its undergraduate life. In 1902 we find Woolf beginning private lessons in Greek with Janet Case, lessons resumed in 1903, but not in 1904, the year of Leslie Stephen's death, a momentous year in which the Stephen children moved, from the London borough of Kensington to set up home in the then markedly shabbier district of Bloomsbury. Greek had become Woolf's 'daily bread, and a keen delight' (*L*1, p. 35). It was a subject she could share with her brother Thoby. Her studies in it were to continue throughout her life, often with great practical intensity, as she made translations and notes, reading and re-reading the poets, philosophers and dramatists in the production of such essays as 'The Perfect Language' and, more important, 'On Not Knowing Greek',[28] as well as otherwise, in service of her thought and writing. Greek became a marker for her, a gendered trope (just as for another student of Greek, the autodidact Thomas Hardy, it may be seen as a class trope). It is a figure, for example, resurgent in *Three Guineas*, pointing up the educational privileges afforded her brothers and male peers, especially those now embarked on life at Cambridge – Cambridge being, as we should know, the university to which Virginia Woolf did not go, an ambivalent matter for her, of both pride and grievance.

'Embryo' Bloomsbury and after

In the jargon of the elite Cambridge Conversazione Society or Apostles, an 'embryo' was a candidate for election; an 'abortion' a failed candidate. Candidates were observed by active Society members and were either oblivious or only solipsistically hopeful of their candidature. Leonard Woolf once read a paper to the Apostles entitled 'Embryos or Abortions?'[29] The gynaecological terminology is revealing. We are in the domain here of the English public school male, if at the priggish and intellectual rather than the hearty end of the spectrum. There were usually no more than six or seven active Apostles at any one time. Departed brethren or 'angels' maintained links with the Society, often quite closely. The Apostles played an important part in the formation of Bloomsbury: Fry, MacCarthy and Forster, of the older generation, Woolf, Strachey and Keynes, of the younger, were all members. There were no women Apostles. Nor was the Society an avowedly political one (something Leonard Woolf was deeply inclined to question),[30] though there certainly came to be more than one or two notoriously politically active members in the 1930s. In tenor like Cambridge itself, as distinct from Oxford, the Apostles were unworldly. (They wrote the name of the other place with a disdainful lower-case 'o'.) Even Leslie Stephen in his time was deemed to be too much the muscular Christian to pass through the eye of the Apostolic needle. His son Thoby (Woolf's adored brother, nicknamed the 'Goth') was also debarred, as was the *parvenu* Clive Bell, a figure in many ways far more adventurous intellectually than some of his closer Cambridge friends, at least in his earlier years, above all in his interest in modern painting.[31] The visual arts were largely a blind spot in Apostolic discourse. Nor did music feature much, except in a cult for German *lieder*, as rendered occasionally by G. E. Moore, and a certain fashionable interest in Wagner.

All non-Apostles (the rest of us) were referred to by the elect as 'phenomena' (echoing Kant), benighted persons living in unenlightened unreality, like denizens of Plato's cave. The Society itself dates back to 1820, when it was founded as an undergraduate discussion club. Little by little it evolved into a semi-secret kind of 'freemasonry of the intellect', as Quentin Bell has called it.[32] The poet Tennyson and his friend Hallam were Apostles. There are arcane allusions to the Society in *In Memoriam* (1850 – begun in 1833), Tennyson's elegy to Hallam. Homoerotic (and, certainly under Lytton Strachey's influence, actively homosexual) friendship was an inevitable if unproclaimed feature of Apostolic life. (The fateful shadow of the law and of Oscar Wilde certainly falls upon Bloomsbury here.)

Celebrated historic figures like Plato, Aristotle and Bishop Berkeley, unfortunate enough never to attend Cambridge, whether before or after 1820, were granted honorary Apostolic status. So Leonard Woolf could begin another of his Saturday night papers to the Society:

> Our brother Plato tells us that this world with its changing and fickle forms of things, with its false justice, false morality, false Education and false government is a gloomy fire-lit cave, wherein men sit bound prisoners guessing at these shadows of reality and boasting that they have found the Truth. Outside blaze the clear sun and the wide world of Reality and only the man who has struggled up the narrow path and looked upon the sun can hope to set in order the chaos of the cave.[33]

If Plato was a haunting presence for the Apostles, so too was the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Apostolic jargon has been described as 'a neo-Kantian argot'.[34] G. E. Moore, by the turn of the century about to become the most powerfully influential figure in the Society, had written a fellowship thesis on Kant – a philosopher important to Romanticism and the formulation of subsequent aesthetic theory, whether as appropriated by Coleridge, or as misrepresented by Henry Crabb Robinson, De Quincey, and others[35] – and Kantian loyalties figure in Moore's 1899 contribution to *Mind*, 'The Nature of Judgement'. Roger Fry's preface in 1912 to the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition would allude to Kant's definition of the proper object of aesthetic emotion, and Desmond MacCarthy in the same year would publish an essay on 'Kant and Post-Impressionism',[36] thus perhaps reminding us of at least some of the connections between modernist and Romanticist aesthetics and subjectivities.

It was as a commonsense philosopher that Moore left his mark within the analytical tradition. But he was earlier to be celebrated for his philosophical realism, for liberating not just Bertrand Russell (another Apostle) but Cambridge philosophy itself from the trammels of neo-Hegelian thought, and, particularly, of Berkeleyan idealism. It was Russell who persuaded Moore, a classicist, to take up the study of philosophy (perhaps this background explains Moore's penchant for Plato). In 1897 Moore subscribed to such neo-Hegelian ideas as the unreality of time. But, as we have seen, by 1899 he had exchanged such idealism for realism and, with Russell for a convert to his cause, he had begun his onslaught on the Hegelian tradition. Most immediately at stake at Cambridge was the neo-Hegelianism pursued by J. E. McTaggart (another Apostle and a former schoolfellow of Roger Fry; and one whom, Moore notwithstanding, Virginia Woolf would read in 1936, remarking as she did so her surprise at discovering 'how interesting mystic Hegelianism is to me' (*L6*, p. 6)). Moore knocked McTaggart from