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Clive Bell's chimes

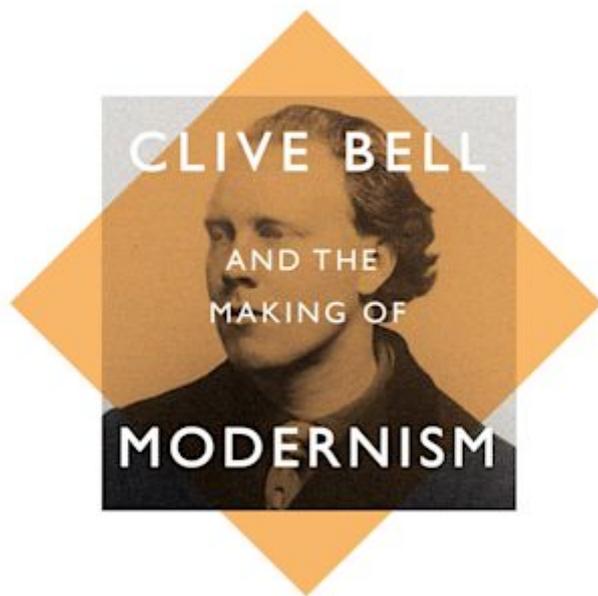
by Brooke Allen

A review of *Clive Bell and the Making of Modernism: A Biography* by Mark Hussey

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MARK HUSSEY



'Restores Clive Bell vividly to life'
LUCASTA MILLER

A BIOGRAPHY
BLOOMSBURY

Mark Hussey

Clive Bell and the Making of Modernism: A Biography

When Charles Ryder, the protagonist of Evelyn Waugh's semi-autobiographical *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), arrives as an undergraduate at Oxford in the early 1920s, he fills his bookshelf with volumes by Lytton Strachey, A. E. Housman, Norman Douglas, Compton Mackenzie, and a copy of Clive Bell's *Art* (1914), a touchstone of modernist theory. It is a nice detail, indicating not only the boy's aspirations to intellectual modishness but his cultural insularity, a point that will be underscored later in the novel when, in thrall to the Flyte family, Charles makes an aesthetic conversion to the international Baroque.

For Bell (along with his older comrade-in-arms, Roger Fry—also featured on Ryder's bookshelf) was modern art's apostle to the Anglo-Saxons, the island nation's interpreter of the ideas behind the post-Impressionist revolution taking place across the Channel. Most famously, Bell explicated the concept of "significant form." "For a discussion of aesthetics," he wrote in his widely read *Art*, "it need only be agreed that forms arranged and combined according to certain mysterious laws do move us profoundly, and that it is the business of an artist to combine and arrange them that they shall move us." According to Mark Hussey, who has written an enlightening new biography of Bell entitled *Clive Bell and the Making of Modernism*, Bell's view was that "the represented element in a picture should be only an aspect of design and not be associated with memory, anecdote, biography or any other non-aesthetic matter." The aim was no longer beauty but the elicitation of emotion through form itself—as with the workman's boots portrayed by Van Gogh, to take an obvious example. Bell took the line (followed by the callow, impressionable Charles Ryder) that artistic genius had dimmed since the quattrocento, and he breezily dismissed most of the masterpieces of the High Renaissance and the Baroque. Art had reignited, he said, with the post-Impressionists and Cubists, who far from initiating a radical break with the past had rejoined the European tradition from which mainstream art had long deviated. Giotto, he opined, was perhaps the "greatest painter of all time."

It is telling that already in 1945 Waugh was presenting *Art* as a period piece, though Bell was to live into the 1960s. Bell himself, in later life, described the book as a record of "what people like myself were thinking and feeling in the years before [World War I]," and Hussey states that now, in the twenty-first century, it is generally "regarded as solely of historical interest." But this is not to deny Bell's importance as a cultural guide. The amateur Bell (as opposed to the scholar Fry) adopted the idea of the critic as signpost, someone who leads his readers to great works and then allows them to respond to those works in their own, necessarily

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subjective, ways. “Roger’s careful, scholarly and putatively objective writing was markedly different from the sometimes slapdash but always entertaining narratives that gave Clive his reputation as a witty guide to high culture,” Hussey points out. (Hussey refers to his subject as Clive, and hereafter I will do likewise.) As one critic commented, Clive wrote about painting “with gusto, as though art were as good fun as cricket.”

In this biography it has been the purpose of Hussey, an academic who has spent decades of his life on Bloomsbury, to detach Clive from his Bloomsbury surroundings insofar as that is possible. In Hussey’s view Clive has too often “been refracted through the voluminous commentary on Bloomsbury, leaving a distorted and incomplete image of him.” This, I believe, is true. It is unfortunate that Bloomsburyites on both sides of the Atlantic, in their wholesale veneration of all things Bloomsbury, have swallowed personal judgments that were often founded merely on snobbery or even anti-Semitism—“underbred” being a specially-favored Bloomsbury term of abuse. This snobbery was applied to Clive’s family by most of the Bloomsbury set, particularly by his wife Vanessa. For Clive’s father had made his fortune in coal, and the family was unapologetically nouveau riche, occupying a comfortable Victorian pile, Cleeve House, in Wiltshire and enjoying country pursuits; they led, in Hussey’s words, a “rather Trollopesque life” and were in no way intellectuals. Clive was introduced to London’s aesthetes through Thoby Stephen, his boon companion at Cambridge, the brother of Clive’s future bride Vanessa and of his longtime erotic and intellectual obsession Virginia (the future novelist Virginia Woolf). “He seemed to live,” recalled Desmond MacCarthy, “[h]alf with the rich sporting-set, and half with the intellectuals” (he retained this habit throughout his life) and “dressed with careless opulence.” Vanessa had an exaggerated horror of Cleeve House and its denizens, explicable only by cultural condescension about its “conventionalities,” for the Bell family appears to have been quite pleasant; in fact, Clive maintained close ties with his mother, his brother, and one of his two sisters until the ends of their lives. Clive was always aware of his outsider status in Bloomsbury, writing once to Lytton Strachey:

You are painfully alive to the fact that I was trained outside the mystic circle of metropolitan culture wherein alone a young man may hope to acquire the distinguished manner. My manners you find florid and vulgar, over emphatic and underbred, whence you infer—wrongly as I think—that my appreciations are more or less blunt and that I am deficient in sensitiveness to the finer shades of thought and feeling.

To readers like myself who have long tired of warmed-over Bloomsbury gossip, Clive—at least as chronicled by Hussey—is rather appealing. He had no truck with the famous “gender fluidity” of the set, devoting a large portion of his time to a vigorous program of womanizing. Of course for all intents and purposes he was a single man: Vanessa set up house first with Roger Fry and then, for the long term, with Duncan Grant, with Clive free to come and go as he chose. “One would not say Clive was handsome, nor classically proportioned,” recalled one girlfriend of the pudgy, redheaded critic, “but his physical ways with one were thrilling. He knew exactly how and when to kiss me, when and how to stroke, to coax, to light one’s cigarette, to tumble or ruffle one.” And according to another, “When you are with him you feel that you are the one woman in the world he has chosen to be with.” Clive’s energies hardly flagged with age; his son Quentin recalled

playing Leporello to Clive's Don Juan in the 1930s, and Virginia, embarrassed by her brother-in-law's capers as a decrepit roué, expressed a wish that he would "progress beyond love where he has been stationed these many years to the next point in the human pilgrimage."

Psychologically, too, he seems refreshingly uncomplicated. He savored his life to the full: "There is no truth about life, he says," Virginia remarked, "except what we feel. It is good if you enjoy it, & so forth." And he set about enjoying as many things as possible: art, travel, food, drink, sex, friendship. "I always feel, how jolly, how much hunting, & talking & carousing there is in you!" Virginia commented. Many of his friends, Hussey notes, said that Clive was not happy unless his friends were happy; "his social arts were perhaps his greatest gifts." They also remarked on the high level of his conversation, but this has survived only in the occasional letter or diary entry.

Clive Bell was very much a man of his moment—that moment beginning, more or less, in 1910 when he and Fry organized the famous exhibition "Manet and the Post-Impressionists," which was followed by the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition of 1912–13. In 1914, the

thirty-two-year-old Clive really could believe that a new renaissance was at hand as a young generation in England laughed at the quaint beliefs of their Victorian forefathers and crossed borders both national and psychological, aesthetic and scientific, determined to create a cosmopolitan society where aesthetic ideas and one's personality mattered more than where one chanced to be born.

Such hopes were soon to be dashed, and with the advent of war Clive assumed a new role as a leader in the pacifist movement, arguing against conscription and for a negotiated peace, supporting conscientious objectors, and advising the government on the possibility of alternative modes of national service. His article "Art and War" deconstructed such abstractions as national honor and patriotism and claimed that, during wartime, artists' and philosophers' first duty is to "tend the lamp" of civilization. Meanwhile, his pamphlet *Peace at Once* (1915) asked whether "crushing" Germany was really worth "killing and maiming half the serviceable male population of Europe, starving to death a quarter of the world, and ruining the hopes of the next three generations." Excused from military service himself for health reasons, he spent the war at Philip and Ottoline Morrell's Garsington Manor, supposedly engaged in vital farm labor.

In the interwar years, traveling constantly between England and the Continent and maintaining close relationships with continental artists including Picasso and Matisse as well as friends such as André Derain and Jean Cocteau, Clive continued to develop his aesthetic theories in new books: *Pot-boilers* (1918), *Since Cézanne* (1922), *Civilization* (1928), *Proust* (1929), and *An Account of French Painting* (1931). He was an enthusiastic booster of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. (Aldous Huxley acidly remarked that "Clive doing his round of the boxes was a superb spectacle. One could almost hear his voice across the whole breadth of the building.") But the 1930s saw the end of Clive's "moment." He was decidedly out of joint with the engaged decade, persisting in his credo that art must transcend the waste of politics and war. Pacifist ideas that had been persuasive in 1914–18 now appeared dangerous in the face of the terrifying rise of dictators across Europe. And in one of those not uncommon family ironies, Clive had a son, the brilliant Julian, who theatrically

rejected his parents' values and gave his life—willingly—in the Spanish Republican cause: a cause in Clive's view not worth dying for.

After World War II a series of émigré art scholars from Germany shifted English writing on art away from Clive's belletristic approach to a more academic style, and the explosion of popular interest in Bloomsbury made Clive, a central survivor of the group, increasingly in demand as a raconteur. By the 1950s he was ruefully admitting that "What people really want of me are reminiscences. It's not flattering; they don't care a fig for my ideas." True, and yet some of his ideas are still very pertinent today. He lived, and wrote, during a profound transformation in the Western aesthetic sensibility (if not quite a change in human nature, as Virginia Woolf claimed). His credo of "significant form," and his criterion that art's *raison d'être* is to express the "permanent and universal," have not been gainsaid in the intervening century. As a communicator, a popularizer, and an infectious enthusiast he has had few rivals. And from the viewpoint of our own era, with its acrimonious and intolerant intellectual camps, these qualities appear more valuable than they might have seemed a century ago.

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