quantities of prose daily. Leonard, in the fourth volume of his autobiography, spells out what for Virginia went without saying: "We should have felt it to be not merely wrong but unpleasant not to work every morning for seven days a week and for about eleven months a year. Every morning, therefore, at about 9:30 after breakfast each of us, as if moved by a law of unquestioned nature, went off and 'worked' until lunch at 1. It is surprising how much one can produce in a year, whether of buns or books or pots or pictures, if one works hard and professionally for three and a half hours every day for 330 days. That was why, despite her disabilities, Virginia was able to produce so much." (In Volume V, lest any reader suppose that Leonard and Virginia spent the rest of the day in effete pleasure, he points out that with reviewing, reading for reviewing, and, in Virginia's case, thinking about work in progress or future work—and, in his own case, running the Hogarth Press and serving on political committees—they actually worked ten or twelve hours a day.)

At Charleston, from which other spirits have fled and can now be conjured only by letters and diaries, the spirit of industry remains a felt presence. If the place is Chekhovian—as perhaps all country houses situated in precariously unspoiled country, with walled gardens and fruit trees and not enough bathrooms, are—it is not of Chekhovian idleness and theatricality that it speaks but, rather, of the values by which Chekhov's "good" characters are ruled: patient, habitual work and sensible, calm behavior. (Chekhov was a kind of Bloomsburian himself.) Charleston is dominated by its workplaces—its studios and studies and the bedrooms to which guests retired to write. The communal rooms were only two in number—the living room (called the garden room) and the dining room—and were modest in size. They were not the house's hearth. That title belonged to the huge ground-floor studio, where for many years Vanessa and Duncan painted side by side, every day. (In Vanessa's later years, she worked in a new studio, in the attic; after her death, Duncan, who stayed on in the house, gradually made the downstairs studio his living quarters.)

The ubiquitous decorations only extend our sense of Charleston as a place of incessant, calm productivity. They give the house its unique appearance, but they do not impose upon it. They belong to the world of high art and design, the world of Post-Impressionist painting and early-modernist design, and yet, quite mysteriously, they are of a piece with the English farmhouse that contains them and with the English countryside that enters each room through large, old-fashioned windows. During my tour of the house, I was drawn to the windows as if by a tropism. Today, we come to the house to see the decorations and the paintings that Clive and Vanessa and Duncan collected as well as the ones that Vanessa and Duncan produced; but what Clive and Vanessa and Duncan looked at when they entered a room was the walled garden and a willow and the pond and the fields beyond, and as I looked out of the windows they had looked out of I felt their presence even more strongly than I had when examining their handiwork and their possessions. I visited the house on a day when it was closed to the public, in the company of Christopher Naylor, then the director of the Charleston Trust, who was at least as well acquainted with the novel of Bloomsbury as I was, and who called its characters by their first names, as I have done here—biographical research leads to a kind of insufferable familiarity. After the tour—which rang with "Christopher"s and "Janet"s as well as with "Clive"s and "Duncan"s and "Maynard"s—my guide tactfully withdrew to allow me to commune alone with the ghosts of the house and to take notes on the decorations. Taking notes proved impossible: after an hour in the unheated house I could no longer move my fingers.

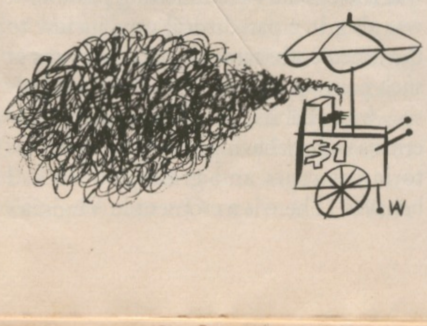
The cold brought my thoughts to the winter of 1918-19, when Vanessa was in the house with Duncan and his boyfriend David Garnett—known as Bunny—and Julian and Quentin and her newborn baby by Duncan, Angelica. Much water had gone over the dam since Clive and Vanessa married and lived like great ladies in Gordon Square. Their marriage had effectively ended in 1914. Clive had reverted to his old ways of philandering; Vanessa had fallen in love Roger and had had an affair with him which ended when she fell in love with Duncan. The war had brought Vanessa and Duncan and Bunny to Charleston. Duncan and Bunny, who were conscientious objectors, maintained their status by doing farmwork. Their first employment was restoring an old orchard, but when the military board required more seriously unpleasant farmwork Vanessa rented Charleston, so that Duncan and Bunny could work on an adjoining farm. Although Duncan was passionately in love with Bunny, he sometimes graciously consented to sleep with Vanessa when Bunny was away. Frances Spalding, in her biography of Vanessa, published in 1983, quotes a rather awful entry in Duncan's diary of 1918, written during a five-day absence of Bunny's:

> I copulated on Saturday with her with great satisfaction to myself physically. It is a convenient way, the females, of letting off one's spunk and comfortable. Also the pleasure it gives is reassuring. You don't get this dumb misunderstanding body of a person who isn't a bugger. That's one for you Bunny!

Thus Angelica. She was born on Christmas Day of 1918, and in her first weeks she almost joined Julia and Stella and Thoby as a casualty of disastrously incompetent doctoring; the intervention of a new doctor saved her life. (Five years later, Virginia, writing in her diary of another near miss—Angelica had been knocked down by a car in London—described the terrible scene in a hospital ward with Vanessa and Duncan when it appeared certain that "death & tragedy had once more put down his paw, after letting us run a few paces." Angelica turned out to be unharmed: "It was only a joke this time.")

After his appearance at Angelica's cradleside, "the great cat" retreated, and Vanessa was allowed almost twenty more years of the happiness she had willed into being when she left Hyde Park Gate and painted the walls of 46 Gordon Square with distemper. "How much I admire this handling of life as if it were a thing one could throw about; this handling of circumstances," her sister wrote about her, and "How masterfully she controls her dozen lives; never in a muddle, or desperate or worried; never spending a pound or a thought needlessly; yet with it all free, careless, airy, indifferent."

The man Vanessa had chosen to be her life's partner is still a veiled character; our understanding of Duncan must await



…ances Spalding's biography, now in preparation. He seems to have been extremely good-looking and charming and disarming, as well as eccentrically vague, and perhaps somewhat selfish. He was six years younger than Vanessa, but she deferred to him as an artist; she considered herself several steps behind him. (This judgment was reflected in their relative positions in the British art world at the time; today, there seems less of a gap between their achievements.) He was one of the Bloomsbury aristocrats (he was Lytton's cousin), as Bunny Garnett, for example, was not. Bunny went straight—or reverted to being straight—soon after Angelica's birth. Duncan transferred his affections to another man, and to others after him, but he permanently remained Vanessa's companion, and she gamely accepted the terms of his companionship. (From her letters to Duncan we may gather that these terms were rather hard ones, and that she *was* sometimes in a muddle and desperate and worried about how to maintain her equilibrium in the face of them.) Her relationship with Clive, meanwhile, was friendly and intimate, a sort of unsinister version of the relationship between the former lovers of "Les Liaisons Dangereuses."

"Would you guys like to come over for a while? Frank can't turn off his motor."

Vanessa's remarkable domestic arrangement seems almost an inevitability: what could be a better riposte to Victorian hypocrisy and dreariness than a husband who brought his mistresses around for amused inspection and a lover who was gay? By any standard, the Bell-Grant household was the strange one, and in the nineteen-twenties there were still plenty of people who could find it excitingly scandalous. One of them was Madge Vaughan, an old family friend, ten years older than Vanessa, who was the daughter of John Addington Symonds. (Symonds, as it happens, was one of the biggest closet queens of the Victorian age, a fact that came out only years after his and Madge's deaths.) In March, 1920, Vanessa received a letter from Madge that made her, she said, "half amused and half furious." The letter was written from Charleston, where Madge, in Vanessa's absence, was staying briefly while deciding whether or not to rent the place for a long family holiday. "I love you & I am *faithful* to old friends," Madge wrote, and she went on:

> I have set my back against slander and chatter and fought your battles always through the years. But I love, with increasing passion, *Goodness, purity* and *homeliness & the hearts of little children are the holiest things I know on earth.* And a question gnaws at my poor heart here in this house.
>
> It came stabbing my heart that day when I saw Angelica. I would like to meet you as a woman friend face to face at some *quiet place* and to *talk it out.* I don't feel I *could* come and live here with Will and the children unless I had done this.

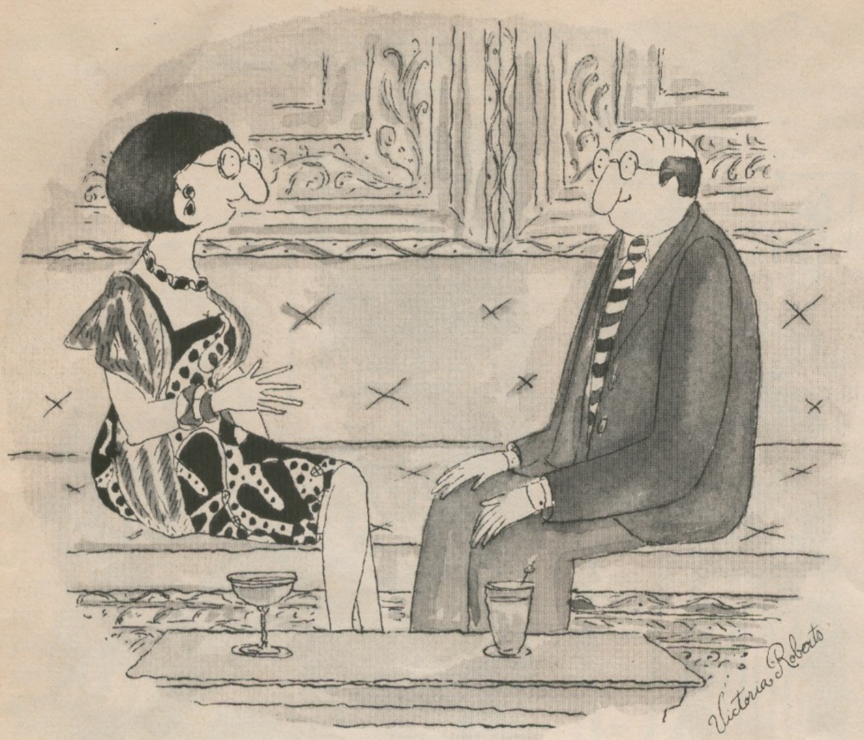
Vanessa replied to this piece of flowery piety in prose as crushingly simple and elegant as the black velvet gown Anna Karenina wore to the fateful opening ball:

> Why on earth should my moral character have anything to do with the question of your taking Charleston or not? I suppose you don't always enquire into your landlords' characters. However, take it or not as you like. . . .
>
> As for the gossip about me, as to which of course I have not been left in ignorance, I must admit that it seems to me almost incredibly impertinent of you to ask me to satisfy your curiosity about it. I cannot conceive why you think it any business of yours. I am absolutely indifferent to anything the world may say about me, my husband or my children. The only people whose opinion can affect one, the working classes, luckily have the sense for the most part to realise that they can know nothing of one's private life and do not allow their speculations about what one does to interfere with their judgment as to what one is. The middle and upper classes are not so sensible. It does not matter as they have no power over one's life.

In her reply, poor Madge put her foot in it even further by saying she had not wanted to pry, oh, no—"I am too saddened by contact with mean, sometimes cruel & inquisitive minds to entertain any sort of mere idle 'curiosity' myself"—but had written only from the Purest of Motives, "*out of a sort of passionate longing to help those I love.*"

Vanessa, roused to even greater heights of weary contempt, replied:

> You say you offered me help, but surely that is not a true account of your motives, for had I shown any slightest sign of wishing for help or needing it? And did not you wish to talk to me really so that you might know what sort of person I was to whose house you proposed to take your children?
>
> That at any rate was the reason you seemed to give me for writing.
>
> Nor was there even the excuse that Clive and I were known to be on bad terms with each other. In that case (though I should probably not desire it) I could understand an old friend's interference.
>
> But whatever the gossip about us may be, you must know that we see each other and are to



"I'm in my other handbag."

• •

> all appearance friendly, so it should I think be assumed that we are in agreement on those matters which concern our intimate lives. You say you tell Will everything, although your married life has been full of restraints. What reason is there to think that I do not tell Clive everything? It is perhaps because we neither of us think much of the world's will or opinion, or that a "conventional home" is necessarily a happy or good one, that my married life has not been full of restraints but, on the contrary, full of ease, freedom and complete confidence. Perhaps the peace and strength you talk of can come in other ways than by yielding to the will of the world. It seems to me at any rate rash to assume that it can't, or in fact that there is ever any reason to think that those who force themselves to lead lives according to convention or the will of others are more likely to be "good" (by which I mean to have good or noble feelings) than those who decide to live as seems to them best regardless of other standards.

Vanessa writes wonderfully not only when she is eating someone alive, like Madge Vaughan, but throughout the volume of her letters. "You have a touch in letter-writing that is beyond me. Something unexpected, like coming round a corner in a rose garden and finding it still daylight," Virginia wrote her in August, 1908, and the description is right. About her own letters Virginia wrote, "I am either too formal, or too feverish," and she is right there, too. Virginia was the great novelist, but Vanessa was the natural letter writer; she had a gift for letter writing just as she had for making houses beautiful and agreeable. Virginia's letters have passages that surpass anything Vanessa could have written—set pieces that shimmer with her febrile genius—but they lack the ease and unself-consciousness (the qualities on which the epistolary genre draws for its life as a literary genre) by which Vanessa's are consistently marked.

Regina Marler, with her selections, has created a kind of novel-in-letters counterpart of Frances Spalding's sympathetic biography. Each letter illustrates a facet of Vanessa's character and advances the plot of her life. Her relationships with Virginia, Clive, Roger, Duncan, and Julian—the novel-in-letters' other main characters—are revealed in moving fullness. The death of Julian, at the age of twenty-nine, in the Spanish Civil War, is the dreadful event toward which the plot inexorably moves. On July 18, 1937, during the battle of Brunete, he was hit by shrapnel and died of his wounds. Reading Vanessa's letters to him in the two years before his death in the knowledge of what is coming is almost unbearable. In a letter written to him in China, where he was teaching, she writes, "Oh Julian, I can never express what happiness you've given me in my life. I often wonder how such luck has fallen my w Just having children seemed such incredible delight, but that they should care for me as you make me feel you do, is something beyond all dreaming of—or even wanting. I never expected it or hoped for it, for it seemed enough to care so much oneself." A year later, when he has begun to make plans to go to Spain, she writes, "I woke . . . from an awful nightmare about you, thinking you were dead, and waking saying 'Oh, if only it could all be a dream.' " In July, 1937, when, in spite of her anguished arguments, he has gone to Spain, she writes a long witty letter about gatherings at Charleston and in London attended by, among others, Leonard, Virginia, Quentin, Angelica, T. S. Eliot, and Henri Matisse, and also by James, Dorothy, Pippa, Jane, and Pernel Strachey ("There was slightly overwhelming Strachey atmosphere"), and holds up as "extraordinarily sane and unanswerable" an article by Maynard in *The New Statesman* replying to Auden's poem "Spain" and asserting the primacy of "the claims of Peace." Reading the next letter in the book, dated August 11th, to Ottoline Morrell, *is* unbearable:

> Dearest Ottoline,
>
> I was grateful for your little note. You will forgive me for not writing sooner. I am only beginning to be able to write any letters, but I wanted to thank you.
>
> Do you remember when we first knew each other telling me of your sorrow when your baby son died—I have never forgotten it.
>
> Yours, Vanessa

In another short letter, written five days later, Vanessa acknowledges a condolence from Vita Sackville-West (her sister's former lover) and says, "I cannot ever say how Virginia has helped me. Perhaps some day, not now, you will be able to tell her it's true." After Virginia's suicide, in March, 1941, Vanessa wrote to Vita again, and came back to her letter of August, 1937. "I remember sending that message by you. I think I had a sort of feeling that it would have more effect if you gave it and I expect I was right. How glad I am you gave it. I remember all those days after I heard about Julian lying in an unreal state and hearing her voice going on and on keeping life going as it seemed when otherwise it would have stopped, and late every day she came to see me here, the only point in the day one could want to come." Virginia noted in her diary in September, 1937, "Nessa's little message: to me so profoundly touch-

..., thus sent secretly via Vita that I have ...elped' her more than she can say." The reversal of roles—Virginia now the strong dispenser of comfort and stability to the pitifully broken Vanessa—is one of the most beautiful and interesting moments in the Bloomsbury novel. Vanessa's inability to tell Virginia directly of her love and gratitude is a measure of the depth of her reserve, the quality that gave her character its immense authority and her household its improbable peacefulness, which strangers sometimes mistook for hauteur, and her sister—emotional, wildly imaginative—for indifference.

"I thought when Roger died that I was unhappy," the devastated Vanessa said to Virginia after Julian's death. Vanessa's affair with Roger had begun in 1911 and had painfully (for him) ended in 1913, but, like Clive, Roger remained in Vanessa's orbit and continued to function in her life as one of its fundamental structures. As well as a lover, he had been a mentor and a decisive artistic influence. His Post-Impressionist show of 1910 had introduced the then difficult art of Cézanne, Gauguin, van Gogh, Picasso, and Matisse, among others, to an obligingly derisive English public. ("The exhibition is either an extremely bad joke or a swindle," Wilfrid Blunt wrote in his diary. "The drawing is on the level of that of an untaught child of seven or eight years old, the sense of colour that of a tea-tray painter, the method that of a schoolboy who wipes his fingers on a slate after spitting on them.") Perhaps the most remarkable of Vanessa's letters to Roger is one she wrote in November, 1918 (from Charleston, in the last month of her pregnancy with Angelica), recalling "that first part of our affair," which was

> one of the most exciting times of my life, for apart from the new excitement about painting, finding for the first time someone whose opinion one cared for, who sympathised with and encouraged one, you know I really was in love with you and felt very intimate with you, and it is one of the most exciting things one can do to get to know another person really well. One can only do so, I think, if one's in love with them, even though it may be true that one's also then deluded about them—as I daresay you *were* about me. But I really loved and admired your character and I still do and I expect that having been in love with you will always make me have a different feeling about you from what I could have had otherwise, in spite of all the difficulties that have happened since.

Roger's death, in 1934, of a heart attack after a fall, is almost as afflicting as Julian's; Lytton's, in 1932, of stomach cancer, is scarcely less so. Vanessa's letters make us care about these long-dead real people in the way novelists make us care about their newly minted imaginary characters. We weep unashamedly when we read Vanessa's letters reaching out to Dora Carrington, the woman who had been hopelessly in love with Lytton, as Vanessa was in love with Duncan, and to Helen Anrep, who had become Roger's companion after he got over Vanessa. Why do books of letters move us as biographies do not? When we are reading a book of letters, we understand the impulse to write biographies, we feel the intoxication the biographer feels in working with primary sources, the rapture of firsthand encounters with another's lived experience. But this intoxication, this rapture, does not carry over into the text of the biography; it dies on the way. Here, for example, is Virginia writing to Lytton from Cornwall in April, 1908:

> Then Nessa and Clive and the Baby and the Nurse all came, and we have been so domestic that I have not read, or wrote. . . . A child is the very devil—calling out, as I believe, all the worst and least explicable passions of the parents—and the Aunts. When we talk of marriage, friendship or prose, we are suddenly held up by Nessa, who has heard a cry, and then we must all distinguish whether it is Julian's cry, or the cry of the 2 year old, who has an abscess, and uses therefore a different scale.

And here is Frances Spalding:

> If Clive was irritated and frustrated, Virginia was experiencing a more agonizing sense of real loss. In Cornwall both were infuriated by Vanessa's habit of interrupting the conversation in order to discern whether it was Julian or the landlady's two-year-old who was crying. The caterwauling increased their discomfort.

Or Vanessa writing to Clive on October 12, 1921:

> Our arrival in Paris was thrilling. You will be sorry you missed Quentin's first sight of Paris. He and I stood in the corridor to see it and he told me he was most anxious to see what it was like as he expected to live there some day. He was wild with excitement, taking in everything with eyes staring out of his head, especially as we crossed the Seine, which did look most lovely. He thought all the colours so different from England, though it was dark and there was not much to be seen but coloured lights.

And Spalding:

> On the journey out her chief pleasure lay in watching her son's response to all that they saw. As the train approached Paris she stood in the corridor with Quentin awaiting the first sight of the city for, as he told her in his most ceremonious manner, he was most anxious to see it as he expected to live there one day.

There is nothing wrong with what Spalding has written in these extracts. They illustrate normal biographical method. The genre (like its progenitor, history) functions as a kind of processing plant where experience is converted into information the way fresh produce is converted into canned vegetables. But, like canned vegetables, biographical narratives are so far removed from their source—so altered from the plant with soil clinging to its roots that is a letter or a diary entry—that they carry little conviction. When Virginia complains to Lytton (another high-strung, single, childless intellectual) about what a nuisance the baby is, her voice carries great conviction, and so does Vanessa's when she proudly exclaims over her young son's aestheticism to his aesthete father. When Spalding writes, "In Cornwall both were infuriated," and "On the journey out her chief pleasure lay," we do not quite believe her. Taken from its living context, and with its blood drained out of it, the "information" of biography is a shrivelled, spurious thing. The canniest biographers, aware of the problem, rush massive transfusions of quotation to the scene. The biographies that give the greatest illusion of life, the fullest sense of their subject, are those which quote the most. Spalding's biography is one of these, as is Quentin's—though Quentin, in any case, is exempt from the above criticisms, because his nephew's and son's voice carries the authority that no stranger-biographer's voice can. His acute critical intelligence is always being inflected by a fond familial feeling; this does not so much blunt his judgments as give them a kind of benign finality. (When Virginia once characterized an affectionate letter of Quentin's mother as "exquisitely soft and just, like the fall of a cat's paw," she could have been describing her nephew's biography.)

THE judgments of Quentin's half sister Angelica have a rather different atmosphere. Angelica appears in Vanessa's letters and Virginia's diaries as a radiant, impish child, and then as a beautiful, piquant young woman—a kind of crown of Vanessa's maternal achievement, the lovely flower who provided the "feminine element" (as Vanessa termed it) that the family required to reach its final perfection. But in her book, "Deceived with Kindness" (1984), Angelica, now a rather defeated older woman, comes forward to correct our admiring vision of Vanessa and to bring the Bloomsbury legend into line with our blaming and self-pitying times. Angelica is a kind of reincarnation of Madge Vaughan; what Madge adumbrated in her piously accusing letters to Vanessa, Angelica elaborates in her angry and aggrieved book about Vanessa. Madge felt that she could not bring her husband and children to live in a house of such irregularity; Angelica confirms her misgivings. Bloomsbury bohemianism was evidently lost on its youngest heir, who never felt at ease in her family, and would have infinitely preferred to grow up in a household like Madge's, where the children came first and you were unlikely to one day discover that your mother's lover was your real father. The relationship of Duncan and Vanessa—regarded by Spalding and other Bloomsbury aficionados as a testament to Vanessa's magisterial free-spiritedness and as an extraordinarily fruitful artistic union—is regarded by Angelica as simply disreputable and pathological. ("There must have been a strong element of masochism in her love for him, which induced her to accept a situation which did permanent harm to her self-respect. . . . She gained companionship with a man she loved on terms unworthy of her whole self.") In 1917, Roger wrote to Vanessa, "You have done such an extraordinarily difficult thing without any fuss, but thro' all the conventions kept friends with a pernickety creature like Clive, got quit of me and yet kept me your devoted friend, got all the things you need for your own development and yet managed to be a splendid mother. . . . You have genius in your life as well as in your art and both are rare things." Angelica denies that Vanessa was a splendid mother, and believes that Vanessa's life was a shambles. Her book introduces into the Bloomsbury legend a most jarring shift in perspective. Until the publication of "Deceived with Kindness" that was the legend had a smooth, unbroken surface. Efforts from the outside to penetrate it—I think of books like Louise DeSalvo's "Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work" (1989) and Roger Poole's less crude but almost as dark and accusing "The Unknown Virginia Woolf" (1978)—succeeded no better than did Madge's and other interfering busybodies' attempts to "help" where no help had been requested.

But Angelica's attack from within is something else. It is a primary document; it cannot be pushed aside, unpleasant and distasteful though it is to see a minor character arise from her corner and proceed to put herself in the center of a rather marvellous story that now threatens to become ugly. An unhappy Quentin attempted to do a little damage control in a review of "Deceived with Kindness" that was first published in *Books and Bookmen* and then in the Charleston *Newsletter*. Treading carefully ("Ought a brother to review his sister's book? Certainly it is an awkward undertaking, made all the more awkward when, as in the present instance, one cannot but express admiration") but firmly ("To say that this is an honest narrative is not to say that it is accurate"), Quentin tries to correct the correction and restore the Bloomsbury story to its old dignity and high style. Occasionally, his irritation with his irritating little sister gets the better of his tact, as when he notes, "My sister was the only young person I then [in the thirties] knew who seemed to take not the slightest interest in politics." He goes on:

> The non-political person must of necessity see the world in terms of personality and individual responsibility, hence of praise or blame. The impersonality of politics which Angelica saw as something inhuman can also lead to milder moral judgements. . . . I was sorry for my sister coming as she did to her majority just as the last hopes of peace in Europe vanished, [but] she, as these pages show, had quite other misfortunes to preoccupy her mind.

More than anything else, it is the tone of Angelica's book that sets it apart from other Bloomsbury texts. The note of irony—perhaps because it resounded too insistently in her ears when she was growing up—is entirely absent from her text, an absence that brings into relief Bloomsbury's characteristic obliqueness. Virginia, writing of sorrows at least as afflicting as Angelica's, never allows her stoicism to falter, and rarely fails to hang on to some shred of her natural gaiety. Her niece writes under the inspiration of different spirits. When Angelica says that Vanessa

> never realised that, by denying me my real father she was treating me even before my birth as an object, and not as a human being. No wonder she always felt guilt and I resentment, even though I did not understand the true reason for it; no wonder too that she tried to make it up to me by spoiling me, and in so doin
> inhibited me. As a result I was emotion
> incapacitated

we withhold our sympathy—as we withheld it from Madge Vaughan—not because her grievance is without merit but because her language is without force. As Madge cloaked and muffled the complexity and legitimacy of her fears for her children in the ornate pieties of the Victorian period (which she had brought with her into the nineteen-twenties), so Angelica cloaks and muffles the complexity and legitimacy of her fury at her mother in the streamlined truisms of the age of mental health.

The man Angelica married (and separated from after many unhappy years) was—the reader who doesn't already know this will fall out of his chair—Bunny Garnett. On the day Angelica was born, Bunny, who was then ensconced at Charleston as Duncan's lover, wrote to Lytton about the new baby, "Its beauty is the remarkable thing about it. I think of marrying it; when she is twenty I shall be 46—will it be scandalous?" That Bunny's prophecy should have come true is a twist that seems to belong to another plot, but that Bunny and Angelica gravitated toward each other is not so remarkable. Like Angelica, Bunny never really belonged among the Bloomsbury aristocrats. Vanessa put up with him because of Duncan; Lytton and Virginia jeered at his (now hopelessly dated) novels. (In her diary for 1925, Virginia quotes Lytton on Bunny's latest work: "Really it's very extraordinary—so arty,—so composed—the competence terrific, but . . . well, it's like a perfectly restored Inn—Ye Olde Cocke and Balls, everything tidied up & restored.") Bunny's three-volume autobiography is permeated with complacency and an air of bogusness. Every literary society has its Bunny, it seems; so often the least talented member comes forward as its noisiest, and most knowing, self-appointed and self-important spokesman.

In what I have written, in separating my Austenian heroines and heroes from my Gogolian flat characters, I have, like every other biographer, conveniently forgotten that I am not writing a novel, and that it really isn't for me to say who is good and who is bad, who is noble and who is faintly ridiculous. Life is infinitely less orderly and more bafflingly ambiguous than any novel, and if we pause to re-

CHINESE OBJECTS

I

The length of white silk I selected
Immaculate as the crust on snow
Was cut in the shape of happiness,
Round as the moon in starry skies.
In and out of her sleeve it slides
Rustling up its own cool weather.
I worry that when autumn comes
And blows away this heat wave
She will toss the fan into a box,
Halfway through our love affair.

II

When the water gourd that dangles
Light as a single leaf from the tree
Goes clickety-clack in the breeze
So that bed sounds and lovemaking
Get into my dream, in my dream
I throw it away, for the world
Is not so big, the gourd so small:
They are objects outside my body
That get in the way of sleep.

—MICHAEL LONGLEY

member that Madge and Bunny, and even George and Gerald Duckworth, were actual, multidimensional individuals, whose parents loved them and whose lives were of inestimable preciousness to themselves, we have to face the problem that every biographer faces and none can solve; namely, that he is standing in quicksand as he writes. There is no floor under his enterprise, no basis for moral certainty. Every character in a biography contains within himself or herself the potential for a reverse image. The finding of a new cache of letters, the stepping forward of a new witness, the coming into fashion of a new ideology—all these events, and particularly the last one, can destabilize any biographical configuration, overturn any biographical consensus, transform any good character into a bad one, and vice versa. The manuscript of "Deceived with Kindness" was made available to Frances Spalding during the writing of her biography of Vanessa, and though she does not ignore it, she chooses not to allow it to sour her affectionate portrait. Another biographer might have made—as a subsequent biographer may well make—a different choice. The distinguished dead are clay in the hands of writers, and chance determines the shapes that their actions and characters assume in the books written about them.

AFTER my inspection of the Charleston house, a walk in the walled garden (which somehow seemed warmer than the icy house), and a visit to the gift shop, I rejoined Christopher Naylor and, as had been arranged, we drove off for tea with Anne Olivier Bell, Quentin's wife, who is known as Olivier. Quentin would not be at tea, Christopher told me; he was frail and napped in the afternoon. The couple live in a house a mile away, which, like Charleston, is on a huge estate belonging to a Lord Gage, who has managed to hang on to his property (is this why one thinks of "The Cherry Orchard" while at Charleston?) and is one of the supporters of the Charleston Trust. When we arrived at the Bell house, at about four-thirty, it was already dark. Olivier ushered us into a large, warm room, with a kitchen at one end and, at the other, a fireplace in which a fire was robustly burning. A long wooden table stood in front of the fire. Olivier is a tall, vigorous woman in her late seventies, with an appealing shy friendliness. One is immediately drawn to her warmth and naturalness, her sensible and matter-of-fact manner, her extreme niceness. She put a kettle on the hob and then showed me (as if this were what her visitors expected) various paintings by Bloomsbury artists. One was a large portrait of Vanessa in a red evening dress with one arm raised voluptuously over her head, painted by Duncan in 1915, and another was Vanessa's portrait of Quentin as a little boy of eight, looking up in the act of writing in a notebook. Neither of these paintings nor any of the others was hung to advantage: the portrait of Vanessa was in a hallway at the bottom of a staircase, on a wall too small for it, and the portrait of Quentin, though not quite so badly placed, was not right, either. In "Deceived with Kindness" Angelica bitterly writes of how "appearances of a purely aesthetic kind were considered of supreme importance" at Charleston ("Hours were spent hanging an old picture in a new place, or in choosing a new colour for the walls"), while she herself was allowed to go out into the world unbrushed and unwashed. Quentin and Olivier's house was entirely without the aestheticism of Charleston. It was comfortable, pleasant, and inviting but aesthetically unremarkable: this was not where their interests lay. Vanessa's dining-room table at Charleston was round, and she had painted a design on it in yellow, gray, and pink evocative of the covers she did for Virginia's Hogarth Press books, which for some readers are inextricably bound up with the experience of reading Virginia's novels and essays. Quentin and Olivier's table was plain scrubbed wood. Olivier served tea at this table in large earthenware mugs, made by Quentin, who, in addition to writing, painting, and teaching, is a potter.

We heard some thumping overhead, and Olivier said, "That's Quentin," and he presently appeared—drawn by curiosity, perhaps. He is a tall man with white hair and a white beard, and he was wearing an artist's smock the color of his blue eyes, which looked at one with a direct, calm gaze. He walked with a cane, with some difficulty. Like Olivier, Quentin immediately pulled one into his orbit of decency, sanity, wholesomeness, fineness. He had a bit of an aura. I asked him what he had thought of Angelica's book. He laughed, and said he had been irritated by Angelica's telling stories he would have wanted to tell himself and getting them