A CRITIC AT LARGE

A HOUSE OF ONE'S OWN

Virginia Woolf was Bloomsbury's genius, but her sister, the painter Vanessa Bell, created its shrine. With her lover and her husband, she transformed a quiet Sussex farmhouse into the backdrop for some of Bloomsbury's most extraordinary scenes—in life and in art.

BY JANET MALCOLM

If one is to try to record one's life truthfully, one must aim at getting into the record of it something of the disorderly discontinuity which makes it so absurd, unpredictable, bearable.—*Leonard Woolf, "The Journey Not the Arrival Matters."*

THE legend of Bloomsbury—the tale of how Virginia and Vanessa Stephen emerged from a grim, patriarchal Victorian background to become the pivotal figures in a luminous group of advanced and free-spirited writers and artists—takes its plot from the myth of modernism. Legend and myth alike trace a movement from darkness to light, turgid ugliness to plain beauty, tired realism to vital abstraction, social backwardness to social progress. Virginia Woolf chronicled her own and her sister's coming of age in the early years of this century much as Nikolaus Pevsner celebrated the liberating simplifications of modern design in his once influential but now perhaps somewhat outdated classic "Pioneers of the Modern Movement: From William Morris to Walter Gropius" (1936). As Pevsner shuddered over the "coarseness and vulgar overcrowding" of a carpet shown in the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London ("We are forced to step over bulging scrolls and into large, unpleasantly realistic flowers. . . . And this barbarism was by no means limited to England. The other nations exhibiting were equally rich in atrocities"), so Virginia, in her memoir "Old Bloomsbury" (1922), recoiled from the suffocating closeness of her childhood home, at 22 Hyde Park Gate, in Kensington—a tall, narrow, begloomed house of small irregular rooms crammed with heavy Victorian furniture, where "eleven people aged between eight and sixty lived, and were waited upon by seven servants, while various old women and lame men did odd jobs with rakes and pails by day." And, as Pevsner turned with relief to the spare, *sachlich* designs of the twentieth-century pioneers, so Virginia exulted in the airy and spacious house on Gordon Square, in Bloomsbury, where she and Vanessa and their brothers, Thoby and Adrian, went to live by themselves in 1904, after the death of their father. (Vanessa was twenty-five, Thoby was twenty-four, Virginia was twenty-two, and Adrian was twenty-one.) "We decorated our walls with washes of plain distemper," Virginia wrote, and:

> We were full of experiments and reforms. . . . We were going to paint; to write; to have coffee after dinner instead of tea at nine-o'clock. Everything was going to be new; everything was going to be different. Everything was on trial.

Nine years earlier, when Virginia was thirteen, her mother, Julia Stephen, had died, suddenly and unexpectedly, of rheumatic fever, at the age of forty-nine, and two years after that Stella Duckworth, one of Julia's three children from a previous marriage, who had become the angel of the house in Julia's place, died of peritonitis, at the age of twenty-eight. These deaths only darkened the darkness, coarsened the atrocious figures in the carpet. Leslie Stephen, the eminent Victorian writer and editor, tyrannized the household with his Victorian widower's hysterical helplessness, and George Duckworth, Stella's brainless brother, couldn't keep his hands off Vanessa and Virginia while affecting to comfort them. Virginia's strength was unequal to the pressure of "all these emotions and complications." A few weeks after Leslie's death, she fell seriously ill. "I had lain in bed at the Dickinsons' house at Welwyn"—Violet Dickinson was then her best friend—"thinking that the birds were singing Greek choruses and that King Edward was using the foulest possible language among Ozzie Dickinson's azaleas," Virginia wrote of this descent into madness, the second in the series (the first followed her mother's death) by which her life was plagued and eventually cut short. When she recovered—the antipsychotics of the time were bed rest, overfeeding, and boredom—her old home was gone and the new one was in place. It was on Vanessa's sturdier shoulders that the weight of life at Hyde Park Gate had

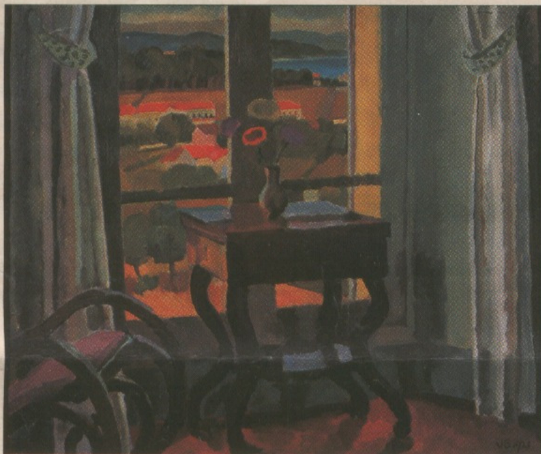
LEFT: HULTON DEUTSCH; RIGHT: THE CHARLESTON TRUST

fallen after Stella's death (her siblings called her the Saint when they wanted to enrage her), and it was she who engineered the move to Gordon Square, selecting the neighborhood (then an unfashionable one), finding the new house, renting the old one, and distributing, selling, and burning its accretions.

There is a photograph of Stella, Virginia, and Vanessa, taken around 1896, the year after Julia's death, in which a classically profiled Stella looks demurely downward; an ethereal Virginia, in half profile, gazes pensively, perhaps a little strangely, into the middle distance; and a solid Vanessa stares straight into the camera, her features set in an expression of almost harsh resolve. Without Vanessa's determination—and by the time of Leslie Stephen's death she was already making good on her ambition to be an artist, having studied drawing and painting since her early teens—it is doubtful whether the flight of the orphans to Gordon Square would have taken place. Nor, more to the point, would there have been the Thursday-evening parties that were, Virginia playfully wrote, "as far as I am concerned the germ from which sprang all that has since come to be called—in newspapers, in novels, in Germany, in France—even, I daresay, in Turkey and Timbuktu—by the name of Bloomsbury." A period of happiness had begun that, as Virginia described it, was like the giddy early months of freshman life at college. She and Vanessa had not, of course, gone to college—even girls from literary families like the Stephens did not go to college then—but Thoby had gone to Cambridge, and came home on vacations to tell his wide-eyed sisters of his remarkable friends: of the frail, ultra-cultivated Lytton Strachey, who once, as Virginia wrote, "burst into Thoby's rooms, cried out, 'Do you hear the music of the spheres?' and fell in a faint"; of an "astonishing fellow called Bell. He's a sort of mixture between Shelley and a sporting country squire"; of a "very silent and thin and odd" man named Saxon Sydney-Turner, who was "an absolute prodigy of learning" and "had the whole of Greek literature by heart." These and other Cambridge classmates became the Thursday-evening harbingers of Bloomsbury and the sisters' initiators into the pleasures of late-night conversation on abstract subjects (beauty, reality, the good) with men who do not want to marry you and to whom you are not attracted. Evidently, they were an unprepossessing lot. "I thought . . . that I had never seen young men so dingy, so lacking in physical splendour as Thoby's friends," Virginia wrote in "Old Bloomsbury" (doubtless exaggerating their nerdishness for comic effect; she wrote the piece to be read aloud to a gathering of Bloomsbury friends that included several of the ill-favored men themselves). But "it was precisely this lack of physical splendour, this shabbiness! that was in my eyes a proof of their superiority. More than that, it was, in some obscure way, reassuring; for it meant that things could go

LEFT: (TOP) THE BERG COLLECTION/NYPL, (BOTTOM) THE CHARLESTON TRUST; RIGHT: THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

Vanessa Bell (opposite) around 1902, and the studio at Charleston that she and Duncan Grant shared for fifteen years.



Opposite page: Vanessa, at the easel, with Virginia, Adrian, and Thoby; Vanessa's 1940 portrait of Leonard Woolf; Vanessa, Stella Duckworth, and Virginia, c. 1896. This page: Virginia with Leslie Stephen, 1902; Clive Bell and Lytton Strachey at Charleston, 1927; Vanessa's "Interior with a Table," 1921.

LEFT: (TOP) THE BERG COLLECTION/NYPL, (BOTTOM) TATE GALLERY, LONDON/ART RESOURCE, N.Y.; RIGHT: TATE GALLERY ARCHIVE

on like this, in abstract argument, without dressing for dinner, and never revert to the ways, which I had come to think so distasteful, at Hyde Park Gate." However, things could not go on like this; the period of happiness abruptly ended. Once again, as she writes in a later memoir, "A Sketch of the Past" (1940), "the lashes of the random unheeding, unthinking flail," which had "brutally and pointlessly" destroyed Julia and Stella, descended on the Stephen family. In the fall of 1906, on a trip to Greece with his siblings, Thoby Stephen contracted typhoid and, apparently because of medical bungling (his illness was at first diagnosed as malaria), died a month after his return to England, at the age of twenty-six.

In the annals of Bloomsbury, Thoby's death, though as brutal and pointless as Julia's and Stella's, has not been accorded the same tragic status. Rather, in fact, the annalists have treated it almost as a kind of death of convenience, like the death of a relative who leaves deserving legatees a bequest of such staggering size that his own disappearance from the scene goes almost unnoticed. What happened was this: The previous year, one of the dingy young men, Clive Bell—who was actually neither as dingy nor as intellectual as the rest—had broken ranks and proposed to Vanessa, and she had refused him. Four months before Thoby's death, he had proposed again, and had again been refused. But now, two days after Thoby's death, Vanessa accepted him, and two months later she married him. As Leslie Stephen's death had allowed the children to flee from the ogre's castle, so Thoby's death melted the ice princess's heart. After Clive's first proposal, Vanessa had written to a friend, "It really seems to matter so very little to oneself what one does. I should be quite happy living with anyone whom I didn't dislike . . . if I could paint and lead the kind of life I like. Yet for some mysterious reason one has to refuse to do what someone else very much wants one to. It seems absurd. But absurd or not, I could no more marry him than I could fly." Yet now, in the kind of emotional tour de force usually achieved by love potions, Vanessa's feeling for Clive suddenly ignited, so that three weeks after the death of her brother she could write to another friend, "I as yet can hardly understand anything but the fact that I am happier than I ever thought people could be, and it goes on getting better every day."

Quentin Bell, Vanessa's son, writing of Thoby's death in his extraordinary biography of his aunt, "Virginia Woolf" (1972), pauses to "wonder what role this masterful and persuasive young man, together with his wife—for he would surely have married—would have played in the life of his sisters." Quentin then goes on to coolly enumerate the advantages that accrued to the sisters from their brother's death:

> I suspect that, if he had lived, he would have tended to strengthen rather than to weaken those barriers of speech and thought and cus-

tom which were soon to be overthrown amongst his friends. It was his death which began to work their destruction: Mr Sydney-Turner and Mr Strachey became Saxon and Lytton, they were at Gordon Square continually and in her distress Virginia wanted to see no one save them and Clive. . . . It was then that Virginia discovered that these young men had not only brains but hearts, and that their sympathy was something different from the dreadful condolences of relations. As a result of Thoby's death Bloomsbury was refounded upon the solid base of deep mutual understanding; his death was also the proximate cause of Vanessa's marriage.

Since Quentin's own existence was precariously poised on this concatenation of events, he may be forgiven for his rather unfeeling words about his unfortunate uncle. Whether Thoby's influence on Bloomsbury would in fact have been as baneful as Quentin postulates cannot be known, of course. But this much is clear: the never-never-land household of the four happy orphans had to be broken up (just as the netherworld of Hyde Park Gate had to be fled) if Bloomsbury was to attain the form by which we know it—a coterie of friends gathered around the nucleus of two very peculiar marriages.

AFTER their wedding and honeymoon, in the winter of 1907, Clive and Vanessa took over 46 Gordon Square, and Virginia and Adrian moved to a house in nearby Fitzroy Square. Four years later, on July 3, 1911, another of Thoby's astonishing Cambridge friends—a "violent trembling misanthropic Jew" who "was as eccentric, as remarkable in his way as Bell and Strachey in theirs"—came to dine with the Bells at Gordon Square; Virginia dropped in after dinner. He was Leonard Woolf, just back from seven years in Ceylon with the Civil Service, and he was stunned by the great changes, the "profound revolution" that had taken place in Gordon Square since he dined there last, in 1904. In "Sowing," the first volume of his five-volume autobiography—a work of Montaigne-like contemplativeness and poise, published in the sixties, and the overture to the Bloomsbury revival—Leonard recalled his first meeting with the Stephen sisters, in Thoby's rooms at Cambridge. They were around twenty-one and eighteen, and "in white dresses and large hats, with parasols in their hands, their beauty literally took one's breath away, for suddenly seeing them one stopped astonished, and everything, including one's breathing for one second, also stopped as it does when in a picture gallery you suddenly come face to face with a great Rembrandt or Velasquez." In 1911, Vanessa's and Virginia's beauty was undiminished (though Leonard pauses to remark—he writes at the age of eighty-one and has outlived his wife by twenty-one years and his sister-in-law by one—that "Vanessa was, I think, usually more beautiful than Virginia. The form of her features was more perfect, her eyes bigger and better, her complexion more glowing"). But what "was so new and so exhilarating to me in the Gordon Square of July, 1911 was the sense of intimacy and complete freedom of thought and speech, much wider than in the Cambridge of seven years ago, and above all including women." To understand Leonard's exhilaration, to see his revolution in action, we must return to Virginia's "Old Bloomsbury" memoir and a famous passage in it:

It was a spring evening [in 1908]. 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. His "Pyramus" filled one entire wall. The Watts' portraits of my father and my mother were hung downstairs if they were hung at all. Clive had hidden all the match boxes because their blue and yellow swore with the prevailing colour scheme. At any moment Clive might come in and he and I should begin to argue—amicably, impersonally at first; soon we should be hurling abuse at each other and pacing up and down the room. Vanessa sat silent and did something mysterious with her needle or her scissors. I talked, egotistically, excitedly, about my own affairs no doubt. Suddenly 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. It is strange to think how reticent, how reserved we had been and for how long.

"This was an important moment in the history of the mores of Bloomsbury," Quentin writes in "Virginia Woolf," and—getting a bit carried away—"perhaps in that of the British middle classes." By the time Leonard came home from Ceylon, the transformation of the innocent girls in white dresses into women from whose lips the word "bugger" (Bloomsbury's preferred term for a homosexual) was never far was complete. Indeed, in the case of Virginia such talk was no longer of much moment or interest. She was doing regular reviewing, working on her first novel, finding Adrian irritating as a housemate, and looking for a husband. The society of buggers had, in fact, become "intolerably boring" to her. "The society of buggers has many advantages—if you are a woman," she allowed. "It is simple, it is honest, it makes one feel, as I noted, in some respects at one's ease." But

it has this drawback—with buggers one cannot, as nurses say, show off. Something is always suppressed, held down. Yet this showing off, which is not copulating, necessarily, nor altogether being in love, is one of the great delights, one of the chief necessities of life. Only then does all effort cease; one ceases to be honest, one ceases to be clever. One fizzes up into some absurd delightful effervescence of soda water or champagne through which one sees the world tinged with all the colours of the rainbow.

The married Vanessa, on the other hand, continued to be drawn to queer society. "Did you have a pleasant afternoon buggering one or more of the young men we left for you?" she wrote to John Maynard Keynes in April, 1914. (Keynes was another Cambridge bugger, who had joined the Bloomsbury circle around 1907.) "It must have been delicious," she went on. "I imagine you . . . with your bare limbs intertwined with him and all the ecstatic preliminaries of Sucking Sodomy—it sounds like the name of a station." Vanessa's connection with Duncan Grant, which began during the First World War—he became her life's companion, even while continuing relationships with a series of boyfriends—has been called tragic; Duncan's inability to reciprocate Vanessa's love because he simply wasn't interested in women has been regarded as one of the sad mischances of her life. But the letter she wrote to Maynard and others of its kind—which appear in Regina Marler's excellently edited and annotated "Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell" (1993)—give one a whiff of something in Vanessa that may have impelled her to deliberately choose a homosexual as the love of her life; they suggest that Duncan's homosexuality may have been the very pivot of her interest in him. In a letter to Duncan of January, 1914, Vanessa, bemoaning the British public's resistance to Post-Impressionist painting, wrote, "I believe distortion is like Sodomy. People are simply blindly prejudiced against it because they think it abnormal." Vanessa herself seemed almost blindly prejudiced *for* the abnormal.

...ut we are getting ahead of our story. ...et us return to the scene of the sisters sitting in the drawing room of 46 Gordon Square in the spring of 1908. We will never know how much of Virginia's account is truth and how much comic invention. ("I do not know if I invented it or not," she offhandedly remarks, by way of introducing the scene.) But one detail stands out in its probable authenticity: *Clive had hidden all the match boxes because their blue and yellow swore with the prevailing colour scheme.* Here, we feel, Virginia was reporting accurately. And here, we have to acknowledge, Clive was doing something that, in its way, was quite as remarkable for a man of his background as talking dirty was for girls of Virginia and Vanessa's background. In his hardcore aestheticism, Clive was behaving as few Victorian men behaved, and as no one in his family had ever behaved. Clive came from a rich family that had made its money from mines in Wales and had built a hideous and pretentious mansion in Wiltshire, decorated with fake-Gothic ornament and animal trophies. Numerous sardonic descriptions of the place have come down to us from Vanessa, who would visit there as a dutiful daughter-in-law and write to Virginia of the "combination of new art and deer's hoofs." At Cambridge, Clive had written poetry and hung a Degas reproduction in his rooms but had not got into the Apostles, the secret discussion society that, in the Bloomsbury gospel according to Leonard, was decisive to Bloomsbury's intellectual and moral avant-gardism. Thoby had not got into the Apostles, either (nor, for that matter, had Leslie Stephen), but Lytton, Maynard, Saxon, Leonard, Morgan (Forster), and Roger (Fry) had.

Clive was the lightweight of Bloomsbury; today nobody reads his books on art, and his own friends patronized him. When he became engaged to Vanessa, Virginia considered him unworthy. "When I think of father and Thoby and then see that funny little creature twitching his pink skin and jerking out his little spasm of laughter I wonder what odd freak there is in Nessa's eyesight," she wrote to Violet Dickinson in December, 1906. In "Virginia Woolf" Quentin writes that Henry James's "views of the bridegroom were even more unfavourable than those of Virginia in her most hostile moods." (James was an old family friend of the Leslie Stephens.) Quentin then quotes this passage from a letter of February 17, 1907, that James wrote to a Mrs. W. K. Clifford:

> However, I suppose she knows what she is about, and seemed very happy and eager and almost boisterously in love (in that house of all the Deaths, ah me!) and I took her an old silver box ("for hairpins"), and she spoke of having got "a beautiful Florentine teaset" from you. She was evidently happy in the latter, but I winced and ground my teeth when I heard of it. She and Clive are to keep the Bloomsbury house, and Virginia and Adrian to forage for some flat somewhere—Virginia having, by the way, grown quite elegantly and charmingly and almost "smartly" handsome. I liked being with them, but it was all strange and terrible (with the hungry *futurity* of youth;) and all I could mainly see was the *ghosts*, even Thoby and Stella, let alone dear old Leslie and beautiful, pale, tragic Julia—on all of whom these young backs were, and quite naturally, so gaily turned.

The passage is wonderful ("the hungry *futurity* of youth"!) but puzzling. Quentin has said that James's views of Clive were even more unfavorable than Virginia's, but James says nothing bad about him—he doesn't single him out from the other callously happy young people. When we read the whole of James's letter (it appears in Volume IV of Leon Edel's edition of James's letters), our puzzlement dissolves. In the sentence immediately preceding this passage James writes:

> And *apropos* of courage, above all, oh yes, I went to see Vanessa Stephen on the eve of her marriage (at the Registrar's) to the quite dreadful-looking little stoop-shouldered, long-haired, third-rate Clive Bell—described as an "intimate friend" of poor, dear, clear, tall, shy, superior Thoby—even as a little sore-eyed poodle might be an intimate friend of a big mild mastiff.

In his Notes, Quentin thanks Edel for bringing the letter to his attention, but when it comes to the point he can't avail himself of Edel's offering. Like Hamlet pulling back from killing Claudius, Quentin cannot commit the parricide of publishing James's terrible words. However, in leaving the trace, the clue to the uncommitted murder, he has afforded us a rare glimpse into the workshop where biographical narratives are manufactured.

In an earlier work, "Bloomsbury," published in 1968, Quentin confesses to the sin of discretion. "I have omitted a good deal that I know and much more at which I can guess concerning the private lives of the people whom I shall discuss," he writes in his introduction, and loftily continues, "This is, primarily, a study in the history of ideas, and although the *mœurs* of Bloomsbury have to be considered and will in a general way be described, I am not required nor am I inclined to act as Clio's chambermaid, to sniff into commodes or under beds, to open love-letters or to scrutinise diaries." But when he accepted the commission from Leonard of writing Virginia's life, Quentin—obviously aware that the biographer *is* Clio's

"Remember, this is just an experiment."