

# **'HAPPILY I'M *BLOOMSBURY*': VIRGINIA'S BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY'S VIRGINIA**

*Maria Cândida Zamith* – Faculdade de Letras do Porto

1905 may be considered as the year of Virginia Woolf's (Stephen at the time) coming of age. Up to then she had voraciously read everything her father's library provided; she had learned Latin and Greek and was familiar with the classics; she had developed an innate gift for literary criticism; and she had nurtured an extraordinary capacity to capture and study the hidden secrets of the human mind. By that time, she had learnt already that she had to subdue her strongest emotions, lest she might collapse again into the depths of mental disorder as she went through after her mother's death in 1895 and, again, very recently, when her father died in February 1904. She was now ripe for putting her talents to good use.

After having consistently felt unworthy and ungifted, she could finally test her capacities, because her terrible judge and model – her father – was no more. While she was being nursed by Violet Dickinson (one of the most prominent feminine figures in her life), her sister and brothers moved from Hyde Park Gate, the sombre house in fashionable Kensington, to the bohemian and socially stigmatized surroundings of Bloomsbury. This had been Vanessa's doing. As Virginia recalls in "Old Bloomsbury":

When I recovered from the illness which was not unnaturally the result of all these emotions and complications [deaths and changes], 22 Hyde Park Gate no longer existed. While I had lain in bed at the Dickinsons' house at Welwyn thinking that the birds were singing Greek choruses and that King Edward was using the foulest possible language among Ozzie [Violet's brother] Dickinson's azaleas, Vanessa had wound up Hyde Park Gate once and for all. She had sold; she had burnt; she had sorted; she had torn up. [...] The four of us were therefore left alone. And Vanessa - looking at a map of London and seeing how far apart they were - had decided that we should leave Kensington and start life afresh in Bloomsbury (MB 161-2).

In fact, Virginia had participated in the tiresome house-hunting program before her "illness", as she euphemistically refers to her "nervous breakdown" or downright "madness" that afflicted her all through that summer. But at that time Bloomsbury did not attract her. On the contrary: the houses seemed "dingy", "Lord how dreary!"; the district unattractive, "so far away, and so cold and gloomy" (L-I 119, 31 December 1903). It was only after Vanessa's magic wand had transformed 46 Gordon Square into a cosy home, full of light and air, an appropriate shrine for young and promising artists, that her sister surrendered to its charms and possibilities and could earnestly feel that Bloomsbury was more interesting than Kensington. There she came to experience a never before felt sentiment of freedom and creation. Particularly decisive to the future writer's build-up was surely this blessed "untutored" eight year period (with no judge or model), from her father's death to her marriage in 1912. Free and unconstrained as she had never been, Virginia Stephen experienced - at long last - the euphoric sensation of being a self-responsible, independent, determined adult, capable of acting as she wished, writing and experimenting with writing, conquering for herself a position in the intellectual world.

Her diary for 1905 lets us see how fruitful a month January was: on the 6th she wrote: "I am to start a girls club at Morley, & talk about books & c." (APA 217); on the 9<sup>th</sup> she " [b]egan, being Monday, work on the note for Fred" (APA 219), this being a biographical note on her father, which Frederic Maitland asked her to contribute for the biography he was writing; on the 10th she received her first wages for the articles contributed to *The Guardian*: "Found this morning on my plate my first instalment of wages - £2.7.6." (APA 219); and the month closed with an entry stating "Wrote all the morning at a paper". This would become "Street Music" and be accepted for publication in the *National Review* (APA 229-30 & n). To culminate this shower of achievements, Virginia started to contribute reviews and essays to the *Times Literary Supplement*, a relationship she would maintain all her life. On 17 January she had met Bruce Richmond of the *Times* at a friend's dinner party, and on 8 February the same friend, Mrs. Cums, invited her for tea, there to meet again Mr. Richmond, who, in Woolf's words, "very soon came to business". "Then he asked if 'we', The Times, that is, might send on books for review also - So I said yes - & thus my work gets established, & I suppose I shall soon have as much as I can do, which is certainly satisfactory" (APA 234). It is, indeed, highly satisfactory and extraordinary, that a girl (especially being a *girl*) of no experience, became, all of a sudden, introduced and appreciated in the world of literary writing.

And in March she can be said to enter a new world and a new life:

she had finally the opportunity to experience the savour and explore the potentialities of a social literary coterie of heterogeneously gifted young people, male and female. Something unthinkable according to Kensington rules of *bienséance*. Thoby, Virginia's elder brother, had asked his friends – mostly from his Cambridge days and from the *Midnight Society*<sup>1</sup> they had formed back in 1900 – to call on them informally on Thursday evenings to discuss literature and art. His sisters would attend the meetings, and "cocoa and biscuits were 'on the house'" (Dunn 96). On 16 March Virginia could joyously record in her journal: "The first of our Thursday Evenings!" (APA 253).<sup>2</sup> She specifies that two only visitors were present, the "sphinx-like civil servant" (Dunn 98) Saxon Sydney-Turner and the Stephens' half brother Gerald Duckworth; but that small seed of a gathering would soon sprout: only a week later, Virginia tells us, "nine people came to our evening and stayed till one" (APA 255). Within two months, most of the young men had become regular visitors (including Clive Bell and Desmond MacCarthy), and the two sisters had gladly joined that "motley, shabby crew of Thoby's friends, to whom social etiquette was an unnecessary encumbrance" (Dunn 95). Besides, they soon felt themselves and were seen by the group as the very heart and life of the meetings.

Gradually, Thoby's modest project would develop into the most informally revolutionary group, that changed the mentalities of the time and has not ceased to attract devotees and detractors throughout the hundred years elapsed to the present, with prospects of increasing interest in the times to come. Being innovators who contested the *status quo* of their society's conventions, particularly the Victorian scale of values, the members of the group could only expect hostility and incomprehension from their social equals and even from the intellectual milieu of their time. They faced this situation sticking to one another and, in their first phase, to G.E. Moore's philosophy summarized in *Principia Ethica*, particularly where it states that "personal affections and aesthetic enjoyments include all the greatest, and *by far* the greatest goods we can imagine", forming "the rational ultimate end of human action and the sole criterion of social progress".<sup>3</sup> These Moore disciples also extracted from his doctrine a possibility of justification for homosexual relations. However, not all the members of the set or even of the former Cambridge Apostles were homosexual, and this disparity of interpretation of the Master's words made that "being a disciple of Moore meant very different things to the different people who became part of Bloomsbury" (Spater & Parsons 33). In general, Moore's ideas instilled in the company of friends a sense of self-contentment and self-sufficiency which might be felt by outsiders as priggish and snobby, as

vain highbrow manifestation. These characteristics Woolf acknowledged and discussed in her writings, particularly in "Middlebrow" (CE-II 196-203) and "Am I a Snob?", a paper read to the *Memoir Club* (MB 181-98),<sup>4</sup> where she expressly shows her acceptance of the "highbrow" libel whilst denying the "snob" epithet only in so far as considered a personal trait of exaggerated self-assertion. She does say:

The essence of snobbery is that you wish to impress other people. The snob is a flutter-brained, hare-brained creature so little satisfied with his or her own standing that in order to consolidate it he or she is always flourishing a title or an honour in other people's faces so that they may believe, and help him to believe what he does not really believe – that he or she is somehow a person of importance. / This is a symptom that I recognise in my own case (MB 184).

But she makes this statement after having brought into question:

"Am I a snob in my egotism when I say that never does the pale light of dawn filter through the blinds of 52 Tavistock Square<sup>5</sup> but I open my eyes and exclaim, 'Good God! Here I am again!' – not always with pleasure, often with pain; sometimes with a spasm of acute disgust – but always, always with interest?" (MB 183).

In the 1920s, when Virginia wrote "Old Bloomsbury" for the *Memoir Club*, she could affirm: "These Thursday evening parties were, as far as I am concerned, the germ from which sprang all that has since come to be called [...] by the name of Bloomsbury" (MB 164). The fate of that name of Bloomsbury had to go through many adverse judgements, as, for instance, Wyndham Lewis's persistent antagonism, D.H.Lawrence's avowed sentiments of repulsion, or F.R.Leavis's negative criticism. But, after Woolf's recuperation by feminists in the 1970s and particularly after the Bloomsbury revival of the 1990s, a general perception arose, as Regina Marler stresses in 1997, that "what this group of friends said and felt seventy years ago can still affect us" (Marler 4).

The Group never became a club, and its boundaries were very fluid. The basic groundwork disposition of the Stephen siblings was anti-Victorianism, anti-Kensington life style, a disposition of freedom, youth and open-mindedness. As Virginia describes them: "We were full of experiments and reforms [...] we were going to paint; to write; to have coffee after dinner instead of tea at nine o'clock. Everything was going to be new; everything was going to be different. Everything was on trial." (MB 163). On the initial Thursday evenings, the visitors

were mostly silent, unaccustomed to the feminine presences that made all the difference from the Cambridge meetings. They had first to get used to the new circumstances, but these soon became a trump instead of a hindrance, and conversation acquired a looseness of comradeship that was to last for ever... although, at the beginning, in a serious, respectable tone. As Leon Edel recalls: "The first phase of Bloomsbury, with women acting as a dam to the free flow of male talk, tended to be abstract and philosophical. Saxon told nothing but the truth; and then beside the Truth there were 'the Good' and 'the Beautiful' – and G.E.Moore's exploration of all three in the *Principia [Ethical]*" (Edel 125).

Without elders to supervise their behaviour, totally unencumbered, they began tentatively to establish for themselves a new and free style of life. They learnt to criticize one another but also to expect assistance from one another. By that time Virginia did not take her brother's friends as seriously as they would have wished: her unpublished review of *Euphrosyne*, an anthology of their poetic writings, is rather caustic and negative.<sup>6</sup> But she accepted from the beginning, and she praised, their criticism and advice concerning her own work. Liberty of expression came little by little, with the substantial help of Lytton Strachey's irreverence. Estimations and critics of the Bloomsbury Group tend to disregard the considerable specificity of each phase and each epoch, appraising *Bloomsbury* as a whole, and that is exactly one of the reasons why opinions diverge so profoundly. One rather accurate but incomplete description is to see *Bloomsbury*, as Leonard Woolf did, as "primarily and fundamentally a group of friends" the roots of whose friendship were in Cambridge University (Hussey 34). In Virginia's view, the initial *Bloomsbury* was merely a "small concentrated world dwelling inside the much larger and looser world of dances and dinners" (MB 170); essentially, they were from the start an ill-defined group, not easily classifiable. Many influences worked in the building of the concept of *Bloomsbury*. Hermione Lee considers that Virginia Woolf and her friends looked askance on "those on the outside of the pale", and she believes that *Bloomsbury*, "though reacting against its ancestry, followed an earlier preoccupation with what has been called 'the question of access'". Those young people "created their own concept of a 'best circle', which remained founded on family allegiances" (Lee 54). "Virginia Woolf was 'modern' but she was also a late Victorian" (Lee 55). Jane Dunn thinks that "Bloomsbury functioned much as a large family would"; "it was not a commune but rather a tendency, a mutual philosophy of work and life"; Dunn refers "its sense of natural superiority and self-containment", "its fierce loyalties and impenetrable solidarity when facing criticism from outside", although she

confirms that "it is not entirely clear who exactly were its constituents" (Dunn 98). Those "constituents" had themselves different views on the group, when questioned on or referring to it. Leonard Woolf, in another instance, calls it "a society or group" which "grew up in London during the years 1907 to 1914" (*Sowing* 155). His lack of accuracy regarding dates is due to the fact that he was in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) at the time and his only account of the event came from Thoby's or Strachey's letters.

As to Virginia herself, she enjoyed the new conditions of her life and did not seek definitions. Most important of all, she and Vanessa (who soon founded the *Friday Club* for discussion of the visual arts) were now free from that world of social dinners and parties which George Duckworth had wanted to impose on them. Their new home seemed to Virginia "the most beautiful, the most exciting, the most romantic place in the world" (MB 164). Having earned money with her writing, Virginia wanted to travel. On 29 March she and Adrian went by train to Liverpool where they embarked on the *Anselm*, "all white & clean and luxurious" (APA 258), bound for the Iberian Peninsula. On 5 April they arrived at Porto's harbour, Leixões – *Leshoenis*, as she explains the word is pronounced –, and she notes that it "is a red roofed Southern looking town, flashing in the evening sun, behind which there is a steep bank with feathery trees" (APA 261); but they could only land next day in the morning. They took a tram to Porto "in a broiling sun, an English August sun"; they went to the ship's agents and then "with Lloyds to see over the 'Lodge' of one of the great port wine merchants, which was a cool scented place (probably, Silva and Cosens of Vila Nova de Gaia)" (APA 261). In the evening they took the train to Lisbon, where they arrived at 10:30 pm.

In 1906 Virginia wrote her first short fiction, which she left untitled and is now known by the name of its protagonists, "Phyllis and Rosamond", since Susan Dick included it in her edition of Virginia Woolf's *Complete Shorter Fiction* (pp. 17-29). In this narrative we find the description of two young girls of a Victorian milieu, who had no further prospects for the future other than using their social skills to attract and secure a prospective husband. Victorian girls were not asked to use their brains, but some of them did, in a subterranean, unuttered way, merely for personal use in behaviour strategy. Of the two sisters, Rosamond is the one who thinks, whose advices are followed, who "might have done better", in her sister's opinion. In Woolf's fiction, written between 20 and 23 June 1906 (APA 309), the situation of the Hibbert sisters and the rules and rituals of their Victorian Kensington family are shown in contrast to the life of another London family, the Tristrams, who, very symptomatically,

live in Bloomsbury, a "distant and unfashionable quarter of London" as the text clarifies (CSF 24). One evening, the Kensington girls – or, rather, young ladies - pay a visit to the Bloomsbury friends, and they wonder and marvel at the different world they find there. Phyllis, who arrived later because she had to accompany her parents to a very formal dinner party, feels ill at ease when she notes how overdressed she is:

She saw herself enter into the smokey room where people sat on the floor, and the host wore a shooting jacket, with her arch little head held high, and her mouth pursed as though for an epigram. [...] She kept looking round at the dozen people who were sitting there, with a sense of bewilderment. [...] 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 (CSF 24).

Even in such early writing, the author brings the reader to the core of the action, makes him/her observe and judge some flashes of real life, of intimate thoughts and schemes, as she would do later in *The Voyage Out*, where the text, a seemingly conventional plot of love and adventure, may sometimes lead the reader's imagination to a palimpsest of the things that are not overtly said. In a way or another, Woolf would act likewise in all the remainder of her writings, using – as Marshik points out – "irony, humour and plot to encourage readers to re-examine the world around them, particularly to reevaluate the censorship that remained an obstacle to the full and free exercise of public speech" (Marshik 90); mainly, it should be added, the censorship that was an obstacle to women's development.

It is remarkable that this life-long concern of Woolf's should be so firmly present in her first attempts with words. In "Phyllis and Rosamond", the future Virginia Woolf shows the two worlds side by side, clearly to the advantage of the new one, as stressed in the dialogue of Phyllis with Sylvia Tristram. When comparing their respective lives, Phyllis notes: "Really, Miss Tristram, you must remember that most young ladies are slaves; and you mustn't insult me because you happen to be free." (CSF 27). The slave condition of the female sex in Victorian society can be said to leave the fashionable Hibbert sisters at the level of prostitutes, considering that both conditions were "produced by and yet excluded from the masculinist culture that led to the Great War" (Marshik 107). Such a consideration lends an extra poignancy to Phyllis's final remark to her Bloomsbury friend: "don't you see what an ideal life yours is?" (CSF 27).

Woolf is so often autobiographical in her writings that here, too, we

can find matter for parallels between fiction and life. The two sisters might be Vanessa and Virginia, the younger one being the one who thinks. And the coexistence of these two so different worlds as depicted in this text may well be a paradigm of the two distinct worlds to which Woolf belonged. The marks they left in her writings are quite noticeable: Bloomsbury (and by Bloomsbury I mean the way of life the Stephen siblings led in their new home) helped her acquire a life of her own, whilst her writing helped her exorcise her Victorian roots and upbringing which were ever so strong. As the writer herself ponders in a moment of self-appreciation, one of the wilful habits of the brain makes it work only at its own terms. To cope with this duality of perspective, the writer had to face it from the beginning, and this she did by actualizing the two different worlds in "Phyllis and Rosamond".

Years later, a counterpart of this dual situation is described with more refinement of writing and details in Woolf's second novel, *Night and Day*, where the conventional family is given the name Hilbery, in close correspondence to Hibbert. Katharine Hilbery, a mixture of Phyllis and Rosamond Hibbert, encounters and compares life styles and intellectual interests with Mary Datchet, a progressive feminist version of the Tristram sisters. As so often in her writing experience, Woolf needed more than one attempt to dispose of the problematic or painful remembrances of her past. The inner struggles between her two worlds and her two dispositions were visible throughout her life and work, and neither of them was strong enough to permanently annihilate the other.

One can well imply from Woolf's own confession to the *Memoir Club* that the snob in her is no more than a mask she puts on to hide her shyness and lack of self-confidence. The Bloomsbury Group and their informal meetings gave her the opportunity to discuss the subjects she loved with intellectual peers of both sexes. She could then be entirely herself and display her conversational gifts freely, taking a keen interest in the sometimes rather heated discussions with other writers and artists of her level who happened to be friends as well. Woolf is known to have enjoyed parties and their "fountain of gold and diamond dust which obscures the solid truth" (MB 188), to the extreme of having to be protected from excessive excitement by her devoted guardian of husband. However, it can be observed that she is happy and lively only in those parties where she feels herself in a kind of family "best circle"; to those "outside of the pale" she may indeed seem haughty and snob: she has to protect herself, as implicitly revealed in her "Am I a Snob" confession. She is then not far from that Victorian prototype Phyllis in the Bloomsbury Tristrams



party, although time and friends have wrought a difference in her behaviour: an icon, almost a priestess within the Group, she is protected by that armour when confronting the mob she secretly fears, and she puts on a show of the haughty intellectual, the untouchable quasi-divinity who may condescend to smile in favourable moments but who may turn dangerously offensive and sarcastic when displeased. Woolf herself tells us in 1924 that Vita Sackville-West's cousin, "the heir of Radcliffe", "implores her to resist the contamination of Bloomsbury, personified in the serpent destroyer, V.W." (D-II 324). After all, she was used already to such and similar opinions, but the only judgements that counted for her were those of her close friends.

As far back as 1904, just after the severe breakdown that incapacitated her during the summer months, Virginia Stephen had already the notion of her excessive self-consciousness that might lead her to act as a kind of "self-centred outsider" in the world. She confides then to Violet Dickinson: "I do think I may emerge less selfish and cocksure than I went in and with greater understanding of the troubles of others" (L-I 143). This was also, in a way, the "Bloomsbury therapy": the comfort of counting on a circle of faithful friends, the mind-enriching life in a mixed group of her intellectual level, helped Woolf strengthen her personality and, with it, that kind of broader disposition towards humanity in general, and particularly towards the members of her set.

"Happily I'm *Bloomsbury* myself", she says when she stresses

the dominion that *Bloomsbury* exercises over the sane and the insane alike seems to be sufficient to turn the brains of the most robust. Happily, I'm *Bloomsbury* myself, and thus immune; but I'm not altogether ignorant of what they mean, & its a hypnotism very difficult to shake off, because there's some foundation for it (D-I 105, 14 January 1918).

Woolf feels herself immune since she *is Bloomsbury*, but in reality she could not be immune to the *Bloomsbury* dominion and hypnotism, that peculiar flavour and atmosphere which actually helped build her adult self, both as a human being and as a writer. In return, however, she gave a decisive contribution to *Bloomsbury's* brilliance and everlasting important place in English literature and society.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *The Midnight Society*, a reading group meeting at Clive Bell's rooms in Cambridge, included Thoby Stephen, Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf and Saxon Sydney-Turner.
- <sup>2</sup> The meetings were meant to start a month earlier, but on 16 February only Sydney-Turner had turned up (cf. Bell, 97: "he and his host and the dog Gurth formed the entire company").
- <sup>3</sup> Quoted in Spater and Parsons, p.33.
- <sup>4</sup> The *Memoir Club* was an idea of Desmond MacCarthy's wife, Molly, in the 1920s. At each meeting one member of the Group would partake with the others some personal reminiscences uttered (or read) with the utmost openness and no prejudices. This practice helped establish some points of the respective authors' biographies.
- <sup>5</sup> Woolf's Bloomsbury home at the time.
- <sup>6</sup> Quentin Bell says, in *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, that Euphrosyne "was a volume of poems, published privately in 1905, to which Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey, Walter Lamb, Saxon Sydney-Turner, Leonard Woolf and some others contributed and to which they seldom alluded in later life, so that the book would have been forgotten if Virginia had not been careful to keep its memory green. It was certainly an anti-climax; none of the contributors were true poets. Virginia laughed at it and began a scathing essay upon it and its contributors (See Appendix C)" (98).

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