chambermaid—bowed to biography's lowering imperatives. He wrote of what his mother and his aunt, respectively, called George Duckworth's "delinquencies" and "malefactions," and of Gerald Duckworth's as well: of how during Leslie Stephen's final illness George would come to Virginia's bedroom late at night and fling himself on her bed, "cuddling and kissing and otherwise embracing" her, and of how Gerald (according to an early memory of Virginia's) had stood her on a ledge and, to her lifelong shivering distress, had meddled with her privates. Quentin wrote of an unconsummated but serious (and to his mother seriously wounding) flirtation between Clive and Virginia, which developed during the spring of 1908, when Vanessa was in thrall to her first baby, Julian, and Clive and the still unmarried Virginia would take long walks together to get away from Julian's nappies and screams. (The fastidious Clive "hated mess—the pissing, puking and slobbering of little children distressed him very much; so did their noise," his son writes.) He wrote of Virginia and Leonard's sexual incompatibility. (Like Vanessa, Virginia had initially refused her husband-to-be and, even when she was on the verge of accepting him, had told him of her doubts about "the sexual side of it." She wrote in a letter of May, 1912, "As I told you brutally the other day, I feel no physical attraction in you. There are moments—when you kissed me the other day was one—when I feel no more than a rock.") Quentin quoted a letter from Vanessa to Clive written a few months after the Woolfs' wedding:

> They seemed very happy, but are evidently both a little exercised in their minds on the subject of the Goat's coldness. [Virginia's family nickname was Goat.] Apparently she still gets no pleasure at all from the act, which I think is curious. They were very anxious to know when I first had an orgasm. I couldn't remember. Do you? But no doubt I sympathised with such things if I didn't have them from the time I was 2.

What makes Quentin's biography such a remarkable work—one of the few biographies that overcome the congenital handicaps of the genre—is the force of his personality and the authority of his voice. He is perhaps more a butler than a chambermaid; he is certainly an upper servant. He has been with the family for a great number of years, and he is fiercely, profoundly loyal to it; he knows who are its friends and who its enemies. More important, he knows its members very well. He has carefully studied each of them for years; he has slowly turned their characters over in his mind, knowing their idiosyncrasies and weaknesses. He has been privy to their quarrels—the quarrels by which family life is defined and braced—and he has chosen sides, has discriminated and judged. In making his judgments and discriminations, he has picked up certain habits of mind from the family—habits of mind for which the family is famous—together with a certain tone. "The people I admire most are those who are sensitive and want to create something or discover something, and do not see life in terms of power." This statement, though made by E. M. Forster, might have been made by Quentin (or Vanessa or Virginia or Leonard or Clive or Lytton); it expresses the Bloomsbury ethos and is inflected in the Bloomsbury tone. Forster wrote these words in the essay "What I Believe," in which he also unforgettably said, "If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country," and held up "an aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and the plucky."

Here is how Quentin administers justice to the despicable, power-abusing George Duckworth, who fondled Vanessa as well as Virginia, little thinking that he was earning himself a place in literary history as one of its lowest worms:

> In later years Virginia's and Vanessa's friends were a little astonished at the unkind mockery, the downright virulence with which the sisters referred to their half-brother. He seemed to be a slightly ridiculous but on the whole an inoffensive old buffer, and so, in a sense, he was. His public face was amiable. But to his half-sisters he stood for something horrible and obscene, the final element of foulness in what was already an appalling situation. More than that, he came to pollute the most sacred of springs, to defile their very dreams. A first experience of loving or being loved may be enchanting, desolating, embarrassing or even boring; but it should not be disgusting. Eros came with a commotion of leathern wings, a figure of mawkish incestuous sexuality. Virginia felt that George had spoilt her life before it had fairly begun. Naturally shy in sexual matters, she was from this time terrified back into a posture of frozen and defensive panic.

When Quentin judges his family, when he feels that one of its members hasn't behaved well (George wasn't a true family member), he reproves her (or as a nineteenth-century novelist might prove a heroine (or hero)—as Jane Austen reproves Emma, say, when Emma has been thoughtlessly cruel to Miss Bates. This is the tone Quentin adopts in writing of Virginia's flirtation with Clive. He writes with a kind of loving disapproval, he feels that the whole thing was wrong, because it was hurtful, but he sympathizes—as Jane Austen sympathized—with the impulse to heedlessly amuse oneself. He also sympathizes with Virginia's feeling of being left out of her sister's life after Vanessa's marriage. "She was not in the least in love with Clive," Quentin writes. "In so far as she was in love with anyone she was in love with Vanessa. . . . It was because she loved Vanessa so much that she had to injure her, to enter and in entering to break that charmed circle within which Vanessa and Clive were so happy and by which she was so cruelly excluded, and to have Vanessa for herself again by detaching the husband who, after all, was not worthy of her."

WHAT makes Bloomsbury of such continuing interest to us—why we emit the obligatory groan when the word is uttered but then go out and buy the latest book about Virginia and Vanessa and Leonard and Clive and Lytton and Roger and the rest—is that these people are so alive. The legend of Bloomsbury has taken on the dense complexity of a sprawling nineteenth-century novel, and its characters have become as real to us as the characters in "Emma" and "Daniel Deronda" and "The Eustace Diamonds." Other early-modernist writers and artists, whose talents were at least equal to the Bloomsbury talents (except for Virginia's), recede from view, but the Bloomsbury writers and artists grow ever more biographically prominent. Were their lives really so fascinating, or is it simply because they wrote so well and so incessantly about themselves and one another that we find them so? Well, the latter, of course. No life is more interesting than any other life; everybody's life takes place in the same twenty-four hours of consciousness and sleep; we are all locked into our own subjectivity, and who is to say that the thoughts of a person gazing into the vertiginous depths of a volcano in Sumatra are more objectively interesting than those of a person trying on a dress at Bloomingdale's? The remark-

## CHINESE OCCASIONS

I

Snow piles up against the sunny window.
I burn my joss sticks (a religious notion).
A blue tit tweetles from the patio.
The breeze sets a snowy twig in motion.

II

I am inspired by wind off the Lagan.
I tipple in the Black Mountain's shadow.
I fall into the flowerbed (drink taken),
Soil and sky my eiderdown and pillow.

III

They sip their whiskies on the patio.
Listen to them and what they listen to.
I close the door and open the window.
My friends grow feathers from top to toe.

IV

At the heart of the blue wisteria
A blackbird practices its aria.

—MICHAEL LONGLEY

able collective achievement of the Bloomsbury writers and artists was that they placed in posterity's hands the documents necessary to engage posterity's feeble attention—the letters, memoirs, and journals that reveal inner life and compel the sort of helpless empathy that fiction compels.

Toward the end of "A Sketch of the Past," there is a beautiful and difficult passage about a tendency Virginia has noticed in herself to write about the past in scenes:

> I find that scene-making is my natural way of marking the past. A scene always comes to the top; arranged; representative. This confirms me in my instinctive notion—it is irrational; it will not stand argument—that we are sealed vessels afloat upon what it is convenient to call reality; at some moments, without a reason, without an effort, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality; that is a scene—for they would not survive entire so many ruinous years unless they were made of something permanent; that is a proof of their "reality." Is this liability of mine to scene-receiving the origin of my writing impulse?

At this point, Virginia, like the reader, begins to sense some of the problems with the passage: the confusion between "scene-making" and "scene-receiving" (which is it?) and the wobbliness of the word "reality," which totters from "what it is convenient to call reality" to plain "reality" to " 'reality.' " "These are questions about reality, about scenes and their connection with writing to which I have no answer; nor time to put the question carefully," she writes, and adds, "Perhaps if I should revise and rewrite as I intend, I will make the question more exact; and worry out something by way of answer." Virginia died before she could revise and rewrite the passage, and students of autobiography and biography are still worrying the subject of "reality" versus reality—the made versus the received. But there is no question that the hyper-reality of the famous scenes in the Bloomsbury legend, like those of classical fiction, derives from a common artistic tradition and from certain technologies of storytelling, by which the wrought is made to appear as if it were the received. We call the tradition Realism; the technologies are unnameable.

Virginia wrote "A Sketch of the Past" in spurts, between April, 1939, and November, 1940, as a diversion from a project that was giving her trouble—her biography of Roger Fry, the critic and painter who had introduced Post-Impressionist art to England. After writing the passage about scenes, she put the "Sketch" aside for a month, and when she returned to it she felt constrained to add, "Scenes, I note, seldom illustrate my relation with Vanessa; it has been too deep for 'scenes.' "

Virginia and Vanessa's relationship was deep indeed—perhaps the deepest of all the Bloomsbury relationships. But it was not, in fact, impervious to—"too deep for"—Virginia's scenic imagination. In a letter to Violet Dickinson, for example, she gives this picture of Vanessa a month before her marriage, as she observed her in Bath walking down the street arm in arm with Clive:

> She had a gauze streamer, red as blood flying over her shoulder, a purple scarf, a shooting cap, tweed skirt and great brown boots. Then her hair swept across her forehead, and she was tawny and jubilant and lusty as a young God.

It is the implicit comparison between the watcher and the watched, between the fragile and wistful Virginia and the powerful and sexually magnetic Vanessa, that gives the scene its novelistic shimmer. In Virginia's vision of her sister—it gleams out of her letters and diaries—Vanessa is a Kate Croy or Charlotte Stant to her own Milly Theale or Maggie Verver; she has not only the physical magnificence of James's wonderful "bad" heroines, whose robust beauty and splendid bearing so pointedly contrast with the slouching delicacy of the "good" heroines, but also their double-edged single-mindedness. ("You are much simpler than I am," Virginia wrote to Vanessa in August, 1909. "How do you manage to see only one thing at a time? Without any of those reflections that distract me so much and make people call me bad names? I suppose you are, as Lytton once said, the most complete human being of us all; and your simplicity is really that you take in much more than I do, who intensify atoms.") Although it was Virginia/Milly/Maggie who had wronged Vanessa/Kate/Charlotte in the Clive affair, Virginia never ceased to feel obscurely wronged by her sister; she perpetually compared herself to Vanessa and found herself wanting. In June, 1929, when she and Leonard joined Vanessa and Duncan in the South of France, she wrote in her diary of buying furniture and crockery for her country house in England; although it gave her pleasure, it "set my dander up against Nessa's almost overpowering supremacy. My elder son is coming tomorrow; yes, & he is the most promising young man in

King's; & has been speaking at the Apostles' dinner. All I can oppose that with is, And I made £2,000 out of Orlando & can bring Leonard here & buy a house if I want. To which she replies (in the same inaudible way) I am a failure as a painter compared with you, & can't do more than pay for my models. And so we go on; over the depths of our childhood."

In 1926, after going to a show of Vanessa's paintings, Virginia wrote to her sister, "I am amazed, a little alarmed (for

*Vanessa's lifelong companion, Duncan Grant, and her former lover, Roger Fry, with Angelica, her daughter by Duncan, at Charleston in the twenties.*

as you have the children, the fame by rights belongs to me) by your combination of pure artistic vision and brilliance of imagination." Of course, it is the parenthetical remark that leaps out of the passage. The fame is a poor thing, a devalued second best to the children. Vanessa is always the alarmingly invulnerable big sister, even though Virginia is capable of condescending to her when she feels particularly provoked. "What you miss [in Clive] is inspiration of any kind," she complained to Violet Dickinson, adding, "But then old Nessa is no genius." Vanessa would have been the first to agree; extreme modesty about her intellectual, and even her artistic, attainments was one of her outstanding traits—and perhaps only added to her insufferable superiority in the eyes of her sister. In a memoir called "Reminiscences," addressed to the yet unborn Julian, Virginia shows us Vanessa behaving in girlhood as she would throughout her life: "When she won the prize at her drawing school, she hardly knew, so shy was she, at the recognition of a secret, how to tell me, in order that I might repeat the news at home. 'They've given me the thing—I don't know why.' 'What thing?' 'O they say I've won it—the book—the prize you know.' "

When Vanessa married, it was not she but Virginia and Adrian who were expelled from Gordon Square and had to "forage for some flat somewhere." "Nessa & Clive live, as I think, much like great ladies in a French salon; they have all the wits & the poets; & Nessa sits among them like a

*The sitting room at Charleston.*

LEFT: TATE GALLERY ARCHIVE; RIGHT: DERRY MOORE

*essa and Duncan's ubiquitous decorations extend the sense of the house as a place of incessant, calm productivity.*

*Duncan at Charleston in 1930; his 1919 portrait of Vanessa; Vanessa in her garden. Her letters suggest that the terms of his companionship*

Goddess," Virginia wrote at about the time she and Adrian gave a party at Fitzroy Square whose high point was the dog being sick on the carpet. When Virginia accepted Leonard, it may have been, as Quentin characterizes it, "the wisest decision of her life," but it did not sweep her up and elevate her to the domestic rank of her sister. Vanessa's household remained the principal residence of the Bloomsbury court, and Virginia's was always secondary, an annex. In view of the fact that the Woolf marriage was a strong and lasting one, and the Bell marriage fell apart after only a few years, it is curious that this was so. But it was so. There was always something a little forlorn and tentative about Virginia and Leonard's household. There were, of course, the bouts of mental illness that Virginia suffered and Leonard nursed her through, which could not but leave in the air of the house their residue of tension and fear. But there was also the fact that Vanessa was a born chatelaine and Virginia was not. Virginia couldn't buy a penwiper without enduring agonies of indecision. As a result, though it is Virginia's literary achievement that has given Bloomsbury its place in cultural history, it is Vanessa's house that has become Bloomsbury's shrine.

CHARLESTON FARMHOUSE, in Sussex, which Vanessa began to rent in 1916 as a country retreat, and where she and Duncan and (sometimes) Clive lived together for extended periods, was restored in the nineteen-eighties and opened to the public. In twentieth-century art, Vanessa and Duncan occupy a minor niche, but their decorations within the farmhouse, painted on door panels, fireplaces, windows, walls, and furniture, convinced some of the keepers of the Bloomsbury flame that the place should be preserved after the death of the ménage's last surviving member—Duncan—in 1978. A trust was formed, money was raised, and the place is now a museum, complete with a gift shop, teas, lectures, a twice-yearly magazine, and a summer-study program. Without the decorations, it is doubtful whether the house would have been preserved. Because of them, the legend of Bloomsbury has a site: readers of the novel of Bloomsbury need no longer merely imagine; they can now actually enter the rooms where some of the most dramatic scenes took place, can look out of the windows the characters looked out of, can tread on the carpets they trod on and stroll in the garden they strolled in. It is as if Mansfield Park itself had been opened up to us as an accompaniment to our reading of the novel.

I visited Charleston last December on an extremely cold, gray day, and immediately felt its Chekhovian beauty and sadness. The place has been preserved in its worn and faded and stained actuality. It is an artist's house, a house wher

*were rather hard, and that she was sometimes desperate about how to maintain her equilibrium in the face of them.*

LEFT: HULTON DEUTSCH; CENTER: COURTESY OF ANTHONY D'OFFAY GALLERY; RIGHT: TATE GALLERY ARCHIVE; DUNCAN GRANT PAINTINGS THROUGHOUT © ESTATE OF DUNCAN GRANT 1978, COURTESY OF HENRIETTA GARNETT

eye has looked into every corner and hovered over every surface, considering what will please it to look at every day—an eye that has been educated by Paris ateliers and villas in the South of France and is not gladdened by English prettiness. But it is also the house of an Englishwoman (an Englishwoman who on arriving at her rented house in St. Tropez in 1921 wrote to Maynard Keynes in London to ask him to send a dozen packages of oatmeal, ten seven-pound tins of marmalade, four pounds of tea, and "some potted meat")—a house where sagging armchairs covered with drooping slipcovers of faded print fabric are tolerated, and where even a certain faint dirtiness is cultivated. In a letter to Roger Fry about a house belonging to the American painters Ethel Sands and Nan Hudson (who had commissioned Vanessa and Duncan to decorate its loggia), Vanessa mocked the "rarefaction" and "spotless order" of the place. "Nan makes muslin covers to receive the flies' excrements (I don't believe Nan and Ethel have any—they never go to the W.), everything has yards and yards of fresh muslin and lace and silk festooned on it and all seems to be washed and ironed in the night," she wrote, and sighed for "a breath from one's home dirt." Vanessa's houses were never rarefied or dainty, but neither were they an artless congeries of possessions, which was what she coldly judged Ottoline Morrell's Garsington to be: "To me it seems simply a collection of objects she likes put together with enormous energy but not made into anything."

Making things—visual or literary—was Bloomsbury's dominating passion. It was also, in a paradoxical way, its link to the nineteenth-century past that it was at such pains to repudiate. In their compulsive work habits, the Bloomsbury modernists were behaving exactly as their Victorian parents and grandparents had behaved. There is a moment in Virginia's "Reminiscences" that goes by so fast we may not immediately grasp what it has let drop about the iron hold that the work ethic had on the nineteenth-century mind. Writing of the excesses of grief to which Leslie Stephen was driven by the sudden death of Julia—"There was something in the darkened rooms, the groans, the passionate lamentations that passed the normal limits of sorrow. . . . He was like one who, by the failure of some stay, reels staggering blindly about the world, and fills it with his woe"—Virginia pauses to recall Stella's strenuous efforts to distract the grief-crazed widower: "All her diplomacy was needed to keep him occupied in some way, when his morning's work was over." *When his morning's work was over.* Sir Leslie may have been staggering blindly about the world, but the world would have had to come to an end before he missed a morning at his writing table. Even when he was dying of bowel cancer, he continued to produce startling