CHAPTER 1

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."
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> (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

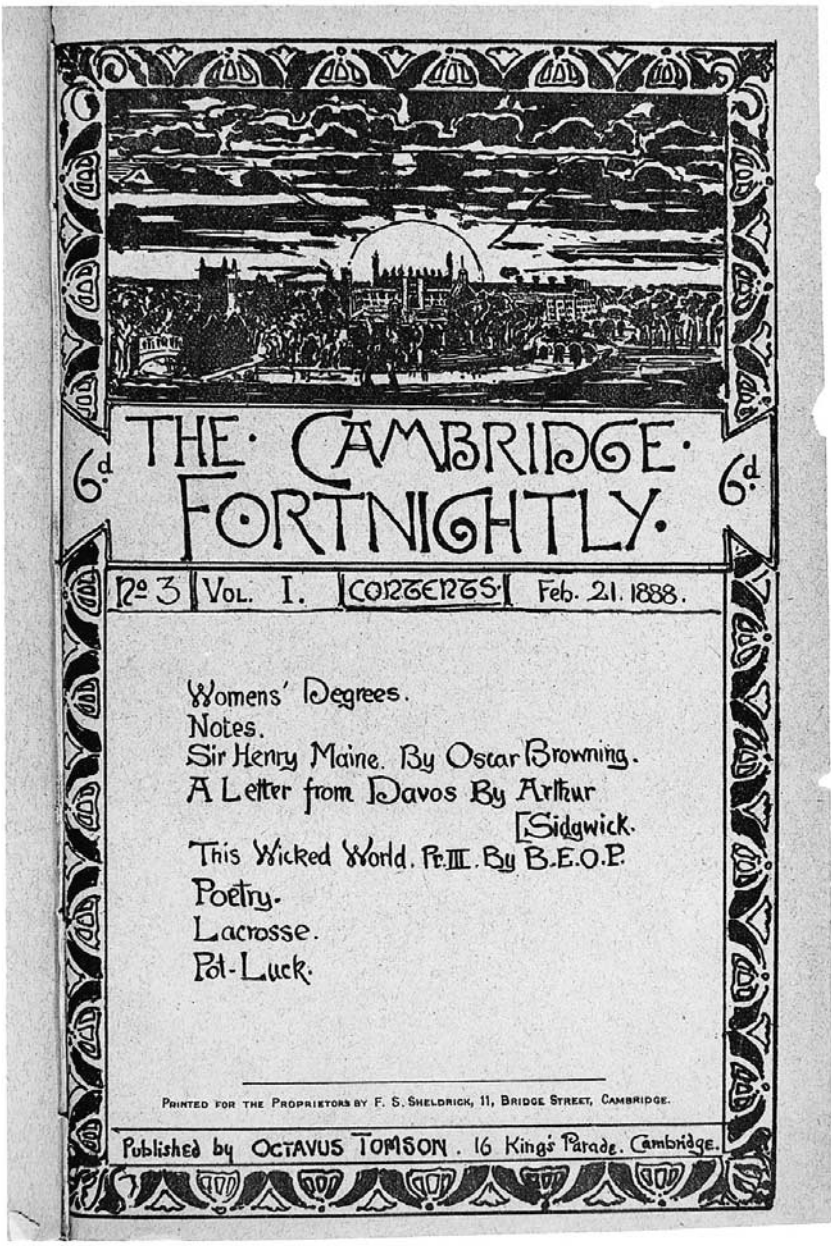

Figure 1. Roger Fry, frontispiece to *The Cambridge Fortnightly*, 1888.

elegiac form that is an adequate response to the world revealed by science.

THE LIGHT OF CAMBRIDGE

> They say the sky is the same everywhere . . . But above Cambridge . . . there is a difference . . . Is it fanciful to suppose the sky, washed into the crevices of King's College Chapel, lighter, thinner, more sparkling than the sky elsewhere? (Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, 31–2)

The origins of this theory of knowledge were in the pre-war Cambridge of Alfred North Whitehead, G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell. "The student of British culture, like Virginia Woolf," Irma Rantavaara insists, "cannot escape Cambridge." (*Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury*, 43). E. M. Forster's *The Longest Journey* (1907) begins abruptly with a dialogue evoking that Cambridge:

> "The cow is there," said Ansell . . . There, now. . ."
>
> "I have proved to myself that she isn't," said the voice. "The cow is *not* there." Ansell frowned and lit another match.
>
> "She's not there for me," he declared. "I don't care whether she's there for you or not. Whether I'm in Cambridge or Iceland or dead, the cow will be there."
>
> It was philosophy. They were discussing the existence of objects. Do they exist only when there is some one to look at them? Or have they a real existence of their own? . . . Hence the cow. She seemed to make things easier. She was so familiar, so solid, that surely the truths that she illustrated would in time become familiar and solid also. Is the cow there or not? This was better than deciding between objectivity and subjectivity. So at Oxford, just at the same time, one was asking, "What do our rooms look like in the vac?" (1–2)

Forster's fictional conversation could well be that which takes place in Jacob Flanders' rooms at Cambridge – one never recorded, however, in Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, because the observer-narrator, identified as a woman, is, it is implied, excluded from the conversation.[1] The novel's perspective on Jacob's rooms, "the window being open," is perforce distanced, limited, "legs issuing here," a "pipe was held in the air, then replaced," "lips opened," "a roar of laughter," "only gestures of arms, movements of bodies, could be seen shaping something in the room." So the question "Was it an argument?" (*JR*, 44) cannot be decided. Yet the subject of the debate Forster reproduces – our knowledge of the external world, the nature of perception – does enter Woolf's novels couched in

explicit philosophical language. "Subject and object and the nature of reality" is the subject of his father's books, Andrew Ramsay answers Lily Briscoe's inquiry in *To the Lighthouse*, for it is as philosopher obsessed by the problem of knowledge and not as literary critic that Woolf fictionally depicts her own father, who was both. "Think of the kitchen table when you're not there," (38) Andrew adds to illustrate the philosophical realist's position with an example like Forster's cow, "so familiar, so solid," "to make things easier" for the puzzled Lily. In *The Years*, Sara Pargiter is reading a version of the Idealist position:

> "This man," she said, tapping the ugly little brown volume, "says the world's nothing but thought, Maggie" . . .
> "The world's nothing but thought, does he say?" . . .
> "Would there be trees if we didn't see them?" said Maggie.
> "What's 'I'? . . . 'I' . . . [Woolf's ellipses]?" She stopped. She did not know what she meant. She was talking nonsense. (139–40)

With these explicit formulations, Woolf makes evident her familiarity with the terms in which British philosophy presents the problem. They are not incidental, however, as in Forster, but themes. Their full understanding requires an explication provided not simply by the parameters of what is after all an ancient debate – that between Realism and Idealism – but by a particular, historically localizable theory of knowledge. Underlying Woolf's work, albeit not always undisguisedly, it is the key to otherwise unexplained obsessions of the novels which, in isolation, remain puzzling, and it intersects with more familiar ones to make possible new readings.[2]

The Cambridge at the origin of this theory was one won over after 1898 by a new philosophical Realism. This was the "revolt" against Idealism of the young Moore and Russell. Its paradigm of reality in Russell and Whitehead was not first the external world, but mathematical and logical truth. If the conjunction of "some branch of mathematics or philosophy" (*TL*, 15) evokes the names of Russell and Whitehead, it had already marked the intellectual orientation of the philosophers of Woolf's father's generation.[3] "Stephen, Sidgwick, Clifford, Marshall and Venn all came to philosophy through mathematics and gravitated to empiricism . . . It was no accident that whereas Oxford at the end of the century became the home of German Idealism, Cambridge nurtured Bertrand Russell's logic which employed Boolean algebra" (Annan, *Godless Victorian*, 190).[4]

While, later, Oxford would read by the natural light of "ordinary language," the "light of Cambridge" included "the light . . . of symbols and figures" (*JR*, 42). An illustration in Russell's *ABC of Relativity* assigns hypothetical lawyers the view of simultaneity of "a person at rest on the earth" and not "the view of a person traveling in a train" by virtue of their "having been educated at Oxford." Russell dryly comments that "in theoretical physics no such parochial prejudices are permissible" (50).

Theory of knowledge was a further development of the new Realism, the result of the inroads of science at Cambridge at the beginning of the century. Here reality is physical reality. Stages in "the process of understanding" were "philosophy; science" (*W*, 249). The young men Peter Walsh is thinking of in *Mrs. Dalloway* as he passes the British Museum are "reading science, reading philosophy" (76). At "Cambridge . . . Greek burns there; science there; philosophy on the ground floor" (*JR*, 39). Philosophy was then the foundation, strengthened by logic and mathematics. Science's knowledge of the external world was only expressible logically and mathematically. "The thought which science evokes is logical thought," wrote Whitehead (*Aims*, 51).

But the growth and dissemination of theory of knowledge required a wider intellectual setting, a meeting-ground of philosophy not only with science, but, surprisingly, with a burgeoning artistic activity. Such, it is our first hypothesis, was Bloomsbury.

(SOME MAIN) PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY: A BLOOMSBURY EPISTEMOLOGY

[H]ow are we to bridge over the gulf between two contradictories? (Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought*, 25)

The turn to theory of knowledge coincided with a nascent philosophy of science in the first decades of the century. Its epistemological urgency arose from what Russell called "the gulf between the world of physics and the world of sense" or "the transition from perception to science" (*Matter*, 222). These problems became acute with the breakthroughs of physics in the last decades of the nineteenth century on the kinetic theory of gases and the wave theory of light, Max Planck's discovery of the quantum in 1900, the confirmation and application of Niels Bohr's theory of the atom between

1913 and 1925, Einstein's formulation of the special theory of relativity in 1905 and of the general theory in 1915 and the discoveries of de Broglie, Heisenberg, P. Jordan, Dirac and Schrödinger on wave and particle theories in 1925–6, spanning the years Woolf is writing her first novels. "The new situation in the thought of today arises from the fact that scientific theory is outrunning common sense," wrote Whitehead (*SMW*, 106). The theme prefaces various of Russell's attempts to formulate a theory of knowledge. He elaborated on it in the opening of his 1926 Tarner Lectures on the Philosophy of the Sciences given at Cambridge:

> All empirical evidence consists, in the last analysis, of perceptions, since it is the latter which supplies the evidence of the laws of physics. In the time of Galileo, this fact did not seem to raise any very difficult problems, since the world of physics had not yet become so abstract and remote as subsequent research has made it. But already in the philosophy of Descartes the modern problem is implicit, and with Berkeley it becomes explicit. The problem arises because the world of physics is, prima facie, so different from the world of perception that it is difficult to see how one can afford evidence for the other. (*Matter*, 6)

Russell's conclusion, in the 1914 "The Relation of Sense-Data to Physics," that "it would seem, the correlation with objects of sense, by which physics was to be verified, is itself utterly and for ever unverifiable" (*ML*, 140), echoes Leslie Stephen's conclusion "that matter cannot be brought into relation to spirit, whilst all scientific knowledge rests on their mutual connection" (*HET*, 25–6).

Thus it was a philosophy which addressed the seeming incommensurability of two versions of a knowledge of the external world, one direct apprehension of it through the senses and the other scientific knowledge, chiefly modern physics, that Woolf, with her acknowledged limits in this area, came to know as philosophy. Both versions made empirical claims about the world. All we ever know immediately is not matter, but our own sensations. The object of science is beyond immediate knowledge. But sensation remains the evidence for it. The empirical basis for objective knowledge thus rests on subjective foundations. Yet science means to formulate a knowledge ideally independent of the subject. Hence a solution to the problem of knowledge within the framework of empiricism must be an answer to Idealism, whether Berkeley's or F. H. Bradley's Hegelianism.

Russell's work on the theory of knowledge is concentrated in the

period 1910 to 1914. Its history after 1910 – the relevant texts including not only *Our Knowledge of the External World* and "The Relation of Sense-Data to Physics," but the manuscript posthumously published as *Theory of Knowledge*, all of 1914, – has only recently been recounted.[5] Its major influences are the Moore of "The Refutation of Idealism" and *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, with ever in the background Whitehead's and Russell's monumental work on logic and the foundations of mathematics. Together Moore, Russell and Whitehead define the contours of philosophy as Bloomsbury understood it. Leonard Woolf singles out this triumvirate as the major philosophical influence for his generation:

> When I came up to Trinity, [J. McT. E.] McTaggart, though regarded with respect and amused affection as an eccentric, had completely lost his intellectual and philosophical influence. The three other philosophers' reputation was great and growing, and they dominated the younger generation. In 1902 Whitehead was forty-one years old, Russell thirty, and Moore twenty-nine. (*Sowing*, 134)

The years 1911–13 are also those in which the young Wittgenstein entered the English philosophical scene, those of the intense exchange between him and Russell. The profound crisis created for Russell by Wittgenstein's criticisms led to Russell's abandonment of the *Theory of Knowledge* text. Wittgenstein as a philosophical influence sets, according to one dominant assessment of the course of philosophy in the twentieth century, a kind of *terminus ad quem* to the period of the theory of knowledge by making "epistemology. . . peripheral," in the words of Michael Dummett, who "points out," Brian McGuinness writes,

> that since the time of Descartes epistemology had been the basic part of philosophy:
>
> "The whole subject had to start from the question, 'What do we know and how?' . . . Descartes's perspective continued to be that which dominated philosophy until this century, when it was overthrown by Wittgenstein, who in the *Tractatus* reinstated philosophical logic as the foundation of philosophy, and relegated epistemology to a peripheral position."
>
> . . . Russell, who came to philosophy before the change signalized by Dummett, perhaps never realized that it had taken place. Despite all his own discoveries in logic and philosophical logic, he tended to think that the Cartesian question was the one with which philosophy began. (*Wittgenstein: A Life*, 83)[6]

The displacement of epistemology marks the break between Russell's dominance and Wittgenstein's.

BLOOMSBURY: THE HOME UNIVERSITY

"Why dont you contribute to the Queen's dolls House, Virginia?" "Is there a W. C. in it, Vita?" "You're a bit hoity toity, Virginia." Well, I was educated in the old Cambridge School. "Ever hear of Moore?" "George Moore the novelist?" "My dear Vita, we start at different ends." (to Clive Bell, *Letters VW*, III, 85–6)

[T]here is still a gulf . . . in which, possibly, literature may crash . . . England has crammed a small aristocratic class with Latin and Greek and logic and metaphysics and mathematics . . . She has left the other class, the immense class to which almost all of us must belong, to pick up what we can in village schools; in factories; in workshops; behind counters; and at home. When one thinks of that criminal injustice one is tempted to say England deserves to have no literature. (*CE* II, 180)

Bloomsbury was both a place and a moment. As a place, it was created by the displacement of two distinct groups from two other places: it was Cambridge and centrally Cambridge philosophy moved to London and it was the private household of the young Stephens moved from Hyde Park Gate to Bloomsbury. "The colour of our minds and thought had been given to us by the climate of Cambridge and Moore's philosophy," Leonard Woolf wrote (*BeAg*, 25). "Bloomsbury grew directly out of Cambridge," he said; it was "intimate friends who had been at Trinity and King's and were now working in London" (*Sowing*, 156). Since the Stephen brothers reached Bloomsbury via Cambridge, the Stephen sisters' arrival defined the specific influence of the Hyde Park Gate contingent: the arts were the sisters' arts; philosophy belonged to the brothers. The Cambridge brothers' philosophy had, moreover, a formal embodiment in that "Fratrum Societati" known as the Cambridge Apostles (Lowe, *Alfred North Whitehead*, I, 120). Although not all of Bloomsbury's nucleus, and notably not the Stephen brothers, were members, its influence was paramount.[7] We can give many names to the conjunction of Cambridge and Hyde Park Gate, but here we will call it the "Home University."

As a moment, Bloomsbury's intellectual history coincides with the work on knowledge. It divides into three sections. The first takes in the formative years 1900 to 1904–5, when Bloomsbury's male members were Cambridge undergraduates. Leonard Woolf pro-

nounced that "1903 was an *annus mirabilis* for Cambridge philosophy, for in that year were published Russell's *Principles of Mathematics* and Moore's *Principia Ethica*" (*Sowing*, 133–4). 1903 also has a landmark in "The Refutation of Idealism," which places sensible and physical reality alongside the mathematical reality of Russell's *Principles*. The second period covers the years 1905 to 1910, those of the first Bloomsbury. The third, from 1910 at least to the outbreak of the War or to Russell's "Logical Atomism" lectures of 1918, includes "the three years 1912 to 1914," when Leonard Woolf remembers "Bloomsbury came into existence," (it for him not having existed during his absence in Ceylon from 1904–11), and when Woolf is writing her first novel, completed in 1913.

Bloomsbury's preoccupation with epistemological questions thus places it squarely within the period of Russell which ends with Wittgenstein's ascendancy. Leonard Woolf, explaining why Virginia had not attended Wittgenstein's lectures, says "nor did I and I don't think many of the older people did" (*LettersLW*, 539). We can thus take the rise of Wittgenstein's influence as a kind of cut-off point for the philosophical background of Bloomsbury. This does not prevent the *Tractatus* from playing a role in our reconstruction of Bloomsbury's intellectual world. It came out of the period of Russell's theory of knowledge, and its conceptions, language and dominant metaphors find their counterparts in Woolf, not because she came under its influence, but because she shared its ways of thinking.

Woolf saw as an inaugural moment for Bloomsbury the turning of the century's first decade. In a famous passage, she wrote that "in or about December 1910 human character changed" (*CE*, I, 320). It marked for her a significant shift in what she calls "atmosphere," Leonard's "climate." We can venture certain hypotheses as to what change Woolf had in mind and what events led her to date it so precisely.

The change was a turn to the "external world"; it was "changing from the general to the particular," as Woolf says of early Bloomsbury conversation (*MB*, 192), echoing the Russellian vocabulary. "The external world" had for Cambridge two embodiments. It was first, we saw, the physical world of science. But the "external world" had a social dimension as well. It was the world outside the narrow circle of Cambridge. For there were other lights than Cambridge. Among the most important was the strong Mediterranean sunlight of a new art, "its light (whether Rossetti's on the wall, or Van Gogh

reproduced . . .)" (*JR*, 40–1), to which Cambridge was blind, for "none of that could show clearly through the swaddlings and blanketings of the Cambridge night" (*JR*, 45).[8] Significant for our history, this incompleteness was felt with a new urgency by the philosopher-logician himself. His intensest labor was over, and in the interval which opened up almost as a void, new questions suddenly became visible, new contacts were sought and made. Leslie Stephen, Woolf thought, had remained "ignorant of all depressions and elevations but those that high philosophy bred in him" (*MB*, 37). The philosopher of 1910 turns from "the world of universals" to the world of "particulars," discovering, despite a "temperament" for "the one," "that both have the same claim on our impartial attention" (*PP*, 100).

In December 1910, the first volume of *Principia Mathematica*, which Russell had spent the previous ten years writing with Whitehead, finally appeared. It marks a watershed. The logicist project – the claim that pure mathematics was deducible, via "chains of deductions" (*PofM*, xvi), "from a very small number of fundamental logical principles" (xv) – had arrived at a critical point, both of achievement and exhaustion. The story of Russell's post-*Principia* exhaustion is notorious. He recounted it to many, including Woolf herself.[9] But his personal odyssey is emblematic of Cambridge philosophy's shift in direction at that moment. In 1910, Whitehead moved from Cambridge to London (Lowe, *Alfred North Whitehead*, II, 2), abruptly ending his thirty-year association with Trinity College.[10] In 1911, Russell, finally separated from his first wife, would also take a flat in London, though he was still lecturing at Cambridge. These events mark the end of something. Unlike the parochial Oxford mind of Russell's *The ABC of Relativity*, his Cambridge-educated mind is a mind in motion, with its "view of a person traveling" at high speed, its direction outwards.

1910 also marked new beginnings. From the completion of *Principia Mathematica* can be dated the new interest in the old problem of knowledge that Moore's "The Refutation of Idealism" initiated and Forster already echoed in 1907. In the winter of 1910–11, Moore delivered twenty lectures in London on "the problem of the external world and the problem of general ideas" which became *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (Wisdom, "Foreword," 5). The revival of interest in knowledge led Russell to extend logic's methods into new terrain, not an imperialist extension but a testimony to the incompleteness of