

UTOPIAN WHOLES:
VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *THE WAVES* AND THE BLOOMSBURY GROUP

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On December 21st 1924, Virginia Woolf wrote on the Bloomsbury Group in her diary: “All our Bloomsbury relationships flourish, grow in lustiness. Suppose our set to survive another 20 years, I tremble to think how thickly knit & grown together it will be” (*Diary* 2 326). Today, Woolf is one of the best-known members of the Bloomsbury Group which met regularly during the first half of the twentieth century. In this paper I will compare this group of friends to a similar group of friends in Virginia Woolf's 1931 novel *The Waves*. To do so I use G. E. Moore's concept of the organic whole and investigate whether *The Waves* and the Bloomsbury Group can be called utopian. First, however, I want to briefly discuss the Group in general.

Opinions vary on who belonged to the Bloomsbury Group, when it started and what unified it. According to Leonard Woolf, the Bloomsbury Group consisted of himself and his wife Virginia Woolf, “Vanessa and Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey, John Maynard Keynes, Duncan Grant, Roger Fry, E. M. Forster, Saxon Sydney-Turner, Adrian Stephen and Desmond and Mary MacCarthy (*Victorian Bloomsbury* 4).¹ The roots of the group can be traced to the beginning of the twentieth century when the men met at Cambridge and

¹ Leonard Woolf: writer, publisher, civil servant; Virginia Woolf: writer, publisher; Vanessa Bell: painter; Clive Bell: art critic; Lytton Strachey: historian; John Maynard Keynes: economist; Duncan Grant: painter; Roger Fry: art critic, painter; E. M. Forster: writer; Saxon Sydney-Turner: civil servant; Adrian Stephen: psychoanalyst; Desmond MacCarthy: journalist, editor; Mary MacCarthy: writer.

Thoby Stephen began his Gordon Square Thursday evenings at which his sisters, Vanessa and Virginia Stephen, were also present.

There appears to have been no common theory underlying the Bloomsbury Group. In the context of this conference the comparison Leonard Woolf made between the Bloomsbury Group and similar groups is interesting. He writes that "There have often been groups of people, writers and artists, who were not only friends, but were consciously united by a common doctrine and object, or purpose artistic or social. [...] Our group was quite different. Its basis was friendship, which in some cases developed into love and marriage" (qtd. in *Bloomsbury* 113). Friendship was the unifying force. As S. P. Rosenbaum also notes: "Bloomsbury's associations included philosophical, artistic, literary, political, economic and moral affinities in addition to their friendships, but the affinities accompanied the friendships rather than the other way around" (*Victorian Bloomsbury* 3).

Naturally, the Group did share certain common influences, one of the them being the ideas of the philosopher G. E. Moore. Leonard Woolf, who met Moore at Cambridge, claims that Moore's ideas had a purifying influence on Bloomsbury's painting and writing: "Artistically the purification can [...] be traced in the clarity, light, absence of humbug of Virginia [Woolf]'s literary style and perhaps Vanessa [Bell]'s painting. They have a quality noted by Maynard [Keynes] in Moorism, the getting rid of 'irrelevant extraneous matter'" (qtd. in *Victorian Bloomsbury* 225). It is also from the philosophy of Moore that Rosenbaum takes the term "organic whole" with which he characterizes the Bloomsbury Group. Just as organic wholes are what they

are, “wholes – and not sums of their parts” (*Victorian Bloomsbury* 228), the Bloomsbury Group’s interconnectedness made their writing “something quite different than the sum of its individual achievements” (*Victorian Bloomsbury* 1).

Virginia Woolf’s novel *The Waves* is connected more than any of her other novels to the Bloomsbury Group. Hermione Lee calls *The Waves* Woolf’s “Bloomsbury novel” (Lee 269) and Rosenbaum mentions that the novel is concerned with “the interrelations of the Bloomsbury Group” (*Georgian Bloomsbury* 148). *The Waves* is the story of six characters whose conversations and monologues make up the novel. Their story is interspersed by interludes in which a narrator traces the movement of the sun through a day, as well as the movement of the seasons through the year. At the beginning of the novel the sun rises and the six characters are children, playing in a paradisaal garden. At school they meet a seventh character, Percival. He remains silent and his life is told by his friends. The novel ends at the end of the day when only one speaker – Bernard – is left.

In the novel the characters form an organic whole because their lives and thoughts are so entwined. This is for example demonstrated by their method of communication, which Susan Gorksy has called “cosmic communication”. Cosmic communication is “the internationalization of another’s unexpressed thoughts and experiences” (Gorksy 450). There are numerous instances in the novel in which the characters repeat phrases or images that were previously only thought by others. Also, they have a way of picking up on each other’s thoughts to form a conversation. An apt example

of this are the characters' thoughts during a dinner. Louis imagines a globe that is made by them together; Jinny picks up on this and Rhoda follows by thinking: "Forests and far countries on the other side of the world [...] are in it; seas and jungle; the howlings of jackals and moonlight falling upon some high peak where the eagle soars" (TW 109). Neville adds to this: "Happiness is in it [...] and the quiet of ordinary things", followed by Susan who adds that "Weekdays are in it", and Bernard rounds the description off with the words "What is to come is in it" (TW 109).

The way in which the characters in *The Waves* influence each other is an important part of their being an organic whole. Rosenbaum – and other critics – have written that the Bloomsbury Group influenced each other greatly as well; much like the characters in *The Waves* one might assume. To exemplify this, Rosenbaum uses the dedications to the different works written by the Group: "Leonard Woolf dedicated *The Village in the Jungle* to Virginia Woolf and *The Wise Virgins* to Desmond MacCarthy. Virginia Woolf dedicated *The Voyage Out* to Leonard Woolf and *Night and Day* to Vanessa Bell. Lytton Strachey dedicated *Queen Victoria* to Virginia Woolf [...] and *Books and Characters* to John Maynard Keynes. Virginia Woolf dedicated *The Common Reader* to Strachey; later she regretted not having dedicated *To the Lighthouse* to Roger Fry." (*Victorian Bloomsbury* 10-1).

Virginia Woolf regretted not dedicating her novel *To the Lighthouse* to Roger Fry. Fry was an art critic, one of the first to bring post-impressionism to Britain with his post-impressionist exhibition in December 1910, and a big influence on artists in the Bloomsbury Group such as Vanessa Bell. However,

his ideas also influenced Virginia Woolf's writing and in particular her novel *To the Lighthouse*. According to Sue Roe, while writing this novel Virginia Woolf was inspired by Fry's ideas, in particular those he describes in his book *Vision and Design*. In this work Fry writes that "one chief aspect of order in a work of art is unity [...] in a picture this unity is due to a balancing of the attractions of the eye about the central line of the picture" (qtd. in Roe 168). Fry's words are echoed in *To the Lighthouse* by the painter in the novel, Lily Briscoe. She is painting a picture that has Mrs. Ramsay and her youngest son James in it, but as Lily explains, "the picture was not of them" (TL 59). She had only introduced them in the picture to keep the balance and unity in it. "It was a question", she says, of "how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left" (TL 60). Apart from Fry's influence on the character of Lily, Rosenbaum claims that Virginia Woolf was a literary post-impressionist because of "her descriptions of shifting viewpoints or transitory states of mind, and the painterly use of light and colour in prose." (*Georgian Bloomsbury* 10).

Vanessa Bell was also influenced by Fry's ideas. In her turn, she also influenced her sister, Virginia Woolf. Most obviously their works are connected through the covers that Vanessa Bell designed for Virginia Woolf's novels, called "optical echoes of the books" (*Victorian Bloomsbury* 23) by Rosenbaum. However, the interconnectedness reached beyond the covers of the novels. In her biography of Virginia Woolf Lee describes Vanessa Bell's letter in which she responded to *The Waves*. Vanessa Bell draws an analogy "between her own recent painting (of a room with a nurse and a mother, two

children and toys on the floor)" (Lee 119) and *The Waves*. As she writes "It means something of the same sort that you seem to me to mean" (qtd. in Lee 119). Virginia Woolf replied to her sister's letter with the words "I always feel I'm writing more for you than for anybody" (qtd. in Lee 119). Indeed the influence that others had on her writing is also revealed in a diary entry of November 7th 1928, written while Virginia Woolf was writing *The Waves*: "[The novel] was to be an abstract mystical eyeless book: a playpoem. And there is affectation in being too mystical, too abstract; saying Nessa & Roger & Duncan & Ethal Sands admire that: it is the uncompromising side of me; therefore I had better win their approval -- " (*Diary* 3 203).

Although she doesn't mention him in this diary entry, Virginia Woolf was also very much influenced by the other novelist in Bloomsbury: E. M. Forster. Forster is sometimes not seen as a member of the Bloomsbury Group, but Rosenbaum believes that Forster's "fiction helped to shape Bloomsbury's fiction; their criticism contributed to his criticism" (*Edwardian Bloomsbury* 52). Woolf and Forster "related to one another as practicing novelists, as critics who review each other's work, and as friends within their Bloomsbury connections" (Hoffman 47). Michael Hoffman and Ann Ter Haar claim that of all her critics, Woolf valued Forster's judgement most. While waiting for responses to *Mrs. Dalloway* Woolf writes in her diary: "The only judgment on Mrs. D I await with trepidation (but that's too strong) is Morgan's. He will say something enlightening" (*Diary* 3 22). Three days later she has received his letter: "Well, Morgan admires [...] This is a weight off my mind" (*Diary* 3 24). In 1931 she even copies Forster's response to *The Waves* into her diary. He

wrote: "Its difficult to express oneself about a work which one feels to be so very important but I've the sort of excitement over it which comes from believing that one's encountered a classic" (*Diary* 4 52).

It is the novel that Forster praised so much, *The Waves*, that Hoffman and Ter Haar link to Forster's own novel *Howards End*. Forster's influence on Woolf's novel can be seen in particular in the character of Bernard. According to Hoffman and Ter Haar, Bernard's "ironic, worldly, and somewhat exhausted wisdom seems finally based less on Woolf herself and more on her friend Morgan, in persona, age, and physique" (Hoffman 54). They even suggest that the reliance in Bernard's voice is a way in which Woolf – consciously or unconsciously – represents a kind of authority in her novel. Similarly, the two main protagonists in *Howards End*, Margaret and Helen Schlegel, may have been modelled on Virginia and Vanessa Stephen. Margaret is the central voice in *Howards End*, much like Bernard is the central voice in *The Waves*.

As the examples I have mentioned demonstrate, in creating the organic whole of *The Waves* Virginia Woolf was obviously influenced by her friends of the Bloomsbury Group. However, I believe Bloomsbury cannot be called a utopia, whereas the childhood of the characters in *The Waves*, set in an idyllic garden, is obviously utopian. In this garden the characters form one – their words seamlessly fit together and there is nothing outside of their world than the six of them. After their separation, "the movement out of their prelapsarian oneness" (Hoffman 53) as Hoffman and Ter Haar call it, they spend the rest of their lives and the rest of the novel attempting to return to

this oneness. Their failure is aptly illustrated by Louis, who calls them “For ever [...] divided” (TW 177). In his final soliloquy Bernard describes the reason for their division. Although they grew up together in the garden they were all different. As he said, “Louis was disgusted by the nature of human flesh; Rhoda by our cruelty; Susan could not share; Neville wanted order; Jinny love; and so on” (TW 186). As a result, moving out of the garden – out of their utopia – was painful. As Bernard says, “We suffered terribly as we became separate bodies” (TW 186).

Bloomsbury always were separate bodies. They met in their early twenties, in Cambridge, in London – not during childhood in a utopian garden. However, Bloomsbury also seemed to long for a time that had passed, illustrated by the founding of the Memoir Club in the 1920s. The purpose of this club was to commemorate Old Bloomsbury, defined by Virginia Woolf as the time between 1904 and 1914 (*Moments of Being* 170). Vanessa Stephen’s marriage to Clive Bell in 1907 was, as Woolf writes, when “the first chapter of Old Bloomsbury came to an end” (*Moments of Being* 170). Old Bloomsbury had been “A small concentrated world dwelling inside the much larger and looser world of dances and dinners” (*Moments of Being* 170). But, as Woolf also notes in her memoir, “it could not have gone on” (*Moments of Being* 170). As she writes, “Even if Vanessa had not married, even if Thoby had lived, change was inevitable. We could not have gone on discussing the nature of beauty in the abstract for ever. The young men, as we used to call them, were changing from the general to the personal. [...] Then too one was beginning to criticise, to distinguish, to compare.” (*Moments of Being* 170). The

change that came over Old Bloomsbury occurred because the members changed – much like the characters in *The Waves* changed – and because the world changed.

The last meeting of the Memoir Club was held in 1956. By that time the Bloomsbury Group was no longer as “thickly knit & grown together” (*Diary 2* 326) as Virginia Woolf had hoped it would be. Lytton Strachey had died in 1932, Roger Fry in 1934 and Julian Bell – Vanessa and Clive Bell’s son – in 1937. It was Julian Bell’s death in particular that tore the Group apart. As Rosenbaum writes, “the death of Julian Bell [...] effectively shattered Bloomsbury. [...] Julian’s death belonged to the public events that overwhelmed Bloomsbury and the world” (*Bloomsbury* 43). In 1941 Virginia Woolf committed suicide; John Maynard Keynes died in 1946, Adrian Stephen in 1948, Desmond MacCarthy in 1952 and his wife Mary in 1953. At the last Memoir Club meeting of 1956 very little of what was once Bloomsbury was left. Rosenbaum writes that Julian Bell’s death belonged to the public events that overwhelmed Bloomsbury and the world. Quentin Bell, Vanessa and Clive Bell’s other son, makes a similar comparison. According to him Bloomsbury fell apart much earlier, in the late 1930s when Fascism spread through Europe. Whereas in World War I it had still been possible to be neutral – as Bloomsbury was – in the late 1930s it was not. At that point, “Bloomsbury was confronted by a quarrel in which, believing what they believed, neutrality was impossible. The old pacifism had become irrelevant and the group as a group ceased to exist” (Bell 118). The members changed;

the world changed. If Bloomsbury ever was utopian, it wasn't for long. As Virginia Woolf wrote, it could not have gone on.

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