MARK HUSSEY

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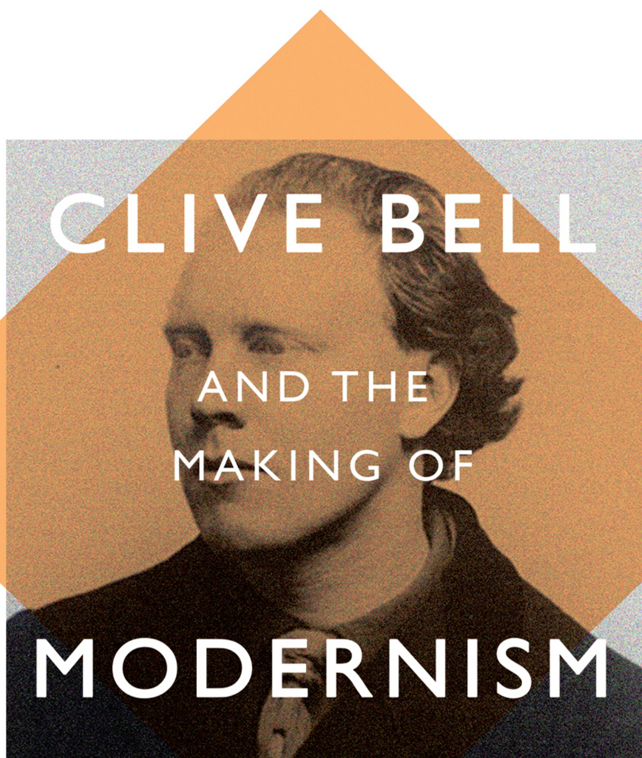
THE TIMES



CLIVE BELL AND THE MAKING OF MODERNISM

'Revelatory'
GUARDIAN

A BIOGRAPHY

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A Note on the Author

MARK HUSSEY, Distinguished Professor of English Emeritus at Pace University in New York City, is best known for his decades of work on Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury. Born in London, he moved to the US in 1982 and worked at the Association of American Publishers and the Sander Gallery in Soho.

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CLIVE BELL AND THE MAKING OF MODERNISM

A Biography

Mark Hussey

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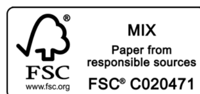

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Contents

Preface ix

PART I BECOMING CLIVE (1881–1907) 1

1. Beginnings 3
2. Cambridge 9
3. A Brace of Partridges 18
4. Paris 23
5. Vanessa 30

PART II *ART* AND LETTERS (1907–1914) 49

6. Virginia 51
7. Roger 81
8. A Hornets' Nest 93
9. Leonard 98
10. Significant Form 104
11. Omega 112
12. A Complete Theory of Visual Art 117

PART III PACIFISTS AND POETS (1914–1918) 123

13. Mary 125
14. Peace at Once 135
15. Art and War 143
16. Tribunals and Tribulations 154
17. Garsington 160
18. Ad Familiares 172
19. Angelica 180

PART IV A HIGHLY CIVILISED LOAFER (1919–1929) 185

20. The New Ballet 187
21. Order and Authority 198
22. Wives and Lovers 214
23. Liberty 228
24. The Lively Arts 232
25. Landmarks 238
26. The End of the Affair 246
27. Insane about Females 268

PART V NOTHING WORSE THAN WAR (1930–1939) 277

28. Clive Agonistes 279
29. An Account of French Painting 289
30. Dancing on a Volcano 294
31. Enjoying Pictures 302
32. Art and the Public 312
33. Your Schoolgirl Mistress 319

34. Today the Struggle 327
35. Warmongers 331
36. Euston Road 337

PART VI CIVILISATION'S FLAME (1939–1949) 343
37. Alarm and Despondency 345
38. Art on Trial 355
39. Collaboration 367
40. Experts and Hoaxes 375
41. Retrospect 385

PART VII OLD FRIENDS (1950–1964) 399
42. Clive Bell Looks at American Art 401
43. Douglas Cooper 419
44. A Gang of Conspirators 423
45. Things Are Never So Bad but They Might Be Worse 431

Epilogue 445

Abbreviations 447
Notes 451
Bibliography 535
Archives and Collections 551
Index 553
Acknowledgments 571
Image Credits 577

Preface

Millions of people every year walk through the main entrance and up the grand staircase of London's National Gallery, just off Trafalgar Square, but few pause to identify the figures in the floor mosaics that decorate the vestibules and halfway landing. If they did, some might recognise the ballerina Margot Fonteyn, portraying 'Delectation', many might see that Winston Churchill represents 'Defiance' and some would know that it is Virginia Woolf on whom the mosaicist, Boris Anrep, modelled Clio, the Muse of History. But how many could identify the figure of Bacchus as Clive Bell, Woolf's brother-in-law, and, in his lifetime, an internationally known and respected writer on art? Even an avid reader of the hundreds of articles and biographies about the 'Bloomsbury Group' knows Bell only as a sort of stock character, a red-faced *bon vivant* who escaped his provincial huntin', shootin' and fishin' upbringing in a nouveau-riche Wiltshire mansion by going up to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he met Thoby Stephen, Leonard Woolf and Lytton Strachey. Such a reader might also know that he later discovered the café life of artists and writers in Paris at the turn of the century, which prepared him to respond positively when Roger Fry invited him to assist in mounting an exhibition of 'post-Impressionist' painting in London in 1910.

For decades, Clive Bell has been refracted through the voluminous commentary on Bloomsbury, leaving a distorted and incomplete image of him that this biography replaces with a more accurate view. Clearing away the accumulated layers of received opinion, this is a work of archaeology, digging down to reveal the tesserae that constitute the

mosaic of a life more complex, more nuanced and more sympathetic than that ossified in Lytton Strachey's witty barbs or Woolf's arch mockery. Although I do not avoid those aspects of Bell's character and behaviour that might cause a reader to cringe, I also correct inaccuracies, such as the claim by a recent biographer that Woolf 'always disliked and distrusted' Bell.

Clive Bell's groundbreaking book *Art* remained in print for fifty years. Brazenly bending the narratives of art history to his purpose, Bell offered baffled English viewers of works by Gauguin, Van Gogh, Picasso and Matisse a way to place them in the tradition which those artists were mistakenly thought to have rejected. When the painters were called 'insane', 'bolsheviks' or 'charlatans', Bell was on the barricades defending them, thereby earning grateful letters throughout his life from young artists and writers for the courage his words had given them to follow their own vision of what art could be. His credo was individual freedom, whether that meant the freedom to make art as one saw fit, to make love to whom one wanted or to say no when the government demanded that one sacrifice one's life for a cause that seemed to be a lie. Before and during the First World War, Bell was a bravely outspoken pacifist, a conviction he grimly held on to despite the tyrannies of the 1930s and a very different global conflict.

For Bell, a society's response to unfamiliar art offered eloquent testimony of its broader views on liberty. In addition to his writings on art, Bell spent his life resisting what he characterised as 'the steady transformation of Puritan prejudice into middle-class opinion'. A schoolboy when the British establishment crushed the rebellious spirit of Oscar Wilde in 1895, Bell lived his life in the service of a Wildean creed of sexual and personal freedom and disdained the notion that art must serve any purpose other than an aesthetic one. Bell was a faithful evangelist for modern art, prescient in his emphasis on the collaborative nature of perception and scathing about the habit of the wealthy to acquire works of art not because they like them but because they bestow prestige. He was thoroughly cosmopolitan and therefore suspect in the opinion of those who adhere to that persistent deep strain of antipathy in England towards anything from across the Channel.

His friends often remarked that what was most memorable about being in Bell's company was his conversation, but any traces of it which

remain in letters or diaries are now so faded as to be hardly visible. As Virginia Woolf wrote, even the most interesting and important talk 'is as elusive as smoke'. This biography depends entirely upon an incomplete written record, and who can say what has been lost in the course of more than a century, a century that witnessed the two most destructive wars in all of human history? Bell seems to have kept every note, card or letter he ever received, but those he sent to others have not often found such dogged hoarders. I have refrained from speculation or invention and tried to strike a reasonable balance between Hilary Spurling's admonition to biographers 'to leave no stone unturned, and above all to turn stones over where no one has looked before', and Henry James' acknowledgement that 'relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw . . . the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so.'

Unlike so many of his celebrated peers, Clive Bell left no reflections on his own life. Even in *Old Friends*, the memoir he created largely by reprinting articles he had written about other people, he is most visible as an expansive host, a gregarious pleasure-seeker whose greatest enjoyment derived from sharing with others his loves, his company, his table, his tastes and, above all, what he felt when he looked at a Cézanne, a Picasso, an early Derain, a Pasmore, a Hitchens or a Grant. A year after Bell's death, the critic Herbert Read wrote a suitable epitaph: 'I prefer to remember him as an officer in the kingdom of the mind, not caring too much for discipline, encouraging insubordination, eager to share his riches with anyone who would knock at his door.'

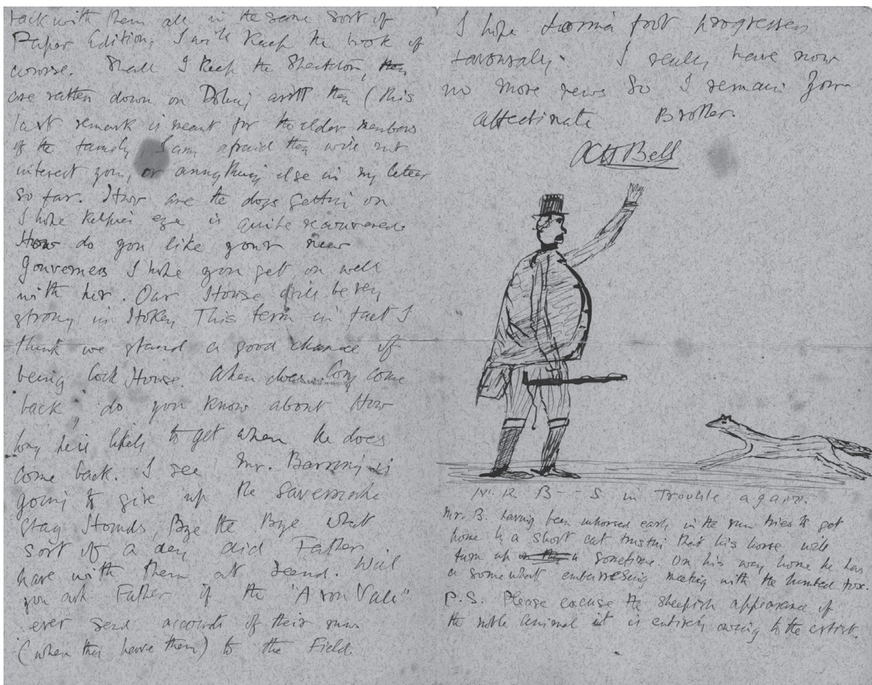
Like Kant, Bell believed that the potential for responding to art with a 'peculiar' emotion is an important aspect of what makes us human. He was 'the right man in the right place' at a momentous time in the history of art. This biography allows Bell to step out of the shadow cast by Bloomsbury, although it also acknowledges that, as Christopher Reed has explained, 'the group continues to stand for something that threatens established beliefs', and Clive Bell was very much part of that.

I

BECOMING CLIVE (1881–1907)

1. Beginnings

Arthur Clive Heward Bell ended a letter to his eight-year-old sister Dorothy with a cartoon of a man holding a whip, towards whom a fox is running. 'Mr. R B – – S in trouble again,' the fourteen-year-old Marlborough schoolboy captioned his drawing: 'Mr. B having been unhorsed early in the run tries to get home by a short cut trusting that his horse will turn up sometime. On his way home he has a somewhat embarrassing meeting with the hunted fox.'


back with them all in the same sort of
Paper Edition, I will keep the book of
course. Shall I keep the Skeleton, ~~they~~
are rather down on Dolly about them (This
last remark is meant for the elder members
of the family.) I am afraid they will not
interest you, or anything else in my letter
so far. How are the dogs getting on
I hope Kelpie's eye is quite recovered.
How do you like your new
Governess I hope you get on well
with her. Our House will be very
strong in Hockey This term in fact I
think we stand a good chance of
being Cock House. When does Cory come
back, do you know about how
long he is likely to get when he does
come back. I see Mr. Barring is
going to give up the Savernake
Stag Hounds, Bye the Bye what
sort of a day did Father
have with them at Seend. Will
you ask Father if the "Avon Vale"
ever send accounts of their runs
(when they have them) to the Field.

I hope Norma's foot progresses
favourably. I really have now
no more news so I remain your
affectionate Brother
ACHBell

Mr. R B – – S in Trouble again.
Mr. B. having been unhorsed early in the run tries to get
home by a short cut trusting that his horse will
turn up ~~on the~~ sometime. On his way home he has
a somewhat embarrassing meeting with the hunted fox.
P.S. Please excuse the sheepish appearance of
the noble animal it is entirely owing to the artist.

Letter to Dorothy Bell from Clive, 1 February 1895

Bell was introduced early to a world of guns, hunting, dogs and game. The third child in his family, he was born on 16 September 1881 in East Shefford, Berkshire. Two years later, his father, William Heward Bell, bought a property in the village of Seend in Wiltshire but promptly had much of the house pulled down to rebuild it on a grander scale over the next decade. Cleeve House was strewn with copies of *The Field*, the *Live Stock Journal* and *Punch*. Snapshots of ponies and dogs filled entire albums and, overlooking the great hall, a gigantic moosehead, bagged by Mr Bell in Canada, complemented the smaller trophies of English bloodsports which lined the walls beneath the minstrels' gallery. The Bell family crest adorned a rather baronial entranceway.

In marrying Hannah Taylor Cory in 1874, William Heward Bell cemented his relations with the firm of Nixon, Taylor, and Cory, a large coal-shipping concern and colliery owner based in Cardiff, where Hannah's father was a partner; William Bell's uncle, John Nixon, founded the company. William's paternal grandfather had been awarded patents in 1846 and 1852 for 'improvements in working in coal mines', but by 1857 he was in the Durham debtors' prison. The Bells seem to have started as small farmers in the Cheviots, struggling until they eventually found success and wealth in coal. Both of Bell's parents, William and Hannah, could trace their families' roots to at least the early 1600s, but the story that 'Heward' – borne as a middle name by several generations of Bell men – was a variant indicating their descent from Hereward the Wake, the eleventh-century leader of English resistance to the Norman conqueror, is almost certainly apocryphal. The nearest the family had come to any kind of fame by the end of the nineteenth century was through Hannah's sister Minnie's marriage in 1876 to Harry Liddell, whose sister Alice inspired Lewis Carroll.

There was little life of the imagination at Cleeve House, however. William Bell became a director of Nixon, Taylor, and Cory in 1901 and the family grew rich through owning coalmines throughout South Wales, in Mountain Ash and Merthyr Vale. By the time Arthur Clive Heward was born, William and Hannah had a son, Cory Heward (b. 1875), and daughter, Lorna (b. 1877), and were successfully established in their provincial world, where William dispensed charity and dabbled as an antiquary. He rode with the Avon Vale hunt, followed the Savernake Stag Hounds and was a first-class shot who regularly took a comfortable lodge in the Scottish Highlands for the season. His grandson Quentin

Clive's parents, William Heward Bell and Hannah Taylor Cory

recalled him as 'an angry little man who shouted at people, and a hypocrite who kept up a pretence of religion'. Of his four children, only Arthur – as he was known to family and friends – would seek to expand his horizons beyond the rather Trollopesque life maintained by his father at Cleeve House.

After prep school at Waynflete, about forty miles from Seend, Bell entered Marlborough College in January 1895. Like many of his and later generations who went on to be writers, he hated his public school. The surviving notebooks of his juvenilia are filled with sentimental love poetry and mockery of athletes and 'swells' (rich boys who disdained both learning and sports). Speaking on the BBC in 1945, Bell described his earliest aesthetic experience at school as occurring not in the classroom but while out fishing. Reading Keats' sonnet 'Bright Star!' had suddenly taken him out of himself in what he recognised was an 'aesthetic' experience. He had had no such response when his parents took him to the National Gallery, although they remarked on his 'peculiar interest' in its contents. Keats' 'moving waters at their priest-like task' had awakened in the schoolboy Bell a sense that his unique sensibility afforded him moments of transcendence.

One summer afternoon, a few weeks before he went up to Cambridge in 1899, Bell was playing tennis on the courts his father had built at Cleeve House, observed by his neighbour Mrs Raven-Hill, wife of the *Punch* cartoonist Leonard Raven-Hill. Raven-Hill had trained as a painter in Paris, had even shown some pictures at the Salon des Beaux Arts, but returned to England to become the art editor of *Pick-me-up*. In 1901, he was appointed junior political cartoonist at *Punch*, to whose editorial meeting in London he would travel every Wednesday. His pretty wife was the belle of the county balls but, for all her allure, Annie was thought by her many admirers to be unassailable.

When he went to the fence at the side of the court to retrieve some balls, Annie quietly complimented Arthur on his curls, making clear that she would not be averse to a visit from him. He soon rode over to the Raven-Hills' house at Bromham, where Annie did not resist his clumsy attempts to kiss her, nor his hurried unbuttoning and loosening of their clothes. The encounter lasted seconds, but the young man rode home in a state of glorious happiness, thrilled to feel the dampness of his shirt against his skin. He would turn eighteen that September, Annie

The Bell Family at Cleeve House (left to right. Lorna, Hannah Taylor Cory, Cory, Clive (seated), Dorothy, W. H. Bell)

was thirty-five; the affair would continue, with some interruptions, until 1914. Mrs Raven-Hill illuminated the dullness of Cleeve House, but in addition to sexual initiation, it seems likely that she gave Bell his first inkling of the world that existed across the Channel, in Paris.

Bell's son Quentin thought that the reproduction of a Degas – an artist almost unknown in England at the time – that his father took with him to Cambridge might have been a gift from his mistress.

The Hall, Cleeve House

2. Cambridge

It was inevitable that Bell and Julian Thoby Stephen would become friends when they went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, in autumn 1899. Thoby was a countryman at heart, despite having been brought up in London in the midst of England's intellectual aristocracy.

He was the eldest son of Leslie Stephen, a celebrated Victorian man of letters whose first wife had been Thackeray's daughter and who counted among his closest friends some of the most prominent novelists and intellectuals of the later nineteenth century, such as George Meredith and Henry James. Thoby's mother was descended from a family of famously beautiful sisters; she herself had modelled for paintings by Edward Burne-Jones and George Frederic Watts. Photographs of his elegantly attractive sisters, Vanessa and Virginia, adorned Thoby's mantelpiece. But he also loved to hunt and to walk among the hedgerows. A keen ornithologist, he decorated the endpapers of his Pindar with myriad deft sketches of birds; his letters were filled with anecdotes about fox hunts and beagling, badgers and horses. Virginia observed that the atmosphere of the countryside hung about her brother always, 'like the dew that collects in beads on a rough coat'. Although their families could hardly have been more different, Bell and Thoby Stephen were drawn together at once by their love of riding and of animals. As their friendship at Cambridge deepened, they discovered they also shared values of tolerance and a disdain for religion, as well as an interest in art. Thoby wrote home to Virginia about his 'astonishing' new friend: 'He's a sort of mixture between Shelley and a sporting country squire,' he told her – someone who continually spouted poetry yet also kept a couple of hunters in the stables.

Bell entered Trinity, one of the largest Cambridge colleges, with an 'exhibition' (scholarship) to read history, a subject which had only recently been deemed worthy of academic study at the university. We can glimpse something of Bell's outlook as a student from the marginalia in his textbooks. In H. Morse Stephens' *Revolutionary Europe, 1789–1815* (1900), for example, his notes praised Danton's efforts in the famous insurrection of 10 August 1792. He agreed with Stephens that the French were 'ready to strike a blow for political liberty' because 'Frenchmen had been in possession of a great measure of personal freedom', in comparison to a country like Germany, but took issue with Stephens' assertions about the French Revolution because they were based only on 'his own unbounded opinion of his own judgments'. Bell applauded Pitt's support of the American colonies in their resistance to British attempts to justify taxing them: Pitt today, he scribbled, 'would be called "A pro-American", "a little Englander", "an enemy of the country" and anti-English, and would probably be stoned in the streets of our great cities'.

Bell achieved a second class in Part I of the history tripos (course of study) in 1901, but his prose led one of the examiners, George Macaulay Trevelyan (great-nephew of the historian Thomas Babington Macaulay), to write to him several weeks before Part II. After praising Bell for his thinking 'and feeling' about religious toleration, Trevelyan took issue with his style:

> you must manage in the tripos to curb your language which often runs horrid riot . . . surely Macaulay's style is not characterized by 'voluptuous beauty' (that is Pater's or Rossetti's) – picturesque beauty is what you mean.
>
> Also your attack on America should be in a more chastened language and I think more reasoned. To say that their 'institutions are not worth 5 years purchase' is absurd; even if you take the worst possible view of their desirability – their stability is another thing. Also to say that 'American & English are not the same language' is just as absurd as to say that Cockney and English are not the same language.

While Trevelyan sympathised with Bell's views of Macaulay and of American institutions, he warned him that the 'violence' of his language

had damaged his chances with the examiners even as they admired the 'force and vigour' of his feelings: 'Never use slang or colloquialisms in an exam.' In his subsequent career as a journalist and art critic, Bell would gleefully deploy just the kind of language his tutor warned against.

In his unofficial guide for new students, *The Freshman at Cambridge*, Evans Hugh cautioned against working too hard, disparaging the notion that getting a first-class in the tripos was the sole purpose of a student's time at the university: 'The all-round man who has many irons in the fire' will have many more opportunities than the 'smug' ('a quiet hard-working student' (OED)), he advised. None among those with whom Bell began to form his circle of friends were 'smugs', though several were quite brilliant. In the 1900 Lent term, a 'Midnight Society' including Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf, Saxon Sydney-Turner and A. J. Robertson began to meet on Saturdays in Bell's rooms to read and discuss plays. In time, the Midnight gave way to the 'X' Society, which met earlier in the day, with Thoby Stephen, Walter Lamb and D. S. Robertson joining in. By the end of their first year at Cambridge, several of the young men who would later be associated with that much-maligned and misunderstood assemblage, the Bloomsbury Group, had formed lifelong friendships.

For May Week in 1900, Thoby's sisters came up for the Trinity Ball where they met some of their brother's friends for the first time. Virginia wrote to her cousin Emma Vaughan that because they arrived late and Thoby did not know many people, they had not danced much; nevertheless, she had experienced her first ball. Leonard Woolf likened seeing Vanessa and Virginia Stephen for the first time to suddenly coming face to face 'with a great Rembrandt or Velasquez': they took one's breath away.

Their exclusion from the secret society at Cambridge known as the Apostles was another bond between Thoby Stephen and Bell. Belonging to the elite Conversazione Society, as the Apostles were formally known, created a homosocial family within the larger world of Cambridge, one which widened in the years after graduation as older members advocated for and selected new ones. Their relations were strengthened in secret meetings characterised by an exclusive and eccentric vocabulary, as well as by long discussions of friendship and love. Friends and relatives from the 'Phenomenal' world – as the

brethren referred to the non-Apostolic realm – might often ask about the society, but 'against these intrusions, Lytton Strachey, Rupert Brooke, and Sydney-Turner remained firm'.

Leonard Woolf told his fellow Apostle Strachey early in 1903 that Thoby – whose solid appearance had earned from them the nickname 'The Goth' – should have been elected the previous year, but Thoby's lack of interest in the society had probably worked against him. Bell, however, was apparently not ever seriously considered. Ironically, despite his rejection, Bell's academic performance was very respectable in comparison to that of Woolf or Strachey. On the other hand, as W. C. Lubenow makes clear in his study of the society, Apostles 'were not supposed to conform to any single type; the Apostles wanted difference and variety in the Society'. Strachey, for example, was highly rated for his conversation, but although Bell was described by Thoby's sister Virginia as 'always ready to sacrifice himself in the cause of talk', it seems he was overlooked by the Apostles simply because he did not fit some secretly held, obscure criteria. During this time, the society was undergoing an Edwardian rebellion against Victorian mores under the influence of new 'Brethren' such as Strachey and John Maynard Keynes (who entered King's College in 1902). Every Easter, the philosopher G. E. Moore – whose book *Principia Ethica* marked for Lytton Strachey 'the beginning of the Age of Reason' in 1903 – hosted a reading party to which only Apostles were invited, further emphasising the boundary between them and those friends who did not belong. Some historians of Bloomsbury have maintained that Bell was 'wounded and bitter' about his exclusion from the Apostles, but there is nothing in the extant record to support this notion.

In the new year of 1905, Thoby Stephen walked from the New Forest to Hindhead in Surrey to see some Cambridge friends: 'There were there J. Pollock . . . Waterlow . . . Meredith . . . and old Bell,' he told Leonard Woolf. Most of the party were content to indulge in 'the old round' of talk about '"what you mean by being" and so on'; Sydney Waterlow was 'a serious cove and devilish Cambridge', but eventually they all went to bed, 'leaving Bell and me who shout simultaneously "Now let's talk about hunting"'. To Desmond MacCarthy, whom Woolf described as Moore's 'favourite Apostle', Bell 'seemed to have a foot in two communities which, in the University, and indeed in the world itself, are separated from each other by as deep a trench as

divides, say, Roman Catholics from the rest of mankind. He seemed to live, half with the rich sporting-set, and half with the intellectuals.'

When he first met Bell in November 1901, MacCarthy was travelling to Cambridge to visit G. E. Moore and feeling despondent. Only one other occupant shared his first-class compartment, 'a youth with a noticeable head of wavy auburn hair, and that milk-white skin which often goes with it'. MacCarthy observed that his companion was 'dressed with careless opulence', wearing 'flung open, a dark fur coat with a deep astrakhan collar'. Within ten minutes of talking with the ebullient Bell, MacCarthy's gloom had lifted and he had accepted an invitation to lunch the next day: 'I fancied myself to be enjoying, vicariously at any rate, through him, the prospect of helping myself in a generous manner to the pleasures of life . . . I could see in imagination the enormous rich hunk he was about to cut from the cake of life.' Throughout his life, many people remarked that Bell could not enjoy himself unless his friends were happy, that his social arts were perhaps his greatest gift.

Those with whom Bell associated most at Trinity stood out for their irreverence and free thinking. Religion was a matter for particular jocularity, leading a student named Arthur Gaye to tell Leonard Woolf he could no longer be his friend owing to the offensive nature of the conversation in Woolf's rooms. Strachey, said Gaye, was the worst offender. Bell found his new friends congenial after life at Cleeve House, where family and servants were summoned each morning to the breakfast room so that William Bell could read to them a passage from the Bible, while everyone knelt on the carpet. Although he disliked his irascible father, Bell cared about his genuinely pious mother, so he dutifully attended church services during vacations, putting his friend Edwin Montagu in mind of Captain Kettle.[1] Even at Cambridge, there was no escape from religious observance, although were a student artful enough he could make a case for 'conscientious objections'.

In 1904, Thoby Stephen addressed a pamphlet against compulsory chapel to the freshmen of Cambridge University because, 'I know that with you rests our chief hope of purging our Republic of bigotry and intolerance.' Bell himself had made 'a good and clear maiden speech' at

[1]Popularised in a series of stories by C. J. Sutcliffe Hyne in *Pearsons Magazine*, Captain Kettle is devout and devoted on land but a profane scoundrel at sea.

the Cambridge Union in November 1899 in support of the (defeated) motion 'That Disestablishment and Disendowment of the Church of England is the obvious and only satisfactory solution of the present difficulties'.

This speech had been followed by numerous others and Bell was soon known as a witty and entertaining speaker. Debating the motion 'That in the opinion of this House the increase of Trades Unionism is conducive to the best interests of the country', Bell spoke for the Nos 'like a Pied Piper'. He 'led the House dancing after him where he would, to South Wales and Piccadilly, and even, once or twice, to the outskirts of the subject of Trade Unionism. A welcome interlude.' But wit is not sufficient for a career and, as university friends dispersed after receiving their BA in 1902, Arthur Clive Heward Bell was uncertain that his future lay in the study of history.

In 1902, Bell was awarded the Earl of Derby studentship, which provided a stipend derived from the interest on £2,000, tenable for a year. He set about writing a fellowship dissertation on the 1822 Congress of Verona (held because the French king wanted the consent of his allies to invade Spain) and accordingly began research in the Public Record Office that autumn. He may, like Thoby, have been considering a career in law because he took rooms in the Inner Temple, at 6 King's Bench Walk. Thomas Greg, a barrister and family friend, guaranteed his bond for £140, telling Bell that his father would be very happy to see him a judge or even a King's Counsel.

From time to time, Bell went to Cambridge to see a play, or to see those of his friends still there trying to establish their futures, such as Woolf and Sydney-Turner who were preparing for the civil service exams. Whenever she had the opportunity, Annie Raven-Hill came to see him at King's Bench Walk. One afternoon, Sydney-Turner and Thoby hammered on his door, hoping to find some tea and conversation. Bell and Annie had been to see an exhibition of Dutch Old Masters at the Guildhall Art Gallery and were now enjoying a long afternoon in bed, so his friends left with no answer.

As Bell began his fellowship research, he continued also to give occasional lectures at the Working Men's College on Great Ormond Street. In May 1902, G. M. Trevelyan organised a weekend visit to Cambridge of forty students from the college, for which Bell was one of the hosts.

The reporter for the *Working Men's College Journal* remarked that when Trevelyan, splitting the men into groups, said, '"Now will you Christs go away"', the irreverence might have caused someone 'of a religious turn of mind and a stranger to University parlance' some disquiet, but it was all taken in good part. The men 'hugely enjoyed' hearing Queen Victoria referred to as '"a good old girl"' and chuckled at the notion that rather than being buried '"she should have been stuffed and used as a perpetual sovereign'". The report concluded:

> To men of the artizan [*sic*] class, like myself, who pass their lives in cities, amid the din of factories and the atmosphere of workshops, such a visit must necessarily be something of a revelation, for it gives one a peep into one phase of the intimate life of the men who are the leaders of thought and action in the world . . . if there is one thing which the average working man hates, it is to feel that he is being patronized. But there was not even a suspicion of 'side' about our hosts; dons and undergraduates alike were as genial and hearty as one could desire, and we felt at home with them at once.

Bell was one of several Trinity students who offered to share the benefits of their privileged education with the working men and seems to have had an easy rapport with them.

Louisa Gibson Blaikie was particularly interested to hear about Bell's talks to working men. Known to the Bell family as 'Louie', she was one of five daughters of Walter Biggar Blaikie, an engineer and printer who had returned to Edinburgh from India, where Louie had been born in 1877. Louie most likely met the Bell family in Scotland during summer holidays when they went to shoot in the Highlands. She had been friendly enough with Cory Bell for her mother to warn her to cease writing to him unless they intended to marry, but she kept up a correspondence with the elder of Bell's two sisters, Lorna. Louie's friendship with Bell probably began when she wrote in 1900 or 1901 to ask if he would mind showing her and some friends around Cambridge.

Only her side of their correspondence survives, but her letters reveal a close friendship whose conversations ranged widely over religion, literature, morality and philosophy, as well as aspirations and hopes for

what their lives might become. Her letters also show that her younger correspondent recognised the constraints imposed on a middle-class woman by late Victorian society and engaged seriously with her views and opinions.

Bell made clear that he believed there should be no barriers of sex or class to what one read. Liberty of mind, unfettered by religion or by social or sexual taboos, was fundamental to his 'ideal'. Louie was eager to hear about Bell's talk on Henrik Ibsen, announced in the December 1902 *WMC Journal* for the next meeting of the Literary and Historical Society. Cory had told Louie he envied his brother's ability to get on so well with working men and, apart from her interest in his thinking and in the subject matter itself, she wanted to learn more about Bell's 'purely pagan point of view'. 'The more I see, of the capacities & temptations of the poor & ill-educated,' she told Arthur (as she always addressed him), 'the more amazed I stand at Christ's comprehension & programme.

Cory Bell in the uniform of the Royal Horse Artillery

And I want to understand your method too, or rather your manner of applying your ideal; for I think you have made me realise what that ideal is.'

Louie scanned the newspaper in June 1902 for a sign of Arthur's tripos result and wondered if he would attend the coronation of Edward VII that summer. The second Boer war, in which Cory fought as an officer in the Royal Horse Artillery, had ended in May, with Britain's reputation among European nations somewhat damaged: had Arthur not suggested, she later asked, that his brother had returned from the Transvaal 'almost a pro-Boer?'

Anti-German sentiment was strong in England at the turn of the century. When Thoby Stephen went to Germany after graduating from Cambridge, he reported from Freiburg that although sometimes 'rather nice', Germans were 'lower than beasts'. The Kaiser's infamous 'Kruger telegram' of 1896 congratulating the Boers for repelling a British raid, Bismarck's comment that 'South Africa would be the grave of the British Empire' (reported in the *Spectator* of 15 February 1902) and a popular genre of invasion literature initiated by *The Battle of Dorking* in 1897 all contributed to a caricature of Germans that informed even the views of those who had visited the country. From their education system to their conscripted military, the German passion for uniformity seemed to Thoby to stifle any creativity.

Soon after he returned, Thoby invited Bell to Lyndhurst in the New Forest where the Stephen family had taken a house. He wanted to disabuse his friend of the notion that modern Germany was still the land of Goethe and Heine, a conception he told Bell was as misguided as thinking that contemporary Greece was still the country of Homer and Sophocles.

3. A Brace of Partridges

His visit to the New Forest went well enough that Bell felt confident to call on Thoby's sisters in London with the gift of a brace of partridges. In what is probably her first letter to her future husband, Vanessa wrote:

> Dear Mr Bell I hope you are able to imagine the excitement and joy that your partridges have caused here, as I am quite unable to describe it. Thank you very much indeed for them . . . I really ought to thank you too for your Collins [thank you note] which was received with great applause and which ought to be shown as a model to all other visitors. I hope you will prove its sincerity by coming here again some day, in spite of death in the pony cart and the certainty of endless discussion of one subject.

The 'one subject' was painting. In 1900, Vanessa had been taken with Thoby to Paris during the Exposition Universelle by their half-brother George Duckworth, perhaps to distract her from an ill-considered involvement with her widowed brother-in-law, Jack Hills.[1] As her biographer recounts, Vanessa 'visited the Louvre for the first time and returned home ecstatic about the food she had eaten and still more about what she had seen'. Virginia warned George not to let her sister 'see too many improper studios – The artist's temperament is such a difficult thing to manage'. When she got back, Vanessa was 'quite

[1]Stella Duckworth, Vanessa's half-sister, had died suddenly in 1897 shortly after her marriage to John Waller 'Jack' Hills. Jack visited frequently thereafter and was comforted by Vanessa, who developed strong feelings for him.

intoxicated with all the things she has done and seen'. 'We shall talk and think of Paris for months to come I am sure,' Virginia told George.

Bell was in Paris in 1903, a visit that has been eclipsed by accounts of the momentous time he spent there the following year when he discovered the path the rest of his life would take. His earlier stay is dated by a letter from Thoby inquiring what people there were saying about the suicide of Sir Hector MacDonald, a Scots military hero who shot himself in a Paris hotel on 25 March 1903 rather than face a court martial over his sexual activities with Sinhalese boys while he was commander-in-chief of British troops in Ceylon. Along one side of his letter, Thoby scribbled, 'By the way, if you go to the Louvre, by any chance, remember this truth which I have just discovered – all painters without exception are sentimental, theatrical, extravagant.' The only things worth seeing there, Thoby continued, were the Greek sculptures, though the Louvre's examples were mostly 'late Hellenistic Roman'. Bantering with his friend, Thoby quoted Thomas Love Peacock's *Crotchet Castle*: 'Where the Greeks had modesty, we have cant. Where the Greeks had anything that exalts, delights or adorns humanity we have nothing but cant cant cant.'

'Cant' for the young Cambridge men of Thoby and Bell's generation, as Leonard Woolf recalled many decades later in his *Autobiography*, was their name for the Victorian 'religious and moral code' which they entered university prepared to rebel against. Leonard's example of this hypocritical code was the unjust condemnation of Alfred Dreyfus and, in 1903, Thoby told Bell that Hector MacDonald's death was 'an eternal disgrace to our blasted race of hypocrites'. Louie Blaikie was grateful when Bell told her that Parisians had shown 'kindness and self-restraint' when discussing with him the fate of a man the Scots believed had been hounded to death by the English.

It may have been on his 1903 visit to Paris that Bell picked up *The French Impressionists* by Camille Mauclair, which he inscribed with his customary signature, 'AC Heward Bell'. His copy bears the label of the Galignani Library, a bookshop on the rue de Rivoli specialising in English and American books. The English translation of Mauclair's book was brought out in 1903 by Thoby's half-brother Gerald Duckworth's publishing company. Another who read it was Thoby's sister Vanessa, who was 'converted . . . to modern art' by Mauclair's well-informed discussion of the Impressionist painters.

In Bell's copy, his underlinings and marginalia summarise without comment what Mauclair explained about the Impressionist painters' handling of light, colour and form. He underlined Mauclair's definition of Impressionism as '*a revolution of technique together with an attempt at expressing modernity*'. In 1903, it would have been possible for Bell to see examples of the work Mauclair discussed at the Musée du Luxembourg, where part of the painter Gustave Caillebotte's bequest to the French government of his collection of Impressionist works had been on public view since 1896. However, whenever Bell described his own conversion to modern art he placed it in 1904, so it cannot be said with certainty when he first entered the small room at the Luxembourg which held eight works by Monet, three by Sisley, eleven by Pissarro, one by Manet and two by Cézanne from Caillebotte's collection.

While Thoby hoped that Bell would visit the Louvre during his 1903 stay in Paris, Louie Blaikie urged him to hear mass at Saint-Sulpice – a suggestion he appears to have followed as she wrote to say, 'I know so well what jarred on you at Mass. I've felt it, but could not describe it, as you do.' They often argued about religion. Bell had given her a better understanding of Shelley's atheism, but his challenges to the proofs of Christianity seemed inadequate in the light of her own experience. Left alone in the country, Louie told him, she found his anti-religious ideology 'lofty & inspiring', but the realities of life with her large family in the city, 'with the perpetual calls on one's patience & love', forced her to rely on a 'less artistic & more personal religion' to help her endure it. Although it unsettled her to realise how much Bell valued their relationship, she was nourished by his respectful intellectual companionship and his willingness to share the benefits of his Cambridge education without patronising her. Her mother had already 'made a fuss' about her writing to his brother, so, if necessary, Cory could explain how difficult her life was, 'how little of my own way I'm allowed'. Her discussions with Bell about art and religion, Shelley and Ibsen, were 'oxygen' to her 'asphyxiated soul'.

More riskily, they had also written to each other about temptation, both painfully aware of the double standard that governed women's lives. In clarifying something Bell had been puzzled by, Louie once wrote: 'I was answering your letter, in which you thought I would sympathise with your struggles against temptation. My meaning was that I certainly did. It seems often, to me, that we girls, whose lives & actions are hedged round can only be pure or the reverse – in spirit. In spite of Ibsen, I can't be more explicit.'

In the social upheavals of 1890s England, Ibsen's domestic dramas had been regarded either as a symptom of that degeneration against which writers such as Max Nordau thundered, or as the heralds of a new honesty about bourgeois hypocrisy. For young people of Bell's generation, Ibsen provided a conduit for arguments on behalf of profound social change. Louie read what her friend had to say about Ibsen with 'much interest', but thought he was idealistic and that he probably had not yet had to face the necessity of masking his true feelings because of society's pressure to conform: 'You speak so easily of the horror of marriage where love has died, that I'm sure you can't realise what it means. The conventional mask that love lasts makes the commonplace pair jog on comfortably enough after the fire has died out . . . If you had to face it in your life without the mask I doubt if books will help.' She had few illusions about her own prospects: 'When I'm weary of my own life, I sometimes feel tempted to run away from it, into a more exciting atmosphere, through the only door which presents itself – marriage with a man I don't really love.'

Perhaps Bell had hinted at carnal 'temptations' to Louie, because early in 1903 she wrote that she knew 'how the noblest natures are tried by the hardest struggles with temptation', exhorting him ('Oh Arthur') 'by all that is highest & holiest' to keep his 'heart & character & powers pure . . . For you can reach up to that atmosphere of goodness which you call what?, & I call Heaven – the atmosphere pervaded by God & love & Holiness.' More freedom to talk openly about sexual matters was imminent in some parts of British society, but it is inconceivable that Bell would have confided in his devout friend about Annie Raven-Hill. Forty years later, Virginia Woolf would be able to note that brothers and sisters 'talk quite freely about – oh about everything. Sex, sodomy, periods, and so on', but there were no such confidences between her and Thoby in 1903: 'As for sex, he passed from childhood to boyhood, from boyhood to manhood under our eyes, in our presence, without saying a single word that could have been taken for a sign of what he was feeling.' It is tantalising to imagine what Bell might have shared with Louie about his sexual feelings, but had he alluded to anything less vague than generic 'temptations' it would have been remarkable.

Bell was no clearer in 1903 about what he wanted to do with his life than he had been when he left Cambridge. His research on the Congress

of Verona was interrupted when his father took him to Alberta to hunt. They would return in time for Cory's wedding to Violet Bowley, daughter of an officer in the Royal Engineers. While travelling to Canada, Bell missed the deadline to apply for an assistant lectureship in history and political science at University College Cardiff for which a Trinity lecturer had recommended him, but he was in any case in no frame of mind to pick a career.

Some poems he had shown to Thomas Greg appeared to the older man to be 'the agonized & passionate wail of the entirely happy young man who fancies he is lacerated beyond recognition'. Just as Bell's schoolboy poems had been lovelorn and sentimental ('An ode to my darling, when my spirit is depressed' in 1896, for example), so at Trinity he had penned lachrymose verses to imaginary women ('The distant land I saw, with thee as wife,/Has wholly disappeared').

The Congress of Verona was not a gripping topic, but Bell had no alternative but to continue with his research. Louie understood his predicament. She knew that he had a 'horror' of a businessman's life but his family expected him to decide upon a career: 'You are two men in my mind – the poet, & the hard, level headed lawyer & politician. I've always heard of you as the latter, but my own knowledge of you is of the former – Who are you really?' Her question went to the heart of what many people who came to know him well would conclude, that Bell was a man who easily inhabited disparate worlds, yet seemed not entirely at home in any one of them.

Bell returned to King's Bench Walk after his brother's marriage in November 1903 and resumed the social round with his Cambridge friends. He often accompanied the prodigiously knowledgeable but alarmingly eccentric Sydney-Turner to a play or concert. Thoby urged him to come to Cambridge for the Greek play at the end of November, for which his younger brother Adrian (who had gone up to Trinity in 1902) could get them tickets. Bell had begun to realise that if his Derby sponsorship was to produce anything that would pass muster at Cambridge, he had to consult the French Archives Nationales for more of the relevant documents. Accordingly, he set off for Paris in the spring of 1904.

4. Paris

Bell brought with him a letter of introduction to the English painter Gerald Kelly, who had lived in Paris since 1901 and had already met Monet, Rodin, Sickert, Degas and Cézanne. Two years older than Bell, Kelly was at first too busy to see him, but on a wet afternoon in March, Bell made his way from his pension on rue de Bouquet de Longchamps to Kelly's studio. That night, Kelly took him to dinner in an upstairs room reserved for British and American artists, their friends and models at the Chat Blanc on rue d'Odessa.

In a memoir titled 'Paris 1904', Bell wrote that even before he arrived in Paris he knew he was not going to continue his historical research: 'Instead of wasting my time making futile pecks at a mass of . . . almost incomprehensible diplomatic correspondence, I would set myself the simpler task of learning French and seeing the sights.' His introduction to Kelly seemingly had nothing to do with an interest in painting; it was merely the friendly gesture of an acquaintance named E. S. P. Haynes doing what he could to make Bell feel less alone in a foreign city.

Despite his waning interest in the Congress of Verona, Bell's applications to consult records relevant to the Concert of Europe that emerged from the Napoleonic Wars continued to wend their way through the Affaires Etrangères office of the French government, supported by testimonials from Stanley Leathes, lecturer in modern history at Trinity, Lord Lansdowne and the British ambassador to France, Sir Edmund Monson. In June, the French Foreign Minister, Théophile Delcassé, approved his wish to consult 1820s correspondence between Turkey and England. By then, however, the direction of Bell's

life had changed for good, and his 'research' was being conducted at the Louvre.

Kelly and Bell got on well at once, Bell sensing that the painter welcomed the opportunity to discuss books and ideas. After a quick trip home to Seend for Easter, Bell made his excuses at the pension and moved to the Hotel Loire, at the junction of the boulevard Raspail and boulevard Montparnasse, where he would stay until the middle of July. He had to acquire French as quickly as he could to keep up with the conversation at the Chat Blanc: despite most of the painters who gathered there being English speakers, many of them had French girlfriends. An increasing number of women artists – among them Kathleen Bruce and Eileen Gray – were studying in the area; they often lived alone 'without outraging public opinion'. James W. Morrice, a French-Canadian from a wealthy Montreal family who had already taken a law degree, was one of the first painters in this crowd to befriend Bell.

Bell arrived in Paris just as a profound revolution in art was starting, but until 1910 his visits to that city were marked by unfortunately timed departures and overlooked opportunities. His exposure to painters and painting in the spring of 1904 was unremarkable. Montparnasse was 'still the Paris of the Impressionists and the Naturalists', of Toulouse-Lautrec and Degas. Anatole France was still alive and Zola had been dead only a couple of years.

About six miles to the north, across the Seine, lay Montmartre, where the artists who would very soon explode the Parisian art world and utterly transform people's ways of seeing crowded into a warren of studios and cafés, including the building named the 'Bateau Lavoir' because it resembled a Seine washing boat. Pablo Picasso had first come from Catalonia in 1900, when he encountered at the Louvre the paintings of David, Ingres and Delacroix, as well as ancient Egyptian and Roman artefacts. In April 1904, word quickly spread among the Montmartrois artists that he had returned to Paris for a fourth time. In the stiflingly hot summer that followed, Matisse had his first one-man show at Ambroise Vollard's gallery on rue Laffitte, where Picasso had had his first Paris exhibition in 1901. Although Bell went to Montmartre – in his memoir *Old Friends* he describes taking the Odéon-Clichy horse omnibus there to visit Arnold Bennett – it left no mark in 1904. The route there led through the Luxembourg Gardens, near where he

lunched at the Café de Fleurus on the street where Gertrude and Leo Stein lived, but in 1904 Bell knew nothing of Steins, Picasso or Matisse.

While Bell was in Paris, the Stephen siblings were in Italy. At Manorbier on the Pembrokeshire coast a week after their father's death in February 1904, the four of them had planned an Easter trip to Venice and Florence. That spring, Strachey was staying in Roquebrune on the south coast of France with his sister Dorothy, who had just married a French painter named Simon Bussy, an art school friend of Matisse. From the Bussys' house, La Souco, Strachey let Leonard Woolf know that he had proposed to Thoby they should meet up with Bell in Paris: 'The meeting will indeed be wonderful if it takes place. I suppose we'll all be arrested and lodged in the Bastille if it does.'

The 'grand meeting', he told Woolf a couple of weeks later, would not come off, but in the meantime Thoby had written to Bell from Venice about the possibility of calling on him in Paris on their way home from Italy. Never, he told his friend, had one seen a painting until one had been to Venice: 'Tintoret's supremacy is completely beyond a doubt.' In three long letters – one from Venice, two from Florence – Thoby conducted a fierce argument with Bell about the superiority of Tintoretto to Titian. He teasingly disparaged Bell's lack of experience, saying his friend's understanding of art must necessarily be limited because he had not yet seen Venice: 'My opinion of your general intelligence is such that I am convinced that had you visited the Scuola San Rocco and the Academia you could not have uttered those blasphemies against Tintoret with which your letter is defiled. Until a man has been there he has no more right to speak of painting than a man who has read neither Sophocles nor Shakespeare to criticize literature.' Theirs was a thoroughly nineteenth-century argument, closely following Ruskinian contours. In *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin described the mind of Tintoretto as 'incomparably more deep and serious than that of Titian'. The friends argued about those painters found in Ruskin's pages: Titian, Tintoretto, Velasquez, Veronese, Bellini.

Thoby extolled not only a Tintoretto Madonna in the Accademia but Bellini's famous altarpiece in San Zacaria as revealing the 'ultimate point of the Catholic faith', which he explained to Bell was more Hellenic than Hebraic, which was to say more fleshly than sacred. Bell must have taken him up on this because when he next wrote, from Florence,

Thoby wryly wondered if Bell might not have confused Giovanni Bellini with his brother Gentile, or even with his father.

During the 1900 Easter term, Strachey had attended university extension lectures on Florentine art given by Roger Fry, whose first book, *Giovanni Bellini*, had been published the previous year. 'These are very interesting and good though somewhat abstruse,' Strachey told his mother. Fry had entered King's College in 1885 and had been elected to the Apostles in 1887. Although he had begun by studying the natural sciences, by the time Strachey attended his lectures, Fry was a well-respected expert on early Renaissance painting and a painter himself. Strachey and he had both been at an Easter vacation reading party on the Isle of Wight with other Apostles in 1902, where Strachey described him as 'a sort of art-critic'. Although it is possible Fry's name came up in conversations in Bell's rooms when Thoby was there, his ideas – for example, that Bellini was Titian's forerunner – left no trace in Bell and Thoby's correspondence in 1904.

Bell's opinions on art at the time can be inferred to some extent from Thoby's Italian letters, albeit filtered through their jocular tone. Bell's 'adulation' of Velasquez cannot be ascribed 'to mere intoxication of the marvels of the Prado', Thoby wrote, as he has never been to Spain, and his ranking of Titian above Tintoretto is only excusable until he is able to go to Venice. 'But I should have thought that even the limited knowledge of painting attainable in the Louvre would have enabled you to distinguish between diabolical dexterity and the grand style of the master.' In his next letter, Thoby is 'grieved' by his friend's having found 'so much ferocity' in the 'singularly temperate, restrained and direct exposition of my opinions'. Thoby was glad to learn that Bell admired 'the incomparable Mantegna', but disagreed with his opinions (whatever they may have been in 1904) of Bartolomeo or Correggio. Looking forward to arriving in Paris, Thoby closed the correspondence by urging Bell, as soon as he had the opportunity, 'to compare Michel Angelo's Thinker in the Medici Chapel with Rodin's Penseur if you want a complete education in the possibilities and limits of sculpture'. When Strachey saw a plaster version of *Le Penseur* in London earlier that year, he remarked to Leonard Woolf that it was 'rigid banks and heaps of muscle. The imagination of Michael Angelo was "spiritual" in some way that Rodin's isn't.'

Thoby and his sisters were in Paris by the beginning of May. 'Your little friend Bell is here,' Vanessa teased her art school friend 'Snow', Margery Snowden. Vanessa and Virginia stayed at the Hôtel Quai d'Orsay but Thoby lodged with Bell, who soon introduced them all to Gerald Kelly. Virginia told Violet Dickinson how they had taken Beatrice Thynne, a family friend who happened to be in Paris, to 'a real Bohemian party . . . and we all stayed talking of Art, Sculpture and Music till 11.30. This was all in the common café, while we smoked half a dozen cigarettes a piece.'

A week later, the Stephens were back in London, where Virginia immediately collapsed, exhausted and tormented by hallucinations. Violet took her to her house to be looked after by three hired nurses. Meanwhile, the exhilarated Vanessa wrote to thank Bell for his hospitality: 'We have been horrifying George with accounts of our doings at cafés & elsewhere – you must be prepared to keep it up & add local colour when you next see him. I hope you & Mr Kelly will some day drag yourselves away from the delights of Paris & will come & see us here & continue those arguments in spite of depressing London surroundings.'

Thoby continued to correspond with Bell about painting, asking in May if he knew 'one Blanche' whose 'uncommonly good' paintings he had seen at the New Gallery on Regent Street. The National Gallery now seemed to Thoby better than the Louvre, the French collection being filled with too much that was 'nugatory'. Thoby saw 'three good pictures' at Burlington House in June but the rest he considered 'merely filth'. He singled out a Watts 'which last horror', he joked, would be beyond Bell.

By mid-July, Bell was back in London, having just missed another Trinity man, Jack Pollock, in Paris, but telling him to use his name to gain admittance to the upper room at the Chat Blanc. As usual, letters from friends spoke of hunting, country walks and books. The Stephen siblings were getting ready to move to their new house at 46 Gordon Square; Woolf was studying for the civil service exams (in which he would do poorly), while Thoby was a hard-working law student.

Bell went back to Paris in late October 1904, unaware that the world he had been introduced to by Kelly was the 'scrag end of Impressionism'. Arnold Bennett was scornful of the insularity of the Montparnasse

artists whose 'contented ignorance' kept them from the 'real life of the city in which they live'. If Bell visited the second Salon d'Automne, which ran from 15 October to 15 November, no comment of his on it has survived.

The Salon had begun in 1903 as an alternative for young painters to the Salon held by the conservative Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts and that of the Académie des Beaux-Arts. At the 1904 Salon d'Automne, Cézanne had a room in the Petit Palais devoted to his work. The Salon also included a special section of photographs of paintings and works by Matisse, Kees van Dongen, Othon Friesz, Francis Picabia and several others who would flourish in the modernist period. None of these names appears in Bell's correspondence at the time, his first mention of Matisse not occurring until 1908.

Bell could have been describing himself when he said that the painters who gathered at the Chat Blanc 'were anything but young lions: they were of the tame kind who worshipped Whistler and Velasquez, Rodin and Veronese, who went to the Louvre and paid their rent and read Wilde'. When he resumed dining at the Chat Blanc and drinking at the Café de Versailles that autumn, however, he encountered Roderic O'Conor, an Irish painter recently back from Brittany, who introduced him to another side of Paris. Bell had already frequented the Closerie des Lilas, where he listened to the Symbolist Jean Moréas declaim his poems and met Paul Fort, but he now began to hear from O'Conor about Guillaume Apollinaire and Max Jacob.

In Pont-Aven on the Brittany coast, O'Conor had become close to Gauguin, whose drawings, as well as photographs of his paintings, he had in his studio. It was an unusual privilege for Bell to be admitted there and he was impressed by what the painter showed him. Since the unexpected death at thirty-four of his close friend and supporter Armand Séguin, O'Conor had felt isolated among the artists in Montparnasse. He 'bewildered his companions with his advocacy of Gauguin, Van Gogh, Cézanne, Bonnard and Vuillard', and was knowledgeable about French writers such as Claudel, Laforgue and Remy de Gourmont, whom he soon recommended to Bell. O'Conor found Bell a first edition of Prosper Mérimée's *Lettres à une inconnue*, a text that Bell would unfailingly recommend to every woman with whom he had a liaison. O'Conor also afforded Bell a much deeper appreciation of the Parisian painting scene than he could gain from the

Montparnassians, whose milieu would shortly be satirised by Somerset Maugham in *The Magician* (1908), in which he caricatured the occultist Aleister Crowley, who was married to Gerald Kelly's sister. O'Conor's belief that artists who allowed themselves to be unduly influenced by what the marketplace demanded 'lost the whole sense of art' made a deep impression on Bell. Soon, O'Conor, J. W. Morrice and the English painter George Hume Barne became Bell's most trusted guides to Paris and painting.

At Cambridge, Bell had made a group of friends who seemed to 'have got hold of the key to the riddle of the universe', concerned as they were with the nature of 'good' and 'truth'. In Paris, that universe was upended by the conservative, anti-Dreyfusard milieu which prevailed at the Chat Blanc, where truth and humanitarianism seemed to Bell to be regarded as 'simply silly'. O'Conor was 'violently contemptuous' of half of what Bell had learned at Cambridge. Many of those in his new society struck Bell as 'unrighteous and indifferent to moral values, without a social conscience or a sense of responsibility' and yet he enjoyed their company. The artists he met seemed to him to live by ideals quite different from those Bell had imbibed from G. E. Moore and his friends who were Apostles, yet their passionate adherence to their own very different ideals appealed to him. He admitted in his memoir of this time to a habit that persisted throughout his life, 'of getting the best I could out of the world in which I happen to find myself, without bothering over much about complications'. The sense that Louie Blaikie had that Bell was two quite different people, and Desmond MacCarthy's observation that he was at ease in very different worlds, were borne out by Bell's explorations in Paris of whom he might become.

5. Vanessa

Having decided not to return to the Royal Academy Schools, where she had taken classes since 1901, and dissatisfied by her trial of a few weeks at the Slade School of Art at the end of 1904, Vanessa was painting a portrait of Lady Robert ('Nelly') Cecil while she reflected on the direction in which she wanted to take her art. Virginia had published her first book reviews at the end of 1904 and, as 1905 began, was writing a note to include in Frederic Maitland's biography of their father, preparing lectures for working women at Morley College and going to dances with her brother and sister from which they would return in the wee hours of the morning.

A large exhibition of French Impressionists – 'unique of its kind in England' – opened in January 1905 at the Grafton Galleries, organised by the French art dealer and champion of Impressionism Paul Durand-Ruel. Lytton Strachey wrote to Leonard Woolf, who had sailed for Ceylon at the end of November to take up a post as a colonial administrator, that the 'general effect is one of dazzling beauty – sheer physical pleasure to the eye . . . no one knew how to do colour before'. Virginia thought some of the French pictures 'lovely, one especially of a liquid & flowing sea', but she pronounced 'pompous & dull' a lecture on Impressionism by the *Sunday Times* art critic Frank Rutter.

Vanessa thought that Mr Bell, as she still addressed him, would be pleased to hear that her sister had lost 'her last scruples of loyalty' to G. F. Watts when the sisters visited his memorial exhibition at the Royal Academy. Vanessa hoped that Bell would bring J. W. Morrice to see them when he came to London, because she was eager to continue their Parisian conversations. She was thinking deeply about her painting,

'Vanessa Stephen' in Clive's parents' photograph album

telling Snow that she believed 'all painting is worth while so long as one honestly expresses one's own ideas' – 'one always must have something of one's own to say that no one else has been able to say'. Conversations

about art, books and ideas could flow freely at 46 Gordon Square, where the Stephens had escaped their elderly relatives to begin life on their own terms. The day after their housewarming party in March, Strachey and Sydney-Turner came after dinner and stayed talking until midnight. A week later, Virginia came home to find Bell in the drawing room, '& we talked the nature of good till almost one!' 'Bloomsbury' was forming.

Concerned to keep his Cambridge relationships intact while he studied for the Bar, Thoby was 'at home' on Thursday evenings, a fact recorded by Virginia on 16 March 1905 when Sydney-Turner and Gerald Duckworth were his first visitors. The distance between Cambridge and London was in any case negligible because Thoby and his friends remained closely involved with university matters, such as the great issue of the vote on whether to retain Greek as a compulsory subject in the second-year examination for all students at Cambridge known as the 'Little-Go'. Strachey kept Woolf, miserable in Ceylon, abreast of all the goings-on in both Cambridge and Gordon Square, among which was news that Sydney-Turner had revived a plan to bring out an anthology of verse: 'He seems to think that he'll be able to induce Bell to finance it.'

Sydney-Turner undertook to gather poems for what literary historian S. P. Rosenbaum has called the 'first book of Bloomsbury'. Contributors included Woolf, Walter Lamb, Sydney-Turner, Strachey, Bell and an Arthur Francis Bell from Brighton. *Euphrosyne, A Collection of Verse* was produced by the Cambridge bookseller Elijah Johnson in August 1905, but in May the manuscript was available at 46 Gordon Square for Virginia to write a sarcastic response to it. It must, she said, be a 'parental fiction' that the days spent at university are the happiest in a young man's life, for *Euphrosyne*'s contributors had come from their university 'pale, preoccupied, & silent; as though in their three years absence, some awful communication had been made them, & they went burdened with a secret too dreadful to impart'. To these fraught young men, 'success is failure & they despise success', and so they do not pass their exams. They admire minor French poets and call some English authors 'supreme' (an Apostolic term of high praise), until these authors become appreciated by the public, upon which they lose interest in them. When the rest of the university was at prayer on Sundays, these young men gathered to read 'these astoundingly brilliant

& immoral productions'. The subtext of her 'review' was clear: their expensive university educations seemed to have ill-prepared these young men for life in the real world.

Many of the poems in *Euphrosyne* echo the aesthetic movement of the 1890s or are in the tradition of Tennyson, Browning and Arnold. Bell's in particular are characterised by melancholy and a sense of the physical pains of desire. He borrows mood and imagery from the Symbolists and, at times, even sounds like Lord Alfred Douglas. In Bell's 'Pereunt et Imputantur' ('they pass away but are accounted for by age' – Martial), 'sad brain-ghosts appear' in the autumn of 'passions that were strangled when the heart was young'; the twenty-three-year-old poet dreams about 'twisted, strangled corpses'. His sonnet to 'Casanova' laments the 'vile prudery and continence' of the new century and longs to 'live a life of living ecstasy'. 'In the Days of Utter Night' recoils from 'Pain to-day and pain to-morrow'. 'The Trinity Ball' has nothing to do with dancing, being rather a savage blast against 'God and the World', cursing the 'crapulous spawn' who follow their faith.

Some of Bell's contributions reflected the influence of the time he had spent in Paris. In 'Rain at Night After a Day of Heat', the bell of Saint-Sulpice strikes eight while the speaker reflects on a quarrel with a friend that has left him alone with 'Contempt and rage and that we fear to name'. A less sentimental poem is 'After a Dance', dedicated 'à Madame de Montmartre'. The speaker contrasts the 'Good boys and simple-minded misses' who would be embarrassed 'at thoughts of ruby kisses' as he sits in a café where champagne flows and the women's shoulders are bare. A translation of de Musset's 'L'Andalouse' demonstrates the facility Bell had gained with the French language by 1905. The most striking of his contributions to *Euphrosyne* is 'A Lady Smoking a Cigarette':

Pastel-like evanescent hues,
    Watched through the drifting whites and greys,
    Subtly changed as the ripple sways;
    Floating us this way green displays,
Floating us that way hints at blues.
Shifts our boat in the moody stream,
    Hangs the smoke in a tattered cloud,
    Lovingly lifts the fragrant shroud,

Peers at the purple eyelids proud
Reposed in an alabaster dream.

All a symphony mystic, now
Slate-blue, purple, now white, now mauve,
Mystical colours our lady wove,
Themes of weariness nightfall drove
Home from an Autumn sunset's brow.

What the dreams you are dreaming say –
Are you lost in some listless skein,
Golden shreds of a topaz stain,
Or turquoise-dust which Charles' wain
For ever spills through the milky way?

Of far adrift in moonstone rays,
Or swooned 'neath breathless lilac trees,
Like tuneful gems, melodious bees
Drone Aristaean epopees,
And lyrics of long summer days?

Thoby anonymously reviewed *Euphrosyne*, pointing out that some of the poems would be familiar because they had been previously published in the *Cambridge Review* and claiming the mantle of 'decadence' for these Cambridge men. Thoby had hoped his review would elicit discussion, but the only response came from Walter Lamb, editor of the *Review*, who wrote pseudonymously as 'A Cambridge Graduate' to claim that if there was a decadent element at the university, it was confined to a 'very small . . . uninfluential group'. However, 'OXON', of Balliol College, Oxford, whom Lamb had invited to write about the volume, singled out 'A Lady Smoking a Cigarette' (among others), seeing in it the influence of Verlaine, as well as Mallarmé, and commended the author for his 'familiarity with the polychromatic visions of Renoir and Monet'. One might have thought such praise would thrill Bell but by the time this correspondence was published he had lost interest in *Euphrosyne*, cast into despair by developments in his romantic life.

Since spending time in Paris with him in 1904, Vanessa Stephen had continued to discuss art with Bell. In the summer of 1905, she enlisted

his help in establishing a 'Friday Club' to afford a wider circle of friends and acquaintances the opportunity to gather for conversation, informal talks on art and the exhibition of works by its members. She and Bell agreed that if the club's discussions were to be fruitful, 'politeness' would have to be 'eradicated', which would be easier to accomplish on 'neutral ground' rather than at 46 Gordon Square. To that end, she asked him to join a committee and help her locate rooms to rent. Bell told Strachey of a Friday Club committee meeting at which he had endured 'platitudinous gibberings of opaque inanity' – the compensation for which was having a 'charming and continuous view of Vanessa's superb profile' from his corner of the room.

Strachey, who preferred the 'purely Cambridge' atmosphere of Bell's rooms on King's Bench Walk to the mixed company at Thoby's Thursday evenings at Gordon Square, found Bell puzzling. He described for Leonard Woolf how he had invited Bell to accompany him to Sarah Bernhardt's *Phèdre* at the Coronet Theatre in July, her only performance in the role that season. Thoby and Adrian Stephen were also there, who, Strachey told Woolf, 'really see the point – but Bell? he's really rather a mystery'. The trouble was that Bell seemed to be interested in the same things as Strachey and yet 'he's not under our control like [Henry] Lamb. He's even independent of the Goth [Thoby]'. The apparent contradictions in Bell's character confused Strachey. He described them at the time to Bernard Swithinbank, a Balliol undergraduate whose friendship Strachey was cultivating:

> His character has several layers, but it is difficult to say which is the fond. There is the country gentleman layer, which makes him retire into the depths of Wiltshire to shoot partridges. There is the Paris decadent layer, which takes him to the quartier latin where he discusses painting and vice with American artists and French models. There is the eighteenth-century layer, which adores Thoby Stephen. There is the layer of innocence which adores Thoby's sister. There is the layer of prostitution, which shows itself in an amazing head of crimped straw-coloured hair. And there is the layer of stupidity, which runs transversely through all the other layers.

There was nothing innocent about Bell's adoration of Vanessa, as Strachey discovered when he stayed in Bell's rooms until two o'clock

one morning, pressing him to reveal his true feelings. Bell was tortured by desire – 'his frightened pathetic face shows it' – and was 'wildly in love' with Vanessa. The Stephens were taking a house for several weeks in August and September on Carbis Bay in Cornwall and Bell told Strachey he intended to propose to Vanessa when he visited the family there. His frankness won Strachey's admiration but he told Woolf it was inconceivable that Vanessa would agree to marry him.

Just before she left for Cornwall, Bell invited Vanessa to King's Bench Walk for dinner, filling his rooms with 'armfuls' of red roses that, he told Strachey, enhanced the 'duskiness' of her complexion. Strachey told Woolf that when Bell confided in him about his love for Vanessa, his 'small lascivious body oozed with disappointed lust'. Bell was terrified that she would find his proposal ridiculous, telling Strachey that were she to turn him down he would leave the country. When the moment came and his worst fears were realised, it was Strachey whom Bell told; he could not face discussing his rejected proposal with Thoby, and if losing Vanessa meant that he also would have to 'surrender' Thoby, it could not make him any more unhappy than he already was.

Thoby had long suspected what was going on and Vanessa in fact told her brother about her refusal of his best friend's proposal. Thoby wrote to Bell to say that he was 'very sorry' to hear about the sad outcome and Strachey assured Bell he should have no concerns about Thoby's friendship being affected by what had happened. Vanessa seems to have told Thoby that Bell had even promised to give up hunting (of which she disapproved) in case that were an impediment to her accepting him, but her reasons had little to do with Bell himself and more to do with her resolute antagonism to the very idea of matrimony. She had enjoyed Bell's easy friendship as they worked alongside one another to set up the Friday Club, but she admitted to Snow that she should have foreseen what would happen, even though she had not flirted. Vanessa was sure that 'unless this particular man is unlike every other', he would fall in love with someone else within the year and she would think no more about it. She and her sister had determined when they left their childhood home at Hyde Park Gate in 1904 that their new lives at 46 Gordon Square would be entirely different from what was typically expected of young late Victorian ladies. Virginia and Vanessa regarded marriage as a 'horrible necessity', a fate that 'would descend

and snatch us apart just as we had achieved freedom and happiness'. Vanessa recognised that for Bell the matter was tremendously serious, but, she told Snow, 'I could no more marry him than I could fly.'

After this disaster, Bell left London, not at first to go abroad but to Seend, and then on to Scotland with his family. He had done what he could to get *Euphrosyne* reviewed but was too dejected to think any more about it. Louise Blaikie wrote to thank him for her copy, received in the Transvaal where she had gone soon after her marriage to Major Henry Barnes. She identified 'After a Dance', 'Rain at Night' and 'Lady with a Cigarette' as Bell's, the latter being 'Whistler incarnate'. Bell asked Sydney-Turner to find the remaining copies in King's Bench Walk waiting to be posted. He would not be back, except in passing, for perhaps a year or more, so if any unpaid bills for *Euphrosyne* should arrive, Sydney-Turner should forward them to his bank in Cambridge.

In Scotland, his family could not understand why Arthur seemed so downcast and he did not enlighten them. In the autumn, he sailed for France, stopping briefly in Cambridge to see Thoby. His destination was St Symphorien, a village in the Tours region, but first he went to Paris. If Bell had any inkling of the volcanic year of the Fauves, he gave no sign in his correspondence.

This had begun in March 1905 with the opening of the Salon des Indépendants. 'From one end of the hall to the other you still heard intemperate laughter and sarcasms rising to open contempt,' recalled the gallerist Berthe Weill, who herself showed Matisse, Marquet, Manguin and Camoin the following month. Bell arrived in Paris while the 3rd Salon d'Automne (18 October – 25 November) was open, where Leo Stein bought Matisse's sensational *Femme au Chapeau*. Shortly thereafter, Stein met Picasso in his studio at the Bateau Lavoire, having recently seen the artist's work at Clovis Sagot's gallery. The American sisters Etta and Claribel Cone were in Paris, acquiring the modernist paintings they would eventually leave to the Baltimore Museum of Art. Bell, more concerned with affairs of the heart than with the revolution in painting in 1905, left no evidence he was aware of it that year.

He wondered if the tears Vanessa had shed when he called on her before setting sail for France were sincere. Once in Paris, however, the beauty of the city lifted his mood. By now he spoke French 'rather well',

and reacquainted himself with the Closerie des Lilas, where Paul Fort asked him for names of anyone who might be interested in subscribing to *Vers et Prose*, the journal he had started with Guillaume Apollinaire. Strachey was delighted to receive a notice. But the *quartier Latin* had lost its appeal for Bell because 'all these artists and journalists are so unutterably stupid and degraded'. When Thoby arrived in Paris for Christmas, he agreed with Bell's estimation of the Montparnasse scene.

Bell spent his days in St Symphorien reading or playing chess with a 'maniac' who followed him around with a board under his arm. News from Seend arrived, where life continued unchanged. The Japanist and botanist F. Victor Dickins, like many of the Bell family's friends, took an interest in his career prospects, suggesting he undertake a study of Balzac while he was in the Tours region. Soon after Christmas, Bell became ill – '*poitrinaire*' (consumptive), according to Strachey. From Wiltshire came exhortations to exercise and maintain his health, which continued to be poor throughout the winter while Bell nursed his broken heart.

In London, the first meeting of the Friday Club took place in October. Virginia had described to Violet Dickinson how in the planning meetings earlier that summer 'one half of the committee shriek Whistler and the French impressionists, and the other stalwart British', requiring considerable diplomacy from Vanessa as the secretary. By the new year, the club was firmly established and had held its first exhibition in December (for which two drawings of birds by Bell had been accepted). Desmond MacCarthy, now married to Molly Warre-Cornish, roused a 'fiery discussion' with a talk in February 1906 that again exposed divisions between supporters of the Impressionists and those of a more conservative cast of mind. Strachey attended the club's events but gave painting short shrift. This business of 'arranging different coloured pigments' on a canvas he thought rather 'lowering to the intellect'.

Strachey's letters to Bell in early 1906 were more than usually full of ennui and self-pity. Vaguely he had heard there was an election going on but he could not rouse himself to take much interest in it. Bell did not profess to care either about what was in fact a turning-point in British politics. While the newspapers were full of the Taff Vale case, with its profoundly negative implications for trades unions (because the House of Lords had ruled they were liable for any injuries or damages arising

from the actions of their members), Thoby wished Bell might stand for Parliament in Merthyr Tydfil, the coal-mining and iron-working region of South Wales from which the Bell family's money derived. But he was ill in France where 'the froggy doctor' did not inspire Thoby with much confidence in his friend's care.

The consequence of the Conservative split that had begun in 1903 over free trade and tariff reform was a Liberal landslide. Arthur Schomberg – a Seend neighbour whom Bell had cajoled into a game of correspondence chess with the St Symphorien 'maniac' – wrote from Seend to rejoice in the results, adding that he was also pleased that France had severed Church and State by its law of 9 December 1905 which codified the movement towards state secularism that had gathered force since the late nineteenth century. We can be certain Bell welcomed *laïcité* too, though he was perhaps too immersed in his lovesickness at the time to mention it.

Thoby continued to send Bell news from London about exhibitions he had seen, their epistolary discussions still running along very traditional tracks. Thoby pronounced the International Society's show 'practically nugatory, except dead or dying froggies, Rodin, Cézanne, Degas, Monet, Forain'. In March, stopping in Rome before coming back to England, Bell told Thoby he had not been impressed by Raphael's frescoes in the Vatican Palace. He was in good company, Thoby pointed out, because Joshua Reynolds had also passed them by without comment on his first visit in 1750. He reminded Bell that he had already told him he was planning an excursion to Greece that autumn, which he hoped his friend would join. While Thoby wrote to Bell about the fine watercolours by Frederick Goodall, RA, at the International, Matisse's one-man show opened on 19 March at Druet's on the Faubourg Saint-Honoré; shortly thereafter, Matisse and Picasso met at the Steins' apartment on rue de Fleurus.

Bell told Strachey he was inclined to think that France was really the only civilised country but he wondered if Gordon Square was still the centre of civilisation in London. As spring approached, he shook off his lethargy and contemplated going home. News from Cambridge – Keynes's pursuit of an undergraduate named Harry (H. T. J.) Norton, A. W. Verrall's superb new book on Euripides – piqued his interest again. Jack Pollock enjoyed the cynicism of Bell's letters but was profoundly bored by Camille Mauclair's *De Watteau à Whistler* (1905),

which Bell had insisted he read. More to his taste was another of Bell's recommendations, Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, which he told Bell was one of the cleverest books he had ever read. This book would join *Lettres à une inconnue* on Bell's list of required reading for all his lovers. In preparation for Bell's return, Pollock sent membership forms for the London Library. Strachey asked his attractive cousin Duncan Grant, who was studying painting in Paris and with whom Strachey had fallen 'in love hopelessly and ultimately', if he would be interested in seeing Bell there. Duncan agreed the rendezvous might be amusing, but did not 'feel inclined to bother about it much'.

At the end of April, Bell returned to London, just too late to hear Thoby deliver a paper on the decadence of modern art to the Friday Club. Teatime conversation resumed at the rooms on King's Bench Walk and he planned to see the *Ring* cycle with Sydney-Turner. Strachey's criticism of Bell in his letters to Woolf somewhat relented because, he admitted, 'It's a great comfort to meet someone who even *says* that he admires Gluck & despises George Meredith, and isn't ashamed of Sodom.' Bell's harsh review of G. M. Trevelyan's *The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith* appeared anonymously in the *Cambridge Review* at the end of May, providing some small insight into the current state of his aesthetic ideas. Trevelyan's comparison of Meredith with Balzac and Flaubert shows 'a complete ignorance of French', he wrote, and furthermore, he

> has never fully appreciated the importance of art in literature . . . he seems to regard language as a mere vehicle for thought . . . He knows nothing of that art which delights in the beauty of words, fingering them with delicious precaution as we finger exquisite gems; the art that feels for strange tones and subtle phrases, and weaves them into symphonies of glorious harmony.

Was Bell perhaps recalling his former teacher's criticisms of the 'violence' of his language? Vanessa would have concurred with his objection to critics writing about the 'moral message' of painters and poets: 'When we meet with an exegesis of the "message" of Browning or the "moral teaching" of Shelley, we confess that our frayed nerves are racked almost beyond endurance.' She had once complained to Snow about a 'long lecture upon Art' delivered by G. F. Watts when she and George

Duckworth had been his weekend guests, in which he had said, 'When I paint a picture I want to give a message and I care comparatively little about how good the art is.'

Bell was still in love with Vanessa but 'behaved with great self possession' when he attended a Thursday 'at home' that summer, laughing and acting as though he had put passion behind him while recuperating in France. Nevertheless, Vanessa was wary of encouraging him. Such 'affairs of the heart' perplexed Virginia, who found Bell's feelings opaque. Within the month, he proposed again to Vanessa who once more turned him down. She explained that his first proposal had taken her by surprise because she had assumed he thought her 'rather stupid and quite illiterate'. She had told Thoby about it so that he would not invite his friend to stay and thus cause him pain. This time, however, Vanessa told Bell that she valued their friendship very much, particularly because their conversations about art and the Friday Club had been so easy and natural; outside her family, she liked him 'much better than I like anyone else', but she simply did not feel for him what she supposed it was necessary to feel for the man she would marry. To Snow, she expressed herself more vehemently: 'to marry without love would be utterly degrading & horrible'. That had been the fate Louie Blaikie had told Bell she feared, but orphaned Vanessa and Virginia Stephen were unencumbered by parental expectations and the hold over them of their half-brothers had waned.

The Stephen siblings rented Blo' Norton Hall in Norfolk at the beginning of August, from where Vanessa again wrote to 'Dear Mr. Bell', absolving him of trying to 'drag' her into correspondence. It was as important to her as she presumed it was to him that he understand how she felt. Thus, despite her wish not to marry, she encouraged him to continue writing to her. She also let him know that she would forward to Athens a letter to Thoby that had been delivered to Gordon Square after her brothers had left for the planned trip to Greece, where Vanessa and Virginia, accompanied by Violet Dickinson, would later join them.

Once more frustrated in his desire to marry Vanessa, Bell made preparations to leave England after Christmas. He asked Sydney-Turner to keep an eye on his King's Bench Walk rooms in case his servant decided clandestinely to rent them out to someone in his absence and joined his family in Scotland, where they had rented Merkland Lodge

in Lairg. Knowing they would be leaving him alone there in September, Bell invited Strachey to visit him. He arrived just before the Bells' departure ('abominably rich and devoid of any shred of gentility') with their guest, the *Punch* cartoonist G. D. Armour. Strachey reported with some smugness to Woolf that he at last had been able to see Bell 'in his true colours': 'He's a perfectly healthy and normal English sportsman with a tic for intellect. His fading decadence in London is affectation, and gross affectation . . . The paraphernalia of cultivation sits upon him most clumsily. He's a Monsieur Jourdain up to date.'

Although Strachey had been a sympathetic confidant when Bell first divulged his love for Vanessa, he continued to denigrate him in letters to Woolf, who followed the progress of Bell's courtship with interest from his remote colonial outpost in Ceylon. Strachey often described Bell as 'stupid' – surprisingly, given Bell's erudition and relative academic success. Bell's insecurities as a provincial who found himself among contemporaries whose well-connected families gave them easy social assurance undoubtedly made him prone to a certain degree of posing, while his hedonism and passion for women would always set him apart from the ascetic and brittle ethos of the Edwardian Apostles. Strachey's mocking comparison of Bell to Molière's *bourgeois gentilhomme* was the kind of barb that would sometimes find its way back to Bell and lead to bitter ruptures in their friendship.

Bell still believed that Vanessa would marry him, perhaps encouraged by her willingness to continue seeing him. It was a prospect that appalled Strachey: 'If by any mad chance it should occur it would be a complete amalgamation of the disgusting and the grotesque. Imagine, please, the family!' Vanessa had plenty of time to reflect on her decision while she was in Greece. After seeing Corinth, Nauplia and Mycenae with her siblings, she fell ill and remained in Athens with Violet while the others journeyed on to Euboea. Thoby wrote to Bell from the Hotel d'Angleterre (whose letterhead boasted 'Electric Light Throughout the Building'), describing the sights and smells of the Adriatic and the Peloponnese, an environment his sister Virginia would summon up in her novel *Jacob's Room* (1922), where she also drew on their 1904 trip to Paris. As he had when in Italy in 1904, Thoby again gently mocked Bell's supposed parochialism. The Parthenon might exist in his friend's mind's eye as a kind of 'dismantled & disreputable British Museum', but it was nothing of the kind. No description could substitute for the

reality of its colour. Virginia agreed, noting in her travel journal that language and paint could not capture the experience of the Parthenon seen at sunset.

In Vanessa's sick room, Virginia read Mérimée's *Lettres à une inconnue*, writing out her impressions at length. By now, Vanessa was suspected to be suffering from appendicitis so would not be able to go on with the others to Constantinople. Although the women had arrived in Olympia 'in a great first class carriage', travel through the region in 1906 was far from luxurious. The night before they met their sisters, Adrian and Thoby had been bitten so badly by bed bugs that their efforts to avoid them roused their 'filthy host & disreputable hostess' who barged into their room without knocking. Then, the presence of a huge scorpion drove them outside to try and sleep in a dry ditch but it became too cold so they dozed in chairs until dawn. Thoby set off from Athens for London, leaving his siblings to board the Austrian ship *Dalmatia* from Piraeus, bound for Constantinople. Vanessa was thought well enough to travel, despite her severe weakness, but in Constantinople her condition worsened. On the advice of a doctor from the English hospital, they would take the Orient Express back to London on 29 October. Thoby, too, arrived in London seriously ill. As soon as Bell saw him, he insisted that Thoby take to his bed.

After weeks resting in Greece, eating very little, but revived somewhat by champagne and brandy, Vanessa wrote a long letter from Constantinople to explain to her suitor what she had been thinking since she left England. She had promised Bell that she would make no major decisions without first consulting him (he may have worried that she would accept a proposal from someone else) but she felt no clearer than before about whether she would ever agree to marry him. She invited him to come and see her as soon as she was home so that she could explain in person her belief that they should not see one another again for a fixed period.

When she reached Gordon Square at the beginning of November, however, Vanessa was deemed too unwell for visitors, although she disagreed with her doctor and thought seeing Bell 'would do me a lot of good'. She thanked him for making Thoby go to bed: 'I think you just prevented him from getting really bad.' A few days later, she wrote again, explaining that were she to go on seeing him as she had in the summer, she would never make up her mind about marriage. She

offered him a choice: either go away for a year and not see her at all, at the end of which she would give him a definite answer, or abandon the idea of marriage altogether and agree to go on seeing her only as a friend. If he chose the former, Vanessa hoped that he would find some employment that would use his intellect. 'I can't imagine you being a successful barrister or man of business,' she wrote, but he must find some satisfying work that would make him see how he had idealised her and the Stephen family.

As soon as he received Vanessa's letter, Bell went to Gordon Square, but she was confined to her room, while Thoby suffered in his. In the ensuing weeks, Bell provided friends with bulletins from the sick rooms while the burden of care for her siblings fell on Virginia, who welcomed the distraction that Bell provided. When he was not at Gordon Square, Virginia kept Bell informed by postcard of her brother and sister's progress, as well of the doctors' opinions. If she had to be out, Bell would come to read to Thoby. Virginia began to refer to her sickroom companion as 'Peter', after Wordsworth's Peter Bell (a sinful ruffian who renounces his past wicked ways through the beneficent influence of nature).[1] She told Violet Dickinson, who was also ill, that they discussed modern verse and the correct way to pronounce 'enema'. When she looked at 'Peter', she imagined how one day she would need to tell him he was not good enough for her sister 'and then he will kiss me, and Nessa will wipe a great tear, and say we shall always have a room for you'. Bell and Virginia bantered about 'love and marriage and what will be good for a woman who has had appendicitis, and a proposal, a woman of very scrupulous mind and unselfish nature', which made him blush. Bell more or less lived at Gordon Square, even occasionally sleeping there.

Thoby's condition had at first been misdiagnosed as malaria and it did not improve. On 17 November, realising that the problem was typhoid, his doctor advised an operation. On the morning of 20 November, Thoby died. Strachey learned the news from Desmond

[1]'His later friends made much of the Peter Bell buried within Clive Bell. They nicknamed him Peter. They thought it a bit of a joke. . . Why did he read so much? Why was he so hungry for art? . . . Clive Bell never triumphed altogether over Peter Bell; but the two lived harmoniously together. Wordsworth's Peter enabled Clive to see that the emperor did not always wear clothes . . .' (Edel, *Bloomsbury* 29).

MacCarthy; he wrote to Woolf that he dreaded seeing Bell. Thoby's funeral took place at Golders Green on 22 November, attended by twenty or thirty people, among whom were Adrian and Virginia, the Duckworths, Strachey and his mother, and Thoby's aunt, Mary Fisher. G. M. Trevelyan read the part of the burial service that Leslie Stephen had chosen for his own funeral. Vanessa was too unwell to attend, so Bell stayed with her at Gordon Square. By the end of the day, she had agreed to marry him.

For the most part, news of their engagement was received as a happy ray of light amidst the gloom cast by Thoby's shattering and unexpected death. Some had misgivings, however: Strachey was reminded of lines from Thomas Beddoes' *Death's Jest-Book*:

> A wedding-robe, and a winding-sheet,
> A bridal bed and a bier.

He had to be the 'bringer of bad news' about the engagement to Woolf, but tried to cling to the idea of Bell's 'fundamental goodness'. A Stephen family friend, Kitty Maxse, wrote to her sister Susan that Virginia had told her about Vanessa's fiancé: he 'has no profession – & likes hunting & shooting – & writes rather good poetry & I hope is quite well off'. Bell was already well known to Vanessa's friends, several of whom wrote at once to congratulate him and at the same time console him for the loss of his closest friend. Among them was Margery Snowden, who told Bell that she had known for the last few years how much Vanessa craved the kind of unselfish affection he could give her. Snow added, teasingly, that she of course did not think him good enough for her friend. That he was 'not good enough' became a refrain within their close circle, and what had been Virginia's jest to Violet Dickinson would soon imbue her complicated feelings for her brother-in-law. When she passed by her sister's door now she heard 'not only perpetual voices but laughter'. They told her they were talking about art, but Virginia was sceptical. 'Do you believe it?' she asked Nelly Cecil. 'Well, you may mix art with many things.'

As Strachey had feared, Adrian and Virginia would now have to move out of Gordon Square. Virginia recognised that living too near the newly married couple would be 'dangerous'. When Bell took Vanessa to Seend to meet his family, Virginia reflected on her feelings about the

engagement. She told Madge Vaughan that Bell had the gift of making others shine, that Vanessa was as happy as she could be (indeed, Vanessa had herself told Madge a few days earlier that she was 'happier than I ever thought people could be'). But Strachey and Virginia could not separate their feelings about Vanessa's engagement from the tragedy of Thoby's death. As Thoby was memorialised – for example by Walter Lamb in the *Cambridge Review* – the couple began to make plans for a simple wedding to take place in February 1907. It was thought that Strachey might write something about Thoby for private circulation so Bell loaned him all of Thoby's letters. Nothing would come of this 'terrible task', as Strachey described it to Woolf, but Bell carefully preserved the letters for the rest of his life.

On the day of Thoby's funeral, 'Virginia Stephen' wrote to 'Mr Strachey' that Vanessa would like to talk to him, if he could come to tea on the following Sunday. Strachey came, feeling overwhelmed and at a loss for words. His written apology to Vanessa's fiancé for his 'rigidity' that afternoon was a milestone in the history of Bloomsbury. It began: 'Dear Arthur? Clive?' 'Henceforth between friends manners were to depend on feelings rather than conventions.' 'Strachey' became Lytton and 'Bell' became Clive.