THE SYBIL OF THE DRAWING ROOM: VIRGINIA WOOLF IN OLD BLOOMSBURY

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"To begin with, admire our new address".[1] So wrote Virginia Woolf on the eve of her move into a new house where she was soon to discover - and enjoy - a different and decidedly new way of life. This conference attests to the fact that there is still much to admire and indeed to celebrate in Virginia Woolf's new address, 46 Gordon Square, and in the new era it inaugurated in her personal and her professional life as a writer. Her arrival retrospectively came to mark the cultural ascendancy of Bloomsbury not just as a London neighborhood, but as a mode of living - irregular, informal, experimental - and a mode of thinking and writing about the world - candid, irreverent, artful and sometimes pointedly arch, in a word modern. Historically Bloomsbury as a social grouping of artistic talents and attitudes begins to form in that decisive year, 1904-1905, when Virginia and Vanessa Stephen moved into 46 Gordon Square and Thoby began his famous Thursday evenings, during which, amid now legendary conversation, the Bloomsbury group began to congregate, coalesce and consolidate itself.[2] Modernist Bloomsbury emerged with such astonishing rapidity that when Woolf came to write about these first exciting years a little less than two decades later, she already felt obliged to refer to that earlier time as "Old Bloomsbury".

But however admiringly, even reverentially we might regard Woolf's relocation from the sedate Victorian confines of 22 Hyde Park Gate to the bustling modern precincts of 46 Gordon Square, we should not overlook her own initial misgivings about that momentous move. At first, the prospect of leaving 22 Hyde Park Gate for Bloomsbury did not appear cheering or even dimly inviting. "We have been tramping Bloomsbury this afternoon with Beatrice," she writes to Violet Dickinson in December of 1903, "and staring up at dingy houses. There are lots to be had - but Lord how dreary! It seems so far away, and so cold and gloomy - but that was due to the dark and the cold I expect. Really we shall

never like a house so well as this, but it is better to go".[3] These initial qualms were understandable, given the recent death of her father, Leslie Stephen, in the spring of 1904. Yet working as a counter-irritant to the emotional inertia brought on by mourning was her growing impatience with the "queer mole like life" she was living at 22 Hyde Park Gate, within whose walls "the outside world seems to have ceased".[4] By the fall of 1904 she is eager for the move; her distress swells to bitter complaint against the implacable Dr. Savage, the physician who treated her for the madness that overcame her that previous summer, for condemning her to convalescence in Cambridge before allowing her to settle into her new home. She writes to Violet Dickinson, who had nursed her that summer through her madness, protesting against the delay that will keep her from the free and full life awaiting her in 46 Gordon Square, which to her represents the desired world of "my own home, and books and pictures, and music".[5]

In her account of these days to the Memoir Club, Woolf would more calmly reflect how Bloomsbury had retrospectively been endowed with the prestige of social and cultural myth. In her own recollections, Woolf attempted to take a more reliable and human measure of Old Bloomsbury, one that would capture the relation and proportion between inner circle to outer world. Old Bloomsbury, she proposed, was best understood and defined as a world within the world, as "[a] small concentrated world dwelling inside the much larger and looser world of dances and dinners".[6] The granite fact, to adopt Woolf's own idiom, that infuses and variegates the rainbow myth of Bloomsbury's "luster and illusion," is that the "larger and looser" but also *earlier* world of dances and dinners that defined much of the life in Hyde Park Gate interpenetrated the life of Gordon Square, where it was brilliantly concentrated. For Woolf, it was out of those "concentrations" - in art, thought and feeling - that modernist culture was made, or at least made possible. In such concentrations, Woolf found the dense social and psychological matter that she would eventually shape and reshape in the fiction to come: the nature and role of silence in human interchange; the traditional relations as well as the irregular couplings of the sexes in modern times; the radical solitariness of the self; the comedy of social life.

So let us approach 46 Gordon Square as Woolf approached it both in life and in her recollections, through 22 Hyde Park Gate, honoring her insistence that "46 Gordon Square could never have meant what it did had not 22 Hyde Park Gate preceded it" (MB 160). Her memoir of that name is primarily a recollection of her remorselessly conventional half-brother George Duckworth. He dominates her memoir as a dreaded creature, half god, half faun, who looked at the world through the eyes of a pig (MB 144).[7] His divinity was of the decidedly

physical kind ("When Miss Willett of Brighton saw him 'throwing off his ulster' in the middle of her drawing room she was moved to write an Ode Comparing George Duckworth to the Hermes of Praxiteles", is the most hilarious instance of George's theophanic gestures that Woolf recalls); his religion, however, was social - he was a "saint" in sacrificing himself and his family to "the ideals of a sportsman and an English gentleman"(MB 144). The faun in George's nature, Woolf goes on to remark, "was at once sportive and demonstrative and thus often at variance with the self-sacrificing nature of the God": "It was quite a common thing to come into the drawing room and find George on his knees with his arms extended, addressing my mother, who might be adding up the weekly books, in tones of fervent adoration" (MB 145). The social (disguised as moral) rectitude of the god and the emotional outbursts of the faun may have been at variance in nature, but they were united in George's singular determination to rise in the social scale. It was the physical god and social idolater who mercilessly dragged Woolf to teas, at homes and dances, but it was the faun who, as reported in the scandalous penultimate paragraph of her memoir, visited her bedroom after a particularly ghastly evening spent dining with Lady Carnarvon and "took me in his arms". "Yes", she writes, "the old ladies of Kensington and Belgravia never knew that George Duckworth was not only father and mother, brother and sister to those poor Stephen girls; he was their lover also" (MB 155).[8]

But George, who seemed to have usurped and monopolized all the family functions he was most unsuited and disqualified for, did not follow her to Gordon Square; he married. What Woolf did bring with her was training in the protocols of the drawing room and undiminished, if sometimes appalled fascination with the life entertained and on display there. In her memoirs, George ironically emerges as a genius loci of the drawing room and its droll spectacles: he shines as Hermes, a god unveiled in the eyes of Miss Willet; he astonishes as the faun who "lavished caresses, endearments, enquiries and embraces as if, after forty years in the Australian bush, he had at last returned to the home of his youth and found an aged mother still alive to welcome him" (MB 145). The drawing room is the entry, but also the proscenium to the dramatized past, since it was there that the traditions and manners of late Victorian family life were most extravagantly displayed.

This is made clear at the opening of "22 Hyde Park Gate", which begins with the disarming fiction that she is resuming an interrupted conversation:

> As I have said, the drawing room at Hyde Park Gate was divided by black folding doors picked out with thin lines of raspberry red. We were still much

> under the influence of Titian. Mounds of plush, Watts' portraits, busts shrined in crimson velvet, enriched the gloom of a room naturally dark and thickly shaded in summer by showers of Virginia Creeper (MB 142).

Vanessa would introduce white and green chintzes and wash down the walls with plain distemper to brighten 46 Gordon Square, thus banishing the physical memory of velvet plush and somber Titian reds. In the first instance, then, Bloomsbury physically signified for Woolf a new brightness in surroundings and outlook that allowed her to see "things one had never seen in the darkness there – Watts pictures, Dutch cabinets, blue china," things that now "shone out for the first time in the drawing room at Gordon Square" (MB 162). 22 Hyde Park Gate dimmed when it did not obscure the shiny aura of beautifully made objects.

But it was less the décor than the furnishing of the Hyde Park Gate drawing room that symbolized for her the kind of life that was lived and observed there. Woolf drew particular attention to the presence and importance of folding doors:

> How could family life have been carried on without them? As soon dispense with water- closets or bathrooms as with folding doors in a family of nine men and women, one of whom into the bargain was an idiot. Suddenly there would be a crisis - a servant dismissed, a lover rejected, pass books opened, or poor Mrs Tyndall who had lately poisoned her husband by mistake come for consolation (MB 142).

The folding doors were the essential stage machinery for mounting the theatricals of family life. On one side of the door, Woolf saw or imagined incidents lively and plentiful enough - servants dismissed, lovers spurned, money lost or stolen, death by misadventure - to provide narrative material for any number of sensationalist tales of domestic life. But what engages her novelistic attention are the less "dark and agitated", more ordinary scenes of life that took place "on the other side of the door, especially on Sunday afternoon". There, Woolf recalls, life

> was cheerful enough. There round the oval tea table with its pink china shell full of spice buns would be found old general Beadle, talking of the Indian Mutiny; or Mr Haldane, or sir Frederick Pollock - talking of all things under the sun; or old C.B. Clarke, whose name is given to three excessively rare Himalayan ferns; and Professor Wolstenholme, capable, if you interrupted him, of spouting two columns of tea not unmixed with sultanas through his nostrils; after which he would relapse into drowsy ursine torpor, the result of

> eating opium to which he had been driven by the unkindness of his wife and the untimely death of his son Oliver who was eaten, somewhere off the coast of Coromandel, by a shark. (MB 142)

Note the transit of this remarkable sentence that takes us from spice buns feeding a crusty general, dreaming of empire, to a professor eating opium to help him escape the memory of an unkind wife and the son who had become the food for sharks. En route Woolf manages to evoke the imperial memories and convictions, the domestic tragedies, and the broad Dickensian comedy of Victorian patriarchs and pedants. Late Victorian and Edwardian society as it was encountered, accommodated and entertained by a large, rambling, emotionally congested family converges in that drawing room.

How different the life encountered in the drawing room at Gordon Square, especially at Thoby's Thursday evenings, "the germ," Woolf claims, "from which sprang all that since came to be called - in newspapers, in novels, in Germany, in France — even, I daresay, in Turkey and Timbuktu - by the name of Bloomsbury" (MB 164). It was at these Thursday evenings that she heard talk of enormous interest and significance to her, talk about art that was at once abstract and technical, speculative conversation shot through with wit and learning. In the company of ardent but unmannerly and often shabbily attired young men, Woolf gratefully remembers, "[a]ll that tremendous encumbrance of appearance and behavior which George had piled upon our first years vanished completely" (MB 169). She particularly remarks the stark differences in life and feeling between the two drawing rooms: "In the world of the Booths and the Maxses we were not asked to use our brains much. Here we used nothing else. And part of the charm of those Thursday evenings was that they were astonishingly abstract" (MB 168).

It was too abstract, in fact, to be altogether appealing to any but the most theoretical and rigorously logical mind, neither of which Woolf's mind could be said to be. In reporting her own reactions and contributions to those Bloomsbury evenings, Woolf appears less interested in reporting the actual words of what people said than in recreating the rhythm of their exchanges, by which she seems to be taking the pulse, increasingly vigorous, of the new life germinating before her eyes:

> Now Hawtrey would say something; now Vanessa; now Saxon; now Clive; now Thoby. It filled me with wonder to watch those who were finally left in the argument piling stone upon stone, cautiously, accurately, long after it had completely soared above my sight. But if one could not say anything, one could

> listen. One had glimpses of something miraculous happening high up in the air (MB 168).

Woolf represents her young self at these occasions as a witness rather than co-creator of the conversational miracles she would later memorialize. This may be ascribed to the modesty inculcated by the tea-table training of 22 Hyde Park Gate; her disinclination to scale the heights of argument may also represent the reluctance of a young woman to speak before she has found her public voice. One last explanation: Woolf may think it easier to evoke the excitement of those Thursday evenings from the point of view of the young, unproven novelist (in this case, herself) beginning to discover her human subject and her relation toward it. It is the novelist, then, as much as the memoirist who chose not to reproduce the talk she heard, but to revisit instead her first vivid impressions of those who held forth on those Thursday evenings. And what different as well as indelible impressions they were - the impressions made by the innocence and enthusiasm of Clive Bell, by the wit of Lytton Strachey who was, somewhat alarmingly, "the essence of culture", a culture so condensed yet rarefied that he was capable of bursting into Thoby's room and crying, "Do you hear the music of the spheres?" and then falling into a dead faint; and the singular impression made by an "astonishing fellow - a man who trembled perpetually all over...as eccentric, as remarkable in his way as Bell and Strachey in theirs" (MB 166) - a Jew by the name of Leonard Woolf.

These droll recollections of the characters and talk that defined Old Bloomsbury suggest that Thoby's Thursday evenings did not so much abandon as transform the conventions of the Hyde Park Gate drawing room. The talk Woolf was to hear would still be of all things under the sun, but now it would be more "concentrated"; arguments would distill the essence of a question rather than diffuse it in euphemism and evasion. Conversation was more candid, but, as Woolf also recalls, it could languish in a way that would be impossible at Hyde Park Gate. 46 Gordon Square, then, succeeds but does not totally obliterate 22 Hyde Park Gate as a scene of human interchange that interests her as much for its unspoken drama as for its open conversations. Woolf, whose literary personality and prospects are predominantly identified with a room of her own, began her professional life as a writer equally absorbed with the life of the drawing room. Indeed it is arguable that without the training she received and the human dramas and behaviors she observed there, her fiction, however exalted in its visionary musings and lyrical transports, would have been humanly barren.

That Woolf herself understood as much is evident in her first efforts at fiction, of which two short pieces are particularly valuable for the glimpse they give us of how Woolf was imagining her former and present life from her new vantage point of 46 Gordon Square. The first was a short story entitled "Phyllis and Rosamond", written in 1906, a little over a year after Thoby's Thursday evenings had begun. The eponymous "heroines" are two sisters destined, we are immediately informed, to remain "what in the slang of the century is called the 'daughters at home'". [9] In representing their social fate, Woolf seems to be imagining the life that would have been hers had she remained at 22 Hyde Park Gate. This being possibly so, it is telling that the most important thing Woolf can think to tell us about them is that

> [t]hey seem indigenous to the drawing room, as though, born in silk evening robes, they had never trod a rougher earth than the Turkey carpet, or reclined on harsher ground than the arm chair or the sofa. To see them in a drawing room full of well dressed men and women, is to see the merchant in the Stock Exchange, or the barrister in the Temple. This, every motion and word proclaims, is their native air; their place of business, their professional arena. Here, clearly, they practice the arts in which they have been instructed since childhood. Here, perhaps, they win their victories and earn their bread (CSF 18).

Woolf is quick to denounce the condescension as well as incompleteness that mar this extended analogy, even if it is one of her own devising. The drawing room, however much it may seem their native habitat, is neither the exclusive nor the sole professional domain of daughters at home. The narrator contends that only by following these dutiful daughters through their daily rounds for many days would "you...be able to calculate those impressions which are to be received by night in the drawing room" (CSF 18). We are accustomed to associate Woolf's professional life as a writer with a room of one's own and 500 pounds a year, her own calculation of how women might materially secure their imaginative independence. But psychological liberation is not so easily achieved, a fact Woolf imaginatively acknowledged in conjuring the drawing room life of 22 Hyde Park Gate when she first tried her hand at fiction. It is in the Edwardian household, especially in the drawing room, that she could directly confront the problem of the novelist - how to calculate the value of those impressions that make up "the life of Monday and Tuesday", as she famously described her own work in "Modern Fiction". [10] 46 Gordon Square was inhabited and enlivened by two young women eager to institute all kinds of "reforms and experiments", from doing without table napkins and taking "coffee after dinner instead of

tea at nine o'clock" (MB 163) to the bolder experiments of working as artists, writing and painting.[11] Yet when she came to write in her private room, Woolf chose not to represent the new world opening before her, but to return to the traditional life of women for whom the drawing room is a place of business and not speculative conversation.

In recreating the world of the conventional drawing room, Woolf seems to be seeking a suitable place to practice her fledgling art of novelistic self-projection. Each sister gives voice to a different aspect of her own mind, character and opinions. Rosamond is perhaps the closest to Woolf's writing self, endowed as she with what we might call a proto-novelistic imagination. This is how the narrator describes her mental acuity: "Rosamond, possessed of shrewd and capable brains, had been driven to feed them exclusively upon the human character and as her science was but little obscured by personal prejudice, her results were generally trustworthy" (CSF 22). Rosamond certainly lacks the room of her own, and perhaps (we will never know) the art to express her impressions in writing. Woolf nevertheless praises her "science" of character-reading for its impartiality and accuracy.

If Rosamond's science is a projection and prototype of Woolf's own novelistic art of representing and judging character, Phyllis's emotionalism anticipates the indignation that will animate Woolf's satires against the regime of the traditional drawing room, where feeling and brains are routinely discouraged or suppressed. She dramatizes and exploits Phyllis's equally shrewd if more partial judgment of character in the concluding episode, a visit the sisters pay to the Tristrams. The Tristrams are a family which regards love not as "something induced by certain calculated actions" but "a robust ingenuous thing which stood out in the daylight, naked and solid" (CSF 16-17). The family name is worth pausing over. Like Joyce's choice of Dedalus as the name of his young fictional alter-ego, Tristram seems at once symbol and prophesy of Woolf's nascent artistic identity. It conjures up the ghost of Sterne, the creator of Tristram Shandy, and the Wagner of Tristan and Isolde, representatives, respectively, of the humorist and the high romantic fabulist that co-existed within her own imagination. The Tristrams, like the Stephens after 1904, live in "a distant and unfashionable quarter of London" (CSF 24) known as Bloomsbury. To describe how Bloomsbury might appear to sheltered maidens from Kensington (of whom, of course, Woolf once counted herself), Woolf turns to the more fanciful Phyllis, who, with less novelistic science than her sister, is both envious and exhilarated by the prospect of a different pattern and tempo of life beyond the pillars of Belgravia and South Kensington:

> That was one of the many enviable parts of their lot. The stucco fronts, the irreproachable rows of Belgravia and South Kensington seemed to Phyllis the type of her lot: of a life trained to grow in an ugly pattern to match the staid ugliness of its fellows. If one lived here in Bloomsbury, she began to theorise waving with her hand as her cab passed through the great tranquil squares, beneath the pale green of umbrageous trees, one might grow up as one like. There was room, and freedom, and in the roar and splendor of the Strand she read the live realities of the world from which her stucco and her pillars protected her so completely (CSF 24).

Phyllis, whose name literally means green leaf, is a poignant shadow figure of Woolf's own exultant entry into modernist territory. Her hungry and clamoring spirit welcomes the new sense of human possibility revealed to her; the sensationalist dramas of abandoned lovers and disgraced servants enacted in the staid drawing rooms of Kensington instantly become dated when exposed to the robust roar and modern splendor of the Strand.

It is from Phyllis's awed, yet increasingly intimidated perspective that Woolf attempts her first fictional account of the conversations that came to define and distinguish the cultural life of Old Bloomsbury:

> The talk was of certain pictures then being shown, and their merits were discussed from a somewhat technical standpoint. Where was Phyllis to begin? She had seen them; but she knew that her platitudes would never stand the test of question and criticism to which they would be exposed. Nor, she knew, was there any scope here for those feminine graces which could veil so much. The time was passed; for the discussion was hot and serious, and not one of the combatants wished to be tripped by illogical devices. So she sat and watched, feeling like a bird with wings pinioned; and more acutely, because more genuinely, uncomfortable than she had ever been at ball or play. She repeated to herself the little bitter axiom that she had fallen between two stools and tried meanwhile to use her brains soberly upon what was being said. (CSF 24-25)

Although Woolf's personal circumstances and modern outlook align her with "the strange new point of view" (CSF 25) of the Tristrams, she is more concerned, even anxious to describe how the uncensored conversations and frank opinions entertained in a Bloomsbury drawing room appear to those outside, if drawn to, such enlightened and ebullient society. The narrator thus reports how Rosamond and Phyllis, amazed by the new ideas and attitudes they encounter, quietly listen "unconscious of their own silence, like people

shut out from some merrymaking in the cold and wind; invisible to the feasters within" (CSF 26).

I find it symptomatic that one of Woolf's first completed sketches as she was settling into Bloomsbury involves a story of two young women who long for a modernity that feel entirely unsuited for, who fall, in a mood of "comic despair," between two stools. I am not suggesting that Woolf was personally unsettled or displaced within the small, concentrated society that opened up for her in Gordon Square. On the contrary, I am marveling that she felt secure enough to explore imaginatively what was both inside and outside the new world of Old Bloomsbury. In "Phyllis and Rosamond" Woolf is actively experimenting with the personally discomfiting but narratively rewarding effects of bi-location. Bi-location is the positive and counterpart to falling between two stools. Falling between two stools lands one in an indefinite and often inglorious mental or social space between two established and equally attractive or creditable positions. Those adept in bi-location occupy both, rather than fall between, those positions. By exercising her skill in bi-location, Woolf narratively situates herself both within and outside of the human scene she is representing. In the Tristrams' drawing room, she transparently represents her new-found life in Bloomsbury; in Sylvia Tristram, the youngest daughter, she depicts the modern (sympathetic) female artist she aspired to be - substantial in character, abstract in thought, in Phyllis's words, "a solid woman in spite of her impersonal generalizations" (CSF 26). But Sylvia has as much to learn from Phyllis and Rosamond as they from her. She suddenly realizes that she "had never considered the Hibberts as human beings before; but had called them 'young ladies," a "mistake" she admits that she is eager to correct "both from vanity and from real curiosity" (CSF 26). Neither her vanity nor her curiosity lead her to the reality of the Hibberts' lives, as Woolf makes clear to us when Sylvia somewhat presumptuously suggests to Rosamond and Phyllis that "we are sisters": "O no, we're not sisters," Phyllis bitterly objects; "at least I pity you if we are. You see, we are brought up just to come out in the evening and make pretty speeches and well, marry I suppose, and of course we might have gone to college if we'd wanted to; but as we didn't we're just accomplished" (CSF 27). It is Phyllis, not Sylvia, who is the realist, in both the common and novelistic sense of the word.

This sketch is followed in 1909 by "Memoirs of a Novelist," in which Bloomsbury reappears in a somewhat different light. "Memoirs of a Novelist" is a fictional review of a biography of an imaginary female novelist named Miss Willatt. Woolf's tone in this fanciful portrait is low and broad enough for satire, but close enough to its (imaginary) human subject to capture the pathos of Miss

Willatt's fretful and somewhat misbegotten creative endeavors. The following passage makes this comically clear:

> It did not seem, to judge by appearances, that the world has so far made use of its right to know about Miss Willatt. The volumes had got themselves wedged between Sturm 'On the Beauties of Nature' and the 'Veterinary Surgeon's Manual' on the outside shelf, where the gas cracks and the dust grimes them, and people may read so long as the boy lets them. Almost unconsciously one begins to confuse Miss Wilatt with her remains and to condescend a little to these shabby, slipshod volumes (CSF 70).[12]

The narrator acknowledges, but ultimately resists, the urge to condescend to those prevented by death from becoming as enlightened as we, the living, so self-assuredly are. She is equally impatient, however, with the biographer's idyllic account of Miss Willatt's youth. She offers her own suppositions of what Miss Willat's youthful character might have been, suppositions that soon take the form of self-projection. Item in point: taking up the characterization of Miss Willatt as a "shy awkward girl much given to mooning", the reviewer-narrator goes on to imagine her as a young woman who

> walked in to pigsties, and read history instead of fiction, did not enjoy her first ball....She found some angle in the great ball room where she could half hide her large figure, and there she waited to be asked to dance. She fixed her eyes upon the festoons which draped the city arms and tried to fancy that she sat on a rock with bees humming round her; she bethought her how no one in that room perhaps knew as well as she did what was meant by the Oath of Uniformity; then she thought how in sixty years, or less perhaps, the worm would feed upon them all; then she wondered whether somehow before that day, every man now dancing there should have reason to respect her (CSF 72).

The rough biographical similarities between the imaginary Miss Willatt and her creator Miss Stephen - both shy, mooning young women embarrassed by their body, dreaming of becoming historians, beginning their creative life in earnest after the death of a father - are only interesting to the extent that they reveal how even at this early stage in her career Woolf possessed not just the talent, but the courage, for self-parody.

Woolf is especially impressive when she confronts - and proceeds to mock - her own proclivities toward mystical flights of imagination. She is, in fact, quite remorseless in describing how Miss Willatt, who in her youth could

clarify and correct any misapprehensions about the Uniformity Law, matures into an enormously stout seer who, "in her hot little drawing room with the spotted wall paper," presides over "intimate conversations about 'the Soul'": "'The Soul' became her province, and she deserted the Southern plains for a strange country draped in eternal twilight, where there are qualities without bodies" (CSF 77). In Miss Willatt Woolf entertains the possibility of a new writerly incarnation - the Sibyl of the drawing room: "We felt often that we had a Sibyl among us," one of Miss Willatt's acolytes testifies, a remark that prompts the narrator to speculate that "if Sibyls are only half inspired, conscious of the folly of their disciples, sorry for them, very vain in their applause and much muddled in their own brains all at once, then Miss Willatt was a Sybil too" (CSF 78). Miss Willat's elevation to Sybil-hood is at once comic and doleful, comic in her vainglorious soulfulness, doleful in

> the unhappy view that it gives of the spiritual state of Bloomsbury at this period - when Miss Willatt brooded in Woburn Square like some gorged spider at the centre of her web, and all along the filaments unhappy women came running, slight hen-like figures, frightened by the sun and the carts and the dreadful world, and longing to hide themselves from the entire panorama in the shade of Miss Willatt's skirts (CSF 78).

Today we associate Bloomsbury with a happier, certainly less gloomy spiritual state, one in which women are no longer frightened by the sun nor spooked by the agitations of the "dreadful world".

Imaginative courage to face and represent the world, dreadful or not, is not a moral gift bestowed by the accidents of birth and temperament, however. It is achieved as much as found. For Woolf, imaginative courage is often found through the sound and sense of laughter. Woolf knew the value of laughter early on and commented on it persuasively in an essay that also belongs to the story of Woolf's move to Bloomsbury. In "The Value of Laughter", she proposed that "there are some things that are beyond words and not beneath them, and laughter is one of these".[13] Woolf then went on to elaborate a distinction that I believe is key to understanding Bloomsburyean Woolf and all the writing to come after:

> Humour is of the heights; the rarest minds alone can climb the plateau whence the whole of life can be viewed as in a panorama; but comedy walks the highways and reflects the trivial and accidental - the venial faults and peculiarities of all who pass in its bright little mirror. Laughter more than anything else preserves

> our sense of proportion; it is for ever reminding us that we are but human, that no man is quite a hero or entirely a villain (Laughter 59).

Bloomsbury released and confirmed the power of laughter in Woolf's spiritual outlook and fictional imagination. It helped her maintain a sense of proportion, grounded her,[14] reminded her of what it is to be all too human. But it did something else as well. It reinforced her sense of herself as a female novelist writing in the tradition of women who had profited from their long and demanding training in the science of character-reading. "I believe," Woolf confessed, "that the verdict that women pass upon character will not be revoked at the Day of Judgment" (Laughter 60). For Woolf, training in these novelistic arts of judgment had come, as it had for Rosamond, as it had for so many of her literary mothers, in the drawing- room.

Woolf would return to the female traditions and feminine arts untiringly practiced in the drawing room in the tableau that concludes her final novel, Between the Acts. In the novel's last page, the family of Pointz Hall foregathers before retiring for the long dark night ahead. The year is 1939, the place is outside London. Although there have been several complaints by various characters in the novel that surely it was time that someone invented a new plot or that the author came out of the bushes, the old plots, we come to understand, will have to suffice and the author will not be courting applause, much less celebrity, any time soon. Only at the moment when Isa, the novel's abortive poet and restless seeker after latent and larger meanings, lets her sewing drop, does a new human vista emerge:

> The great hooded chairs had become enormous. And Giles too. And Isa too against the window. The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks.
> Then the curtain rose. They spoke. (219)

We do not of course hear these first words. But I like to think that those spoken words might include snatches of conversation that Woolf overheard at Thoby's Thursday evenings, words, at any rate, punctuated by bursts of laughter. Even without knowing what those words might be, we might respond to their power. Through them, Woolf speaks to us in her last work as a sublime humorist who "alone can climb the pinnacle whence the whole of life can be viewed as in a panorama." From that pinnacle she beheld the entire human panorama from the momentary shelter of the present moment back to the night

before roads were made. But for Woolf the climb to that pinnacle begins in the drawing room. If Sibyls are half visionaries in whose gaze the whole of life is comprehended, and half comic seers conscious of "[a]ll the hideous excrescences that have overgrown our modern life, the pomps and conventions and dreary solemnities" (Laughter 60), then Virginia Woolf is a Sibyl too. In her last fiction, indeed, she appears as the most humorous incarnation of that Bloomsburyean figure: the Sybil of the drawing room.

NOTES

[1] Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, I.* ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p.149. All further citations will be noted as L-I.

[2] There are many personal recollections and personal accounts of Bloomsbury. Still the indispensable work is S.P. Rosenbaum, *Edwardian Bloomsbury* 2 volumes (New York: Macmillan. 1994).

[3] *Letters I,* p.119

[4] Ibid.

[5] *Letters I,* p. 147.

[6] Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being* edited, with an introduction and notes, by Jeanne Schulkind (London and New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) p.170. All further citations in the text will be noted as MB.

[7] Thanks to Christine Froula for reminding me that George's pig eyes were as essential to Woolf as his dark crisp ringlets for understanding his nature.

[8] When she recapitulates the last abruptly scandalous pages of "22 Hyde Park Gate" at the opening of "Old Bloomsbury", Woolf recalls George's attentions this way: "It was long past midnight that I got into bed and sat reading a page of two of Marius the Epicurean for which I had then a passion. There would be a tap at the door; the light would be turned out and George would fling himself on my bed, cuddling and kissing and otherwise embracing me in order, as he told Dr. Savage later, to comfort me for the fatal illness of my father - who was dying three or four storeys lower down of cancer" (MB 160). The entire question of George Duckworth's sexual "malefactions" is a complex and much disputed one, but for the most careful weighing as well as reading of the evidence, see Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (New York : Knopf, 1997) pp. 147-156.

[9] Virginia Woolf, "Phyllis and Rosamond", *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf* (CSF), ed. Susan Dick (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt, 1985), p.18. All future references will be noted in the text.

[10] The phrase is Woolf's elegant shorthand for the ordinary life of an ordinary day with which, Woolf argues, the modern novel ought to concern itself. See Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction", *The Essays of Virginia Woolf IV*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (San Diego and London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1986) pp. 157-65.

[11] See especially, Christine Froula, "Civilization and 'my' civilization" Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde in *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde: War, Civilization, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) pp.1-34.

[12] Virginia Woolf, "Memoirs of a Novelist", *Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf* (CSF), p.70. All future references will be noted in the text.

[13] Virginia Woolf, "The Value of Laughter", *The Essays of Virginia Woolf I*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (San Diego and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986) p. 59. All future references will be noted in the text.

[14] "Tell me, Bart", Lucy Swithin asks her brother, "what's the origin of that? Touch wood...Antaeus, didn't he touch earth?" Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (San Diego and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969) p.25. All future citations will be to this edition.