The Aesthetic Principles of Bloomsbury

Vanessa Bell, Virginia Woolf in a Deckchair (1912), Oil on board

Leonard Woolf, Virginia’s husband, once said that this portrait was “more like Virginia in its way than anything else of her.”
“By far the most valuable things, which we know or can imagine, are certain states of consciousness, which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects. No one, probably, who has asked himself the question, has ever doubted that personal affection and the appreciation of what is beautiful in Art or Nature, are good in themselves.” G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*
G.E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* (1903)

- Emphasis on friendship. The relationships among the members of Bloomsbury are an important part of Moore’s philosophy. Something intrinsically good or beautiful—even if society would disagree (homosexuality).

- “Only connect”

- Prudery, insincerity and “good manners” make an honest friendship impossible.

- These veritable traits of the Victorian Age had segregated the sexes and isolated individuals, according to the Bloomsberries.
The Bloomsbury members were aesthetes—they were concerned primarily with feelings and the expression of feelings. What was felt was right, however it was regarded by society: if it was felt it was to be expressed, either emotionally in a human relationship, or artistically in words or pictures.

1. One who cultivates an unusually high sensitivity to beauty, as in art or nature.
2. One whose pursuit and admiration of beauty is regarded as excessive or affected.
Bell began to work with Grant, a younger painter, whose work she admired, from around 1913 and they subsequently fell in love. Its use of rich, vibrant colour and pattern demonstrates Grant's adoption of a Post-Impressionist style.

Vanessa Bell by Duncan Grant, 1918, oil on canvas, National Portrait Gallery, London
Roger Fry arranged the two post-impressionist exhibitions (1910 and 1912).

He has little respect for artists who concerns themselves with what he calls the “childish problems of photographic representation.”

Vanessa Bell and Roger Fry agreed that the artist who is preoccupied with exact representation is likely to neglect the form of his work.
It must be admitted that if imitation is the sole purpose of the graphic arts, it is surprising that the works of such arts are ever looked upon as more than curiosities, or ingenious toys, are ever taken seriously by grown-up people. Moreover, it will be surprising that they have no recognizable affinity with other arts, such as music or architecture, in which imitation of actual objects is a negligible quantity.

Roger Fry, “An Essay in Aesthetics” (1909)
Ford Madox Ford “On Impressionism” (1913): “The Impressionist gives you, as a rule, the fruits of his own observations and the fruits of his own observations alone.”

Impressionists were interested in capturing the fleeting impressions of light and colour.

Claude Monet, Impression Sunrise, 1872
Roger Fry coined the term post-impressionist: Breaking free of the naturalism of Impressionism in the late 1880s, a group of young painters sought independent artistic styles for expressing emotions rather than simply optical impressions, concentrating on themes of deeper symbolism. Through the use of simplified colors and definitive forms, their art was characterized by a renewed aesthetic sense as well as abstract tendencies. (MetMuseum)

Paul Cézanne, Still Life with a Curtain, oil on canvas (1895),
The impressionist/post-impressionist artist finds a new significance in objects and landscapes—in fact, in all that surrounds him. The experiences that the artist has before nature have an emotional and spiritual meaning so important to him that he feels them to be more real and permanent than anything else he knows.

He externalizes this experience by creating a work of art.
Vincent van Gogh exaggerated the bright colours that impressionists used and wanted to convey passionate emotion. (Vincent van Gogh, Starry Night, 1889)
Henri Matisse, *La Danse*, oil on canvas, 1909 - displayed at the second post-impressionist exhibition.
“Grant’s painting of Bell is a curious combination of modernism and conventionality. The bold red of Bell’s dress with its complementary green outlining, the striking green shadows on her face and neck, the enlargement of her hands, and the emphasis on the flat decorative patterning of the wall behind the chair all reveal Grant’s knowledge of French Post-Impressionism. At the same time, however, the picture displays qualities more reminiscent of Victorian academic painting; these qualities include the illusion of three-dimensional space ... the sitter’s languid pose, and the beautifully delicate rendering of her facial features. It is tempting to read the stylistic dualities in this work as symptomatic of Grant’s unconscious ambivalences toward Bell as an older woman, painter and equal, friend and love” (B. J. Elliott, Jo-Ann Wallace, Women Writers and Artists: Modernist (Im)Positionings 85).
“Bell frequently questioned her own artistic ability. Perhaps revealingly, Bell portrayed herself with un-focused eyes (actually devoid of pupils), staring mistily into space in her own Self-Portrait dated circa 1915.

On other one hand, it must be acknowledged that this image of Bell conveys great strength in terms of her large physical size, foreground positions, and pyramidal stability.

The sense of Bell’s power is reinforced by her confident handling of modernist devices, ranging from the bold patterning of her dress and abstract background (both of which flatten the picture plane) to the thin painterly application of blocks of colours that reveal the sketchy pencil underdrawing and reserve ground of the primed canvas.

And yet, on the other hand, this demonstration of technical bravado is hardly echoed in the pose of the painter who is offered to the viewer as a woman at leisure without brushes, palette, or easel”

(B. J. Elliott, Jo-Ann Wallace, Women Writers and Artists: Modernist (Im)Positionings 88)
Duncan Grant, Portrait of David Garnett, Oil on board, 1930

Vanessa Bell Painting by Duncan Grant, Oil on Canvas, 1915
In 1916, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant moved to Charleston Farmhouse. It became a meeting place for the Bloomsbury members. Garnett, Clive Bell and Maynard Keynes lived at Charleston for considerable periods; Virginia and Leonard Woolf, E. M. Forster, Lytton Strachey and Roger Fry were frequent visitors.

Charleston functioned as a refuge—a haven from two World wars and the turmoil of Bloomsbury emotions:

In the year that she died (1961), Vanessa wrote,

“Yesterday Leonard and Morgan [E.M.] Forster came to lunch & seemed to enjoy themselves--Duncan is painting, I am sitting in my room with the door open between us. The garden is full of Red Admirals,, & birds & apples & I hope to return to my studio in a day or two.”

 Members and friends of the Bloomsbury group in the walled garden at Charleston, 1928. From left to right: Francis Partridge, Quentin and Julian Bell, Duncan Grant, Clive Bell and Beatrice Mayor. Roger Fry seated with Raymond Mortimer in front. Photograph © The Charleston Trust

Charleston functioned as a refuge—a haven from two World wars and the turmoil of Bloomsbury emotions:

In the year that she died (1961), Vanessa wrote,

“Yesterday Leonard and Morgan [E.M.] Forster came to lunch & seemed to enjoy themselves--Duncan is painting, I am sitting in my room with the door open between us. The garden is full of Red Admirals, & birds & apples & I hope to return to my studio in a day or two.”

(Post)Impressionism and Literature

Roger Fry asked Virginia Woolf: “Why was there no English novelist who took his art seriously? Why were they all engrossed in childish problems of photographic representation?”

According to Virginia Woolf, Roger Fry “never found time to work out his theory of the influence of post-impressionism upon literature.”

Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”: In or about December, 1910, human character changed. I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; and, since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910.
Impressionism: as a literary term, writing that seeks to capture fleeting impressions of characters, settings, and events, depicted subjectively as they appear through the filter of the writer’s moods and personal perceptions. Impressionist works thus tend to be short on objective, concrete details of the kind we associate with conventional settings and plots but detailed in their presentation of characters’ emotions, thoughts, and perceptions. The French Symbolists, other writers active in the aesthetic movement, and stream-of-consciousness novelists have all been termed impressionists or, at least, impressionistic in their writing. (Examples: Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf)

The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms
Roger Fry compared Woolf’s method with Cubism—in which objects are analyzed, broken up and reassembled in an abstracted form—instead of depicting objects from one viewpoint, the artist depicts the subject from a multitude of viewpoints to represent the subject in a greater context (pioneered by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso)
Cubism in Woolf’s Writing

- The plane in Mrs. Dalloway, which is analyzed from different perspectives (read page 21)
- What principles of impressionism or cubism does Woolf apply in “The Mark on the Wall” (1921)?
Cubism in Woolf’s Writing

- The plane in Mrs. Dalloway, which is analyzed from different perspectives (read page 21)

- What principles of impressionism or cubism does Woolf apply in “The Mark on the Wall”?
  - The reality of the mark on the wall is expressed as a series of exploratory observations.
  - The whole story takes place in the narrator’s mind: its events are mental not physical.
  - Woolf describes the rhythms of wandering and return or expansion and contraction.
I remember that I was smoking a cigarette when I looked up and saw the mark on the wall for the first time. I looked up through the smoke of my cigarette and my eye lodged for a moment upon the burning coals, and that old fancy of the crimson flag flapping from the castle tower came into my mind, and I thought of the cavalcade of red knights riding up the side of the black rock. Rather to my relief the sight of the mark interrupted the fancy, for it is an old fancy, an automatic fancy, made as a child perhaps. The mark was a small round mark, black upon the white wall, about six or seven inches above the mantelpiece.
The Mark on the Wall

I remember that I was smoking a cigarette when I looked up and saw the mark on the wall for the first time. I looked up through the smoke of my cigarette and my eye lodged for a moment upon the burning coals, and that old fancy of the crimson flag flapping from the castle tower came into my mind, and I thought of the cavalcade of red knights riding up the side of the black rock. Rather to my relief the sight of the mark interrupted the fancy, for it is an old fancy, an automatic fancy, made as a child perhaps. The mark was a small round mark, black upon the white wall, about six or seven inches above the mantelpiece.

► The cigarette smoke creates a filter, symbolizing in which the world around us is always filtered through our individual consciousness.
“The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday”

Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction”

Impression of Mrs. Brown – page 12.
“The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday ... Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.”
Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction”

➢ Materialist vs. spiritual
Stream of consciousness (sometimes confused with automatic writing): a literary technique that approximates the flow (or jumble) of thoughts and sensory impressions that pass through the mind each instant. Great value is placed on the interior mental and emotional processes of individuals, rather than on the exterior world that their thinking reflects. (Examples of stream-of-consciousness writers: Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner)
In “The Mark on the Wall,” Woolf sets up two opposing sets of knowledge:

- Rational-Scientific (masculine)
  - Whitaker’s Table of Precedency

- An attitude that relishes uncertainty, resists closure, and celebrates contradiction and puzzlement.

Whitaker’s Almanack is a reference book (first produced in 1868) which is published on an annual basis. It contains a section dealing with precedence, the order in which dignitaries should be addressed, seated, acknowledged etc. on official occasions.

Adrian Hunter, The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English
In “The Mark on the Wall,” Woolf sets up two opposing sets of knowledge:

- Rational-Scientific (masculine) - Whitaker’s Table of Precedency
- An attitude that relishes uncertainty, resists closure, and celebrates contradiction and puzzlement.

The narrator doesn’t want to know what the mark on the wall is, because it would arrest the meandering of the mind.

Adrian Hunter, The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English
In “The Mark on the Wall,” Woolf sets up two opposing sets of knowledge:

The narrator doesn’t want to know what the mark on the wall is, because it would arrest the meandering of the mind.

“No, no, nothing is proved, nothing is known ... What are our learned men save the descendants of witches and hermits who crouched in caves and in woods brewing herbs, interrogating shrew-mice and writing down the language of the stars?”

“No, no, nothing is proved, nothing is known … What are our learned men save the descendants of witches and hermits who crouched in caves and in woods brewing herbs, interrogating shrew-mice and writing down the language of the stars?”

“Though it’s no good buying newspapers.... Nothing ever happens. Curse this war; God damn this war!... All the same, I don’t see why we should have a snail on our wall.”

Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail.
Impression of Mrs. Brown:

There was something pinched about her—a look of suffering, of apprehension, and, in addition, she was extremely small. Her feet, in their clean little boots, scarcely touched the floor. I felt she had nobody to support her; that she had to make up her mind for herself; that, having been deserted, or left a widow, years ago, she had led an anxious, harried life, bringing up an only son, perhaps, who, as likely as not, was by this time beginning to go to the bad. (Woolf, Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown)

What is the value of Woolf’s description of character? How does it differ from Edwardian descriptions of character?
The narrator gives us a fragmented account of Mrs. Brown:

The impression she made was overwhelming. It came pouring out like a draught, like a smell of burning. What was it composed of—that overwhelming and peculiar impression? Myriads of irrelevant and incongruous ideas crowd into one’s head on such occasions; one sees the person, one sees Mrs. Brown, in the centre of all sorts of different scenes. I thought of her in a seaside house, among queer ornaments: sea-urchins, models of ships in glass cases. Her husband’s medals were on the mantelpiece. She popped in and out of the room, perching on the edges of chairs, picking meals out of saucers, indulging in long, silent stares. The caterpillars and the oak-trees seemed to imply all that. (12)

➢ The narrator does not fully know Mrs. Brown: “And I have never seen her again, and I shall never know what became of her. The story ends without any point to it.”

➢ But the narrator also does not fully know the self: what ideas are relevant or irrelevant?
Woolf recognizes the value of uncertainty, darkness, partial knowledge.

THE SENSATION OF CROSSING THE STREET, 1913 BY STANLEY CURSITER
Materialist vs. spiritual:

Mr. Bennett, alone of the Edwardians, would keep his eyes in the carriage. He, indeed, would observe every detail with immense care. He would notice the advertisements; the pictures of Swanage and Portsmouth; the way in which the cushion bulged between the buttons; how Mrs. Brown wore a brooch which had cost three-and-ten-three at Whitworth's bazaar; and had mended both gloves—indeed the thumb of the left-hand glove had been replaced. (15)

They have given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there.
Conclusion cont’d

- Fragmented knowledge expressed in cubist art forms, in which objects are broken up:
  - But do not expect just at present a complete and satisfactory presentation of her. Tolerate the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure. Your help is invoked in a good cause. For I will make one final and surpassingly rash prediction—we are trembling on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature. But it can only be reached if we are determined never, never to desert Mrs. Brown.
- Celebration of the subjective and the internal.

Vanessa Bell, *Virginia Woolf in a Deckchair* (1912), Oil on board. Mimi and Peter Haas. (Leonard Woolf, Virginia’s husband, once said that this portrait was “more like Virginia in its way than anything else of her.”)