

"The Thing That Lies Beneath The Semblance of The Thing":

Virginia Woolf's Concept of Reality

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Virginia Woolf's Concept of Reality

By

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis undertakes a co-ordinated study of the public and private writings of Virginia Woolf with the purpose of defining her concept of reality as presented in her major novels.

The topic is subdivided into four categories which are discussed in four chapters under the following headings: Sex, Time, Life and Love, and Death. In each chapter extracts from the private papers of Virginia Woolf are compared with her public writings in order to clarify such key concepts as "moments of being" and "androgyny".

The thesis itself is cyclical in that it begins and ends with a discussion of Virginia Woolf's sexual beliefs and the ways in which these inform the lifework. It is certain aspects of this discussion (the link between sex and death, for example) which make an original contribution to the continuing reevaluation of the lifework of Virginia Woolf and of her place among Modernist writers.

I wish to acknowledge the encouragement of Dr. Stella Slade, who helped me to formulate the thesis topic, the patient guidance of Dr. David Blewett, who saved me from numerous errors of thought and composition, and the inspired and influential reading of my original manuscript by Jill Hampson, my critic and friend.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- AROO A Room of One's Own (Toronto: Granada) 1977.
- BTA Between The Acts (Toronto: Granada) 1978.
- CD The Captain's Deathbed (London: Hogarth Press) 1950.
- CR I The Common Reader (London: Harvest) 1953.
- CR II The Second Common Reader (London: Harvest) 1960.
- DM The Death of the Moth (London: Hogarth Press) 1942.
- DVW I,II,III,IV,V The Diary of Virginia Woolf (Harmondsworth:Penguin) 1979-85.
- JR Jacob's Room (Toronto: Granada) 1976.
- MB Moments of Being (Toronto: Granada) 1978.
- MBK Mausoleum Book by Leslie Stephen (London: Oxford University Press) 1977.
- MD Mrs. Dalloway (Toronto: Granada) 1976.
- ND Night and Day (Toronto: Granada) 1978.
- O Orlando (Toronto: Granada) 1977.
- QB I&II Virginia Woolf: A Biography by Quentin Bell (London: Hogarth Press) 1972.
- TG Three Guineas (Harmondsworth: Penguin) 1977.
- TTL To The Lighthouse (Toronto: Granada) 1977.
- VO The Voyage Out (Toronto: Granada) 1978.
- W The Waves (Toronto: Granada) 1977.
- Y The Years (Toronto: Granada) 1977.

## INTRODUCTION

On Saturday, January 9, 1915, while teetering on the brink of a prolonged and violent depression, Virginia Woolf made note in her diary of a walk she had taken with Leonard.

On the towpath we met & had to pass a long line of imbeciles. The first was a very tall young man, just queer enough to look twice at, but no more; the second shuffled, & looked aside; & then one realised that every one in that long line was a miserable ineffective shuffling idiotic creature, with no forehead, or no chin, & an imbecile grin, or a wild suspicious stare. It was perfectly horrible. They should certainly be killed. (DVW I, Sat., 9 Jan., 1915)

Some eight years later, during the composition of Mrs. Dalloway, the scene recurred to her imagination, and she placed it in the consciousness of Septimus Warren Smith, the "mad" character whose experiences with doctors and "cures" were modelled on her own.

In the street, vans roared past him; brutality blared out on placards; men were trapped in mines; women burnt alive; and once a maimed file of lunatics being exercised or displayed for the diversion of the populace (who laughed aloud) ambled and nodded and grinned past him, in the Tottenham Court Road, each half apologetically, yet triumphantly, inflicting his hopeless woe. And would he go mad? (MD, 81)

The last line of the Mrs. Dalloway passage is surely a comment on the violent sentiment expressed in the last line of the diary entry. Life influenced art by providing the incident, but art influenced life by explaining it. The two passages provide a clear indication of the



methods employed by Virginia Woolf in all her fictional writing. To borrow an analogy, she "cooked" the various incidents which life provided in an imagination which resembled a double-boiler, for it operated on two levels; what she "served" to her readers was her interpretation of the meaning behind or beneath such incidents. In effect, she creates two worlds -- the world of external reality which we are accustomed to find in novels, and an inner, mystical world of meaning which her characters discover gradually through their life experiences. Such is her perspective, and it is necessary to see through her bifocals in order to understand the lifework. As this author herself reminds us, in an essay on Defoe, "Our first task, and it is often formidable enough, is to master [the novelist's] perspective. All alone we must climb upon the novelist's shoulders and gaze through his eyes until we, too, understand in what order he arranges the large common objects upon which novelists are fated to gaze: man and men; behind them Nature; and above them that power which for convenience and brevity we may call God." (CR II, 43).

This thesis is an attempt to master Virginia Woolf's perspective. Unlike Defoe, whose journalism more often than not only serves to confuse the issues raised in his novels, Virginia Woolf has left us a body of private papers which clearly reflect and often explain the issues raised in hers. No unbiassed reader of her public and private writings can

doubt that the reality set forth in the novels is an artistic rendering of the reality which she perceived in life itself. Her prose style may have been influenced by Walter Pater<sup>1</sup> and she was writing in the same milieu which produced Proust, Lawrence, and Joyce, but her vision is essentially a private one. She perceived reality in the ways in which she did primarily because she was the person she was with the physical and mental capacities she had. Of course the same point could be made about any profoundly original writer, but in the case of Virginia Woolf the issue is crucial because she had a unique and distinctly physical mode of perception which psychologists would term abnormal: the diffuse mode. In this mode subject and object seem to fuse, as they do for Septimus Smith in Regent's Park when he feels himself becoming part of a tree (MD, 22). As Jean O. Love explains,

Virginia was aware even in childhood that she did not always distinguish between inner and outer events, and was always alert to the fusion of subjective and objective experience, judging from the number of references she made to that phenomenon in her various writings....Like many artists she was fascinated and exhilarated by the union of subjective and objective realms and, therefore, sometimes courted the experience.<sup>2</sup>

1. See Perry Meisel, The Absent Father: Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980)
2. Jean O. Love, Virginia Woolf: Sources of Madness and Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) 7.

The result for her writing is a highly sensual prose style, a "physicalness" about everything she writes which affects its meaning even when she is in her most etherial mood and supposedly the farthest removed from the mundane. Like Wordsworth and the Romantics, she sees the spiritual through the physical, even in the physical, and the eternal through and in the temporal. This perspective is not so much a "philosophy" as it is a result of literally "seeing" the world in a certain way. She had personal experiences -- "moments of being" as she calls them -- from her childhood on, which convinced her that reality lay beneath the smooth surfaces presented by everyday life. It was, as her character Rhoda expresses it in The Waves, "the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing". (W,110)

Many critics have discovered affinities between Virginia Woolf's novels and the work of certain existential philosophers who were her near contemporaries; but there is little evidence that she ever read any of their work, and even the philosophy of G.E. Moore, whose Principia Ethica has been called "the bible of Bloomsbury", is not an evident ingredient in her work. Existentialism, as well as Moore's neo-platonism, are a part of the ambience within which Virginia Woolf lived and worked, but her novelist's perspective arises primarily not from these, but from her own experience and perception of life.

In fact, the term "philosophy" is inapplicable to the thinking of Virginia Woolf. She never developed the kind of sustained and rational system of thought which this term denotes, but rather a highly personal and non-rational current of interwoven opinions which are more closely related to mysticism than to logic. She did, of course, express a particular viewpoint or perspective through her novels, and this perspective could be called, in a literary sense, a "philosophy of life" in the same way that George Eliot's perspective throughout her novels could be called a "philosophy of life". That is, both novelists express opinions, particularly ethical opinions which, taken together, form a philosophy of ethics. In neither case is there an enclosed and all-inclusive system; but both authors express certain opinions -- that integrity is good, for example -- and work out the evil results of loss of integrity through their stories. George Eliot does precisely this in Middlemarch, Virginia Woolf in Mrs. Dalloway. But writers of fiction do not generally propose systems of philosophy, and of all English writers Virginia Woolf is the least systematic. In fact, she pokes fun at Mr. Ramsay's philosophising in To The Lighthouse when she has Lily Briscoe imagine his reality theories as a kitchen table caught in the branches of a pear tree (TTL,26). And in her private writings she categorises her thought as "philosophy" only once -- in A Sketch of The Past, but the word is hedged round with "mights"

and "at any rates", as she attempts, in highly discursive fashion, to explain what she means by "moments of being". System-building of the Aristotelian variety was inimical to all her habits of thought which were, as Jean O. Love points out, "mythopoetic" rather than "ratio-empirical".<sup>3</sup>

Because of the unconventional nature of Virginia Woolf's thought processes, this thesis will avoid the term "philosophy" altogether in discussing her work, relying instead upon the phrase "concept of reality" to convey the author's current of opinions on what is, or is not, true life. Such terms as "perspective" which she uses in the Defoe essay and "point of view" which is her concern in "Modern Fiction" will help to elaborate the discussion. But it will also be clearly shown that this concept of reality, while not systematic, is a unified perception of the author's which attempts to answer most of the questions philosophers have traditionally deemed important, questions not only about ethical matters, but also about such abstract concepts as time and the nature of being. For in her usual open-ended and non-systematic way, Virginia Woolf has expressed opinions on all of these, in both her public and private writings; it is the objective of this thesis to pick up the many and varied strands of her opinions and weave of them a basket which may be found, in the end, to contain reality.

3. Jean O. Love, Worlds In Consciousness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970) ch.1.

I have arbitrarily divided reality into four categories for the convenience of making chapter divisions (Sex, Time, Life and Love, Death) but it should be stressed that these categories in no way reflect the author's attitude, which was holistic:

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. ("Modern Fiction", CR I, 154)

I shall be tracing the links which she found (and made) between art and life through discussion of her private writings such as diaries and memoirs as they illuminate the novels. This thesis is not an attempt to psychoanalyse Virginia Woolf, but rather a study of the ways in which she used the people and events of her own life experiences to produce art which is at once true to life and distinctly her own.

## SEX

In a letter written on her honeymoon, Virginia Woolf speculated on the fuss made by everyone (but herself) over the physical act of sex.

Why do you think people make such a fuss about marriage and copulation? Why do some of our friends change upon losing chastity? Possibly my great age makes it less of a catastrophe; but certainly I find the climax immensely exaggerated. (QB II,5)

Professor Bell adds to this his own speculation that it was Virginia's

disposition to shrink from the crudities of sex, a disposition which resulted from some profound and perhaps congenital inhibition.... I would go further and suggest that she regarded sex, not so much with horror, as with incomprehension; there was, both in her personality and in her art, a disconcertingly aetherial quality and, when the necessities of literature compel her to consider lust, she either turns away or presents us with something as remote from the gropings and grapplings of the bed as is the flame of a candle from its tallow. (QB II,6)

It is difficult to decide whose language is more inappropriate to the situation: Virginia, with her talk of "copulation" or her nephew and his "gropings and grapplings of the bed". Sex in Bloomsbury sounds as if it were different from sex in the rest of the world. Tradition (and Quentin Bell in Volume One of his biography) tell us that it was Lytton Strachey who proposed the Latin terminology which the elder generation of Bloomsbury used when conducting sexual conversations. This unfortunate choice of a dead language to express a living reality may have influenced Virginia's expectations long before her first attempt at love-making.

But certainly the "disconcertingly aetherial" quality of Virginia Woolf's writing exists nowhere except in the mind of Professor Bell, who apparently equates sex with wrestling. The most striking quality of Virginia Woolf's prose is its sensuality; "copulation" is (mercifully) unheard of in her novels, but sexuality abounds -- in the language, in the tone, in the very structure of her work. What is missing is any explicit sexual scenes of the Lawrentian school, and it is probably to this lack that Professor Bell refers when he speaks of "gropings and grapplings", although his choice of words is unfortunate in its implications about the nature of the sexual experience.

In her critical writing Virginia Woolf comments twice on the use of sex in literature; once, in "Modern Fiction" when she is discussing Joyce; and again in "Professions For Women" in reference to her own work. About Joyce she wonders, "Does the emphasis laid, perhaps didactically, upon indecency, contribute to the effect of something angular and isolated"(CR I,156)? She seems to be regretting a kind of joylessness in his writing. But in her own case, her fear is of breaking convention. She pictures herself as a young girl fishing:

The line raced through the girl's fingers. Her imagination had rushed away. It had sought the pools, the depths, the dark places where the largest fish slumber. And then there was a smash. There was an explosion. There was foam and confusion. The imagination had dashed itself



against something hard. The girl was roused from her dream. She was indeed in a state of the most acute and difficult distress. To speak without figure she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked. (DM, 205)

Men, and women too, probably would have been shocked, as they were by Lawrence and Joyce, and as certain segments of society still are by the novels of Margaret Laurence. It is absurd to condemn Virginia Woolf, as many critics do from their lofty vantage point of a more liberal era, for her failure to produce the kind of writing which would have been banned in her day. If she had written even one such book, her extreme sensitivity to criticism would alone have been enough to prevent her from ever writing again, and would probably have pushed her to an even earlier suicide. In this "liberal" era of the 'eighties Margaret Laurence herself, who is probably an altogether more stable individual than Virginia Woolf was, has spoken in interviews of the terrible pain she has experienced in consequence of the vile abuse she has received over her novels. Virginia Woolf's worry about convention may have been in part self-inflicted due to personal inhibitions, but it cannot be emphasized enough that to write truthfully about human sexual passion in her day was to court disaster, particularly, as she herself points out, if the writer were a woman.

But there was nothing to prevent Virginia Woolf from "laying it

between the lines", and perhaps what Bell calls her "candle-flame" approach to sex deserves discussion of its peculiar illuminations. On another level Virginia Woolf's profound grasp of the essence of maleness and femaleness surely requires more study.

The Voyage Out and Night and Day, the two earliest works, are also the only ones which are "about" lovers; indeed, they are the only ones "about" anything in the sense of having a conventional story to tell. Their sexual scenes range from the discreet to the bizarre:

'Here's shade,' began Hewet, when Rachel suddenly stopped dead. They saw a man and a woman lying on the ground beneath them, rolling slightly this way and that as the embrace tightened and slackened. The man then sat upright and the woman, who now appeared to be Susan Warrington, lay back upon the ground, with her eyes shut and an absorbed look upon her face, as though she were not altogether conscious. Nor could you tell from her expression whether she was happy, or had suffered something. When Arthur again turned to her, butting her as a lamb butts a ewe, Hewet and Rachel retreated without a word. Hewet felt uncomfortably shy.

'I don't like that,' said Rachel after a moment. (VO, 139)

The lovers in this scene are distanced, objectified, by the narrator, who wonders, at the same time, if Susan is "conscious" and whether or not she has "suffered something". The lamb and ewe image, as Howard Harper points out, "seems too bizarre even for this context",<sup>1</sup> and Rachel's use of the word "that" removes the sexual act from the people experiencing it.

1. Howard Harper, *Between Language and Silence* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press) 1982, 40.

Such a depersonalized sexual experience could, perhaps, be defined as "copulation". Hewet's reply, that he can remember a time when he didn't like it either implies, to quote Harper again, "that sexual love is not entirely natural, but an acquired taste."<sup>2</sup> Harper faults Virginia Woolf on both counts, but is this presentation not, in some sense, "real"? For the children of Victorian parents, wasn't sex of necessity "an acquired taste" if the inhibitions of their parents had been successfully transferred? Virginia Woolf is demonstrating through this scene all that was wrong in the Victorian sexual education of children. One basic premise of the novel as a whole is that Rachel has been completely left in the dark, even to the advanced age of twenty-four, about the most basic facts of life, and Hewet's response shows that his own education, while perhaps broader, has been scarcely more wholesome than hers. In his first attempt at love-making he fails:

Faster and faster they walked; simultaneously they stopped, clasped each other in their arms, then releasing themselves, dropped to the earth. They sat side by side. Sounds stood out from the background making a bridge across their silence; they heard the swish of the trees and some beast croaking in a remote world.

'We love each other,' Terence repeated, searching into her face. Their faces were both very pale and quiet, and they said nothing. He was afraid to kiss her again. By degrees she grew closer to him and rested against him. In this position they sat for some time. She said 'Terence' once; he answered 'Rachel'.(VO,278-9)

2. Harper,40.

The narrator, who is really the repository for the feelings of both characters in each of these scenes, hears the outside sounds of the forest and "some beast croaking" during the lovers' embrace. Furthermore, Terence is "afraid to kiss her again". This love scene is only completed and fulfilled when Helen Ambrose, a wise and sensual woman, becomes a part of their love-making. This extraordinary occurrence takes place the next day:

A hand dropped abrupt as iron on Rachel's shoulder; it might have been a bolt from heaven. She fell beneath it, and the grass whipped across her eyes and filled her mouth and ears. Through the waving stems she saw a figure, large and shapeless against the sky. Helen was upon her. Rolled this way and that, now seeing only forests of green, and now the high blue heaven; she was still speechless and almost without sense. At last she lay still, all the grasses shaken round her by her panting. Over her loomed two great heads, the heads of a man and a woman, of Terence and Helen.

Both were flushed, both laughing, and the lips were moving; they came together and kissed in the air above her. Broken fragments of speech came down to her on the ground. She thought she heard them speak of love and then of marriage. Raising herself and sitting up, she too realized Helen's soft body, the strong and hospitable arms, and happiness swelling and breaking in one vast wave. (VO, 290-1)

The passage is as sensual as a poem by Keats, brimming with sound and colour and sensation. It moves from hard to soft, from heaven to earth, from grey iron to green and blue and red in the flushed faces of Terence and Helen. It is surrealistic and impressionistic, conveying its meaning not through logic but through poetic imagery. We can see the words of Helen and Terence -- they are "broken fragments". We can feel them kiss,

as we could not feel the earlier kiss of Terence and Rachel. Above all, we can experience the sensual, almost sexual, release of happiness by Rachel as she is enfolded by Helen's "strong and hospitable arms". In fact, it is probably only the very poetical and therefore "obscure" rendering of this sexual experience which saved Virginia Woolf's first novel from the unpleasant attentions of the censor which Lawrence's work received for scenes whose only difference from this one lies in the degree of explication of the characters' activities. Certainly there is no "copulation" involved here, but there is love-making which involves the whole body, the soul, and the earth and sky as well; nor is it limited to the conventional male-female relationship which the society of the author's day officially approved.

It is my belief that Virginia Woolf's famous frigidity was, in fact, the reverse: an acute sensitivity residing in every inch of her body, and extending to embrace grass and trees as well as people of both sexes. In any case, Rachel Vinrace, who was Virginia Woolf's first literary projection of herself, has the same type of "diffuse" sensibility as her creator, whose sexual "reality" in this first work, though unconventional, is certainly as vital as any offered by Lawrence in his work.

There are no explicitly sexual scenes in Night and Day, understandable in a work derived, according to Jane Marcus, from equal injections of

Shakespearian romance and Austenian social comedy to produce a light-hearted satirical rebuttal of Mozart's The Magic Flute.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, there is a diary entry for June of 1918, a year which was taken up entirely with the composition of this novel, in which Virginia Woolf mentions that she saw Mozart's opera "& thought rather better of humanity for having that in them" (DVW I, Fri., 7 June, 1918), and certainly her Mrs. Hilberry is the exact opposite of Mozart's Queen of Night, as Marcus ably demonstrates. It is perhaps difficult to reconcile Virginia's obvious enjoyment of the opera with her denunciation of its values unless she saw Mozart's work as already satirical and wrote her "rebuttal" as an accompanying piece. At any rate, both works are clearly comic in tone, which naturally precludes explicitly sexual scenes, but both works are deeply concerned with the relations, both on the surface and at the deeper archetypal level, between the sexes.

What Virginia Woolf gives us in Night and Day is the other side of her sexual coin, a side which was also presented in The Voyage Out -- the search for androgyny. In both novels there is an older couple -- Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose in the first book and Mr. and Mrs. Hilberry in the

3. Jane Marcus, "Enchanted Organs, Magic Bells: Night and Day as Comic Opera", in Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity, ed. Ralph Freedman (Berkeley: University of California Press) 1980, 97.

second -- who prefigure in many ways the later mythic representations of the male and female essences, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. We are invited to watch how their relationships work, and at the same time to join the younger couples, Terence and Rachel, Katharine Hilberry and Ralph Denham, in their search for a better way to live in which there is a sharing of male and female qualities and prerogatives.

"'Oh, you're free!'" exclaims Terence in the midst of his meditation on possible marriage with Rachel. "'We'd be free together. We'd share everything together. No happiness would be like ours. No lives would compare with ours '"(VO,250). Rachel dies before Terence's dream can become reality, but Ralph and Katharine will purchase their cottage in the country where their "flame", which suggests sex as well as creative power, will burn brightly. Katharine tells Ralph that he has "destroyed" her loneliness, "and more and more constantly he appeared to her a fire burning through its smoke, a source of life"(ND,456).

The theme of young love and marriage is not repeated after Virginia Woolf's first two novels, perhaps because the author had changed her views on the possibility that marriage could provide the freedom necessary to develop a creative and androgynous life; but more likely because other themes became more important to her than young love. But sex is never left out in the remainder of her work, and androgyny becomes more and more central thematically in the major works of the 'twenties.

Jacob's Room is discreet sexually, having more to do with the overwhelming problem of getting to know an individual at all than with the secondary issue of carnal knowledge. But Jacob does wonder, during his intrigue with Florinda, about the "insoluble problem" of physical beauty when it surrounds an empty mind and beckons invitingly:

The problem is insoluble. The body is harnessed to a brain. Beauty goes hand in hand with stupidity. There she sat staring at the fire as she had stared at the broken mustard-pot. In spite of defending indecency, Jacob doubted whether he liked it in the raw. He had a violent reversion towards male society, cloistered rooms, and the works of the classics; and was ready to turn with wrath upon whoever it was who had fashioned life thus.

Then Florinda laid her hand upon his knee. (JR, 79)

Jacob goes on to enjoy this particular sexual adventure, but with a rather frustrated astonishment at his own capacity to divorce physical pleasure from his deeper emotions. Once again, there is an implied criticism of a society which restricts pre-marital sex to such uneven relationships as this one, in which a Florinda must be used for experimental purposes because young ladies of Clara Durrant's class are off-limits until the official papers are signed.

Clarissa Dalloway's biggest problem is her inability to divorce the physical from the emotional in order to bend convention. Sally Seton's kiss had been so splendid because Clarissa was in love with her at the time the kiss was bestowed. Emily Jensen, in "Clarissa



Dalloway's Respectable Suicide", argues that Clarissa's rejection of homosexual love is actually a suicide of the soul, far more killing than Septimus's physical death. She equates Clarissa's "thing that mattered" (MD,163) with Septimus's "treasure" (MD,163) and concludes "that both refer to the integrity of homosexual love and of the selves involved in that love."<sup>4</sup> This study exemplifies the growing critical interest in the sexual aspect of Virginia Woolf's work, an aspect which passed unnoticed by the censors who attacked Joyce and Lawrence, but presumably found Mrs. Woolf lady-like and refined.

Mrs. Dalloway is a study of the sexual experience. Clarissa knows what that is:

It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores. Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. But the close withdrew; the hard softened. It was over -- the moment. (MD,30)

Was there ever a truer or more beautiful description of orgasm? But in keeping with her expressed need to avoid shocking men Virginia allows her heroine this experience in a detached way. Clarissa imagines it

4. Emily Jensen, "Clarissa Dalloway's Respectable Suicide", in Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant, ed. Jane Marcus (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press) 1983, 167.

as part of her series of memories of the past rather than living it with a partner in the present. She remembers, in fact, that most of her actual sexual experiences with Richard had been failures:

She could see what she lacked. It was not beauty; it was not mind. It was something central which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman, or of women together. For that she could dimly perceive. She resented it, had a scruple picked up Heaven knows where, or, as she felt, sent by Nature (who is invariably wise); yet she could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman...and...she did undoubtedly then feel what men felt. (MD, 30)

Spater and Parsons, in A Marriage of True Minds link "wise Nature" with Virginia's personal life, and draw the unfounded conclusion that the author was rather pleased with her own physical aloofness because it left her more time to write.<sup>5</sup> They ignore the obvious connection in the passage itself between wise Nature and Clarissa's attraction to women. In this aspect of her sexuality, Clarissa did perhaps resemble her creator, though such evidence as there is suggests that Virginia was only slightly less frigid with Vita Sackville-West than she was with Leonard. The real point, however, has nothing to do with sexual performance. In the thoughts of Clarissa Dalloway Virginia Woolf is expressing her own thoughts, impressions, and poetic reflections on the place of sex in a relationship and as a part of reality itself.

5. George Spater and Ian Parsons, A Marriage of True Minds (London: Jonathon Cape and the Hogarth Press) 1977, 177.

Sex was "something warm which broke up surfaces". The image is of water boiling. The "something warm" then, comes from within and reaches to the surface, where it has the power to "ripple" the hard, smooth, cold contact of superficial relationships. "It was something central which permeated." It is not something which comes from without and can be plastered on to a relationship to make it more exciting, but something integral to the individual in the relationship. A diary entry for July, 1927 expands on this theme in relation to Clive Bell, who does not seem -- in Virginia's opinion at least -- to have caught on, even at the advanced age of forty-five, to the meaning of sex in a relationship.

Clive walked me round, & standing under the lamp expressed his complete disillusion. "My dear Virginia, life is over. There's no good denying it. We're 45. I'm bored, I'm bored, I'm unspeakably bored....I go about thinking about suicide. I admire you for having tried to kill yourself."

The next day, when Clive and Virginia met again, Clive had fallen in love with an aristocratic lady, and for him life was changed. Virginia found his entire performance "silly, shallow, and selfish".

Now love I dare say nothing against; but it is a feeble passion, I mean a gross dull passion when it has no part in it of imagination, intellect, poetry. Clive's love is three parts vanity. Now that he can say, or lie, I've been to bed with Valerie, his self-love is assuaged. He remains Clive, the undaunted lover, the Don Juan of Bloomsbury; & whether it's true or not, so long as we think it true, scarcely matters. (DVW, III, Sat., 23 July, 1927)

The "something warm" which Clarissa lacks, whatever it might be, is manifestly not the "gross dull passion" of Clive the hedonist, nor is it "shallow and selfish", but rather a going out of oneself which makes the contact with another interesting, imaginative, poetic instead of smooth and hard and cold. It is an adventure, but an adventure shared by two (or possibly three, as in the scene quoted above from The Voyage Out) and not a conquest of one person over another. (In all fairness to Clive Bell it should be added that he saw his own actions in a more poetic and imaginative light than Virginia was able to use. And Frances Spalding, in her biography of Vanessa Bell paints a very different picture from Virginia's of Clive's affairs:

Clive gave to his women friends an attentive sympathy that was rare in this period when sexual stereotypes helped determine behaviour and created invisible barriers of communication even between husband and wife....He had a gift for giving happiness to others.<sup>6)</sup>

Virginia's objection to Clive Bell was based, not on his promiscuity, but on his boasting, which gave her the impression that he was much more of a self-aggrandising "conquistadore" than was actually the case. Jinny, in The Waves, is the character whose promiscuity most closely parallels that of Clive Bell, but she is presented as a devout practitioner of the kind of "rippling" Clarissa describes. The fact that the author names this character "Jinny", a diminutive of Virginia, suggests that

6. Frances Spalding, Vanessa Bell (London: Macmillan) 1983, 242.

she may be a part of Virginia Woolf's psyche. Jinny seeks union, not merely pleasure.

He approaches. He makes towards me. This is the most exciting moment I have ever known. I flutter. I ripple. I stream like a plant in the river, flowing this way, flowing that way, but rooted, so that he may come to me. ...I am a native of this world. Here is my risk, here is my adventure. The door opens. O come, I say to this one, rippling gold from head to heels. 'Come,' and he comes towards me. (W, 69-70)

"Rippling", in both novels, is a poetic rendering of a particular kind of excitement, the kind of excitement which happens to water when it boils or to human beings when they are sexually aroused. Jinny ripples a lot, Clarissa hardly ever -- except, perhaps, for that "most exquisite moment of her whole life" when Sally Seton kissed her on the lips and "the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling!" (MD, 33)

In The Years Virginia Woolf shows the seamy side of her sexual reality, in which all the values she has been at some pains to establish elsewhere in her work are perverted by a perverse patriarchal society. This book gives us life as it was lived in the Europe which was hatching Hitler. It seems natural for little girls in this world to be accosted by nasty men in raincoats who expose themselves by post boxes. It seems natural for old men to keep mistresses of dubious moral and hygienic standards. It even seems natural for these old men to fumble around their mistresses' necklines with grotesque fingerless paws. But the

naturalness is the naturalness of evil, as the author makes clear throughout that long and depressing narrative. Society has been poisoned, like Hamlet's Denmark, and perversion is the only possible result of such a state of affairs. For a more balanced view of the sexual relationship we must turn to Virginia Woolf's last novel, Between The Acts.

This novel contains its author's most realistic treatment of sexual themes. In a world far removed from the garden on a certain Sunday in June of 1939, we are introduced to an unfulfilled wife, a frustrated husband, a shy homosexual, a deserted lesbian, and <sup>a</sup> middle-aged adventurer of the Clive Bell school of hedonism.

The novel opens with a discussion of a cesspool, an indication of things to come. But there is a comic tone to the work which takes the edge off its biting social criticism. Romantic love is made fun of in the opening scene as Isa sits lusting after Rupert Haines, the gentleman-farmer, under the "goose-like" eyes of Mrs. Haines.

She had met him at a Bazaar; and at a tennis party.  
He had handed her a cup and a racquet -- that was all.  
But in his ravaged face she always felt mystery; and  
in his silence passion. (BTA, 8)

Old Bart interrupts with a story about his mother and her gift to him of the works of Byron, some lines of whom he now quotes.

Isa raised her head. The words made two rings,  
perfect rings, that floated them, herself and  
Haines, like swans downstream. But his snow-white  
breast was circled with a tangle of dirty duckweed; (BTA, 9)

No reader familiar with the reports of the uninvited fondlings Virginia was subjected to by her Duckworth half-brothers will miss the allusion in these lines; but even without such private information, we can see that the image is a muddy one. "Perfect" love is impossible in a "tangled" world.

and she too, in her webbed feet was entangled,  
by her husband, the stockbroker. Sitting on her  
three-cornered chair she swayed, with her dark  
pigtails hanging, and her body like a bolster  
in its faded dressing-gown. (BTA,9)

Isa must remain "a bolster" to her family, a cushioned support against the pressures of life. Giles the stockbroker is too far removed from the reality of the land to satisfy her, nor can she understand his cruder perceptions of a world "bristling" with guns (BTA,43). Virginia Woolf said that for her reality was "residing in the downs or sky" (DWW, Mon., 10 Sept., 1928). In her desire for Rupert Haines, it is this kind of reality which Isa seeks, and it is this which will be denied her because the world in 1939 is too fragmented to afford such unity.

Giles needs a more immediate physical release of tension, and for this he seeks out Mrs. Manressa. Isa is aware of his attraction to that lady's ample physique, also of the unfairness of his double standard. "She could feel the Manressa in his wake. She could hear in the dusk in their bedroom the usual explanation. It made no difference; his infidelity -- but hers did" (BTA,83). Giles, on the other hand, senses only that his wife is rejecting him, not why, or for whom.

Giles shifted his feet. Whom did she admire?  
 Not Dodge. That he could take for certain. Who else?  
 Some man he knew. Some man, he was sure, in the Barn.  
 Which man? He looked around him. (BTA,84)

His suspicion and possessiveness are comic in light of his own lust for the "taut plump curves" of Mrs. Manresa, who, we are told, "had him in thrall"(BTA,89&84).

Jean Guiguet worries a great deal about the sexual explicitness of Virginia Woolf's last novel.

With these, another theme must be included, somewhat unexpected in its frankness: physical desire and the element of antagonism implicit in sexual relationship. No doubt the hatred that is the underside of love was already apparent in the relations between Ralph Denham and Katharine Hilberry; the same mixed feelings were present in Orlando, and both To The Lighthouse and The Waves develop this duality, but on the plane of feeling, whereas here, attraction and repulsion are shown as animal reactions.<sup>7</sup>

Guiguet goes on to speculate that the author may be giving a "belated manifestation" of her affinities with Lawrence, or may possibly have been influenced by reading Freud. But the sexuality of Between The Acts represents not so much a change of direction as a letting go of certain subtleties of language which Virginia Woolf had been using as a "blind" (in order to avoid shocking men) throughout her career as a novelist. "Animal reactions" are certainly one aspect of sexual relations. That she chooses to deal with them here indicates a kind of "loosening up"

7. Jean Guiguet, Virginia Woolf and Her Works, trans. by Jean Stewart (London: The Hogarth Press) 1965, 324.



of the restrictions which she had felt earlier in her career. This "loosening" is apparent as well in her Memoirs which were being written concurrently with the novel, and in which she alludes to the sexual exploration of her six-year old body by Gerald Duckworth. "Professions For Women", in which she regretted her inability to write about "my own experiences as a body" had been written in 1931; ten years later, in her final novel, she solved the problem which had bedevilled her attempts to write truthfully of physical passions for most of her life.

But sexual antagonism, as Guiguet correctly notes, had been present in her work from the beginning. The most telling comment on the ending of Between The Acts is that made by Rachel Vinrace in The Voyage Out when she feels painfully the alternate closeness and division which go to make up love and exclaims, "It will be a fight." (VO, 289) Giles and Isa, a mature version of Rachel and Terence, are involved in that fight, which, paradoxically, may produce new life.

But Miss LaTrobe and William Dodge point the way to a less combative way of life, which is explored most fully in To The Lighthouse and Orlando: the way of androgyny. Miss LaTrobe, "hardly a charmer", as Phyllis Rose succinctly expresses it,<sup>8</sup> has been drinking too much since her actress-lover left her, and William Dodge is despised by

8. Phyllis Rose, Woman of Letters (New York: Oxford University Press) 1978, 234.

the hyper-masculine Giles, but both characters possess a sympathetic understanding of humanity which is expressed by Miss LaTrobe through her pageant and by William Dodge in his conversations with old Lucy and Isa. This understanding is positively comforting in the sex-embattled world of Pointz Hall. But in order to grasp the point entirely it is necessary to return to the earlier novels and trace Virginia Woolf's development of the theme of androgyny up to this point.

The need for a more androgynous way of life has been present thematically, of course, in all the novels of Virginia Woolf, beginning with The Voyage Out. Here we are given Helen Ambrose, who enjoys her conversation with St. John Hirst so much because "he took her outside this little world of love and emotion. He had a grasp of facts"(VO,311). The "little world of love and emotion" is the feminine world, the world of the kitchen, the nursery, the dining room or drawing room where we take care of people. A woman never has a room of her own because she is not supposed to need one. How can you take care of people if you have closed the door to sit in your study and read Shakespeare? For this reason, as Herbert Mardar points out, the home is a symbol of the woman's sphere for Virginia Woolf in Night and Day, The Years, and particularly in To The Lighthouse.

During much of the first section, Mrs. Ramsay sits framed in a window of the Ramsay summer home; the house is her sphere, filled and animated by her influence. It is the shell of the family and Mrs. Ramsay is the life within it. The title of the section, "The Window", is significant. In the second section, "Time Passes", Mrs. Ramsay dies; the house falls into decay. In the final section it is partially restored when some members of the family return, seeking the dead mother.<sup>9</sup>

But the work involved in being the life within the shell of a house is never logical, rational, factual. Getting from Q to R, as Mr. Ramsay tries to do, is no help at all in making things run smoothly in a houseful of different personalities. Intuitive understanding of the emotional needs of everyone involved is what is called for, as well as the selflessness and dedication of a saint -- or martyr.

Mrs. Ramsay is, in fact, the "Angel in the House", that dearly beloved model of Victorian womanhood whom Virginia had to "strangle" before she could become a writer, as she describes in "Professions For Women":

It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her. You...may not know what I mean by the Angel in the House. I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it -- in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all -- I need not say it -- she was pure. (DM, 202)

9. Herbert Marder, Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press) 1968, 37.

Mrs. Ramsay lives in her little world framed by a window which she rarely looks out of. She cares for others, but cannot share with them that part of her which is herself, for to admit that she even has a self would be breaking the angelic code. But she feels things intuitively -- Paul and Minta should marry -- and she acts upon her intuition, setting in motion a train of events over which she has, ultimately, no control. The marriage is a failure and we are left to question Mrs. Ramsay's rejection of the world of fact.

Mr. Ramsay, who is most completely at home in the world of fact, is unable to relate to his own children for that very reason:

What he said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, least of all his own children, who, sprung from his loins, should be aware from childhood that life is difficult; facts uncompromising; and the passage to that fabled land where our brightest hopes are extinguished, our frail barks founder in darkness (here Mr. Ramsay would straighten his back and narrow his little blue eyes upon the horizon), one that needs, above all, courage, truth, and the power to endure. (TTL, 10)

Mr. Ramsay's world is a hard one, which his wife strives to soften for the benefit of their children, often at the expense of complete veracity. She is "wrong" to do this (the weather will not be fine tomorrow) but she is "right" to calm the stormy waters of emotion which Mr. Ramsay invariably stirs up in his offspring. Her lack of respect for factual

reality is balanced by an equal but opposite incompleteness in her husband.

It is manifestly not emotion which Mr. Ramsay lacks, but the ability to deal with it. A good example of his failure to deal with his own emotions comes during the dinner party when he is irrationally upset by Augustus Carmichael's request for a second bowl of soup.

It was unthinkable, it was detestable (so he signalled to her across the table) that Augustus should be beginning his soup over again. He loathed people eating when he had finished. She saw his anger fly like a pack of hounds into his eyes, his brow, and she knew that in a moment something violent would explode, and then -- but thank goodness! she saw him clutch himself and clap a brake on the wheel, and the whole of his body seemed to emit sparks but not words. He sat there scowling. He had said nothing, he would have her observe. Let her give him the credit for that! But why after all should poor Augustus not ask for another plate of soup? (TTL, 89)

On this occasion it is Minta Doyle who saves Mr. Ramsay from himself by confessing that she has lost her grandmother's brooch "which roused his chivalry so that he bantered her" (TTL, 91). Calling Minta Doyle a silly goose makes Mr. Ramsay feel better. If, on the other hand, Minta had sat down to discuss Sophocles, an undertaking he would have enjoyed with a man, he would have been completely squelched and would probably have exploded in the violent way that Mrs. Ramsay feared.

Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay are presented, in To The Lighthouse, as mythic characters of purely male and female sensibilities, rather like Milton's Adam and Eve. What is needed is a fusion of the two.

In A Room of One's Own Virginia Woolf speculates on Coleridge's theory of the androgynous mind. She had been looking out a window (unlike Mrs. Ramsay, who keeps her eyes fastened upon the activity within the house) when she saw a man and a woman getting into a taxi-cab; this act put her in mind of unity.

One has a profound, if irrational, instinct in favour of the theory that the union of man and woman makes for the greatest satisfaction, the most complete happiness. But the sight of the two people getting into the taxi and the satisfaction it gave me made me also ask whether there are two sexes in the mind which correspond to the two sexes in the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness?...Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought. (AROO, 93-4)

Mrs. Ramsay achieves a momentary fusion during her dinner party when she is able to share herself completely with others. But for Mr. Ramsay such an experience cannot take place until, long after the death of his wife, he undertakes a kind of odyssey in search of unity of being, as symbolized by the lighthouse.

In undertaking the voyage to the lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay is undertaking self-renunciation, for he must look out rather than in and provide something for Cam and James rather than looking to them for emotional solace. This is not an easy task, and the moments before their departure

are entirely taken up by his seeking for sympathy from Lily Briscoe, who, without the prodding of Mrs. Ramsay, is determined not to give it. These two reach a compromise of sorts when she is able to compliment him on his magnificent boots, boots that have climbed mountains and led expeditions, and her praise brings about a change in him "when it seemed as if he had shed worries and ambitions, and the hope of sympathy and the desire for praise, had entered some other region, was drawn on, as if by curiosity, in dumb colloquy, whether with himself or another, at the head of that little procession out of one's range"(TTL,146).

As they approach the lighthouse James remembers the "silvery, misty-looking tower with the yellow eye" which he had associated, from childhood, with his mother, the feminine principle. But the "stark and straight" tower "barred with black and white" which he sees on this trip with his father is also true because "nothing is simply one thing"(TTL,172). As James fuses the masculine and feminine principles in his mind, so Mr. Ramsay is able to fuse them in his person. He jumps onto the rock "like a young man" (TTL,191) "as if", in Marder's words, "he were rejecting the masculine deity, and casting off his one-sidedness forever."<sup>10</sup>

10. Marder, 151.

Mr. Ramsay must wait until old age to achieve a kind of androgyny, and Mrs. Ramsay never really achieves it, but the hero/heroine of Orlando has androgyny thrust upon him/her, so to speak. This most spirited and fun-filled of all Virginia Woolf's novels is also her last word on the advantages of seeing the world with a kind of double vision. Later characters such as Bernard in The Waves, Eleanor in The Years, and the indomitable Miss LaTrobe in Between The Acts will have what are essentially androgynous visions of reality, but never again is the theme absolutely central to the work as it is in Orlando. And never is the theme worked out with such splendid panache as it is in this book.

Orlando is enormously creative because he (and later she) can fuse logic and intuition as Shakespeare did. Nor does this character suffer from sexual inhibitions. When he is young and it is time to fall in love, he does. When the Victorian era of marriage and family closes around her and it is time to marry and have babies, she does. When the lustful and unattractive Archduke or duchess chase them, they both escape. Orlando's husband is a Byronic figure whom she recognizes immediately as a woman while he sees that she is really a man. In fact, they are both both.

When Orlando changes from a man to a woman the three goddesses



of Purity, Chastity, and Modesty, who have given Wealth, Prosperity, Comfort, and Ease to men, are driven out by Truth (0,85-6). We are reminded of the deceitful Angel in the House as well as Mr. Ramsay's passion for courage and truth. Orlando will be an intuitive woman who retains the freedom and daring of a man. As Avrom Fleishman explains:

The natural tendency to remain intact, purely potential, even infantile, is vanquished by the inevitable movement toward self-realization, maturity, and personal fulfillment. That this conflict should be dramatized as a theomachy between the triple goddess and the masculine "austere Gods" of truth suggests that we have here not merely a shift of sexual proclivities but a fusion in one person of the deepest propensities in human nature: on the one hand the eternal feminine, the impulse toward security and permanence; on the other, the masculine dynamism of change and the intellectual faculties which drive toward truth.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately for Orlando, Victorian England is not prepared to welcome such a creature as this, and she finds herself relegated to the drawing room pouring tea. She becomes disgusted with both sexes -- the men who keep women in subjection and the women who insist upon enjoying their fate. She begins, in fact, to wonder if there is such a thing as "the eternal feminine" or "masculine dynamism". Might these categories not be merely culturally defined stereotypes? Phyllis Rose expresses a less abstract view of the effect of this book on the reader:

The rapid pace, the constant changes, the unflinching satire of the book have the effect of leaving the reader thoroughly and comically confused as to what

11. Avrom Fleishman, Virginia Woolf: A Critical Reading (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press) 1975, 148.

sex is. Is it determined by one's drives (to make war or babies, paintings or soups), or by one's genitals, or by one's clothes? What do we mean when we say one sex or the other is uppermost in a person? What do we signify by talking of a man in a woman's body or a woman in a man's? Isn't any sort of distinction between male and female characteristics spurious? At the very least, crude?<sup>12</sup>

Both views, it must be confessed, are supported by Orlando's experience. She is confused, as a woman, by the role-playing which she sees going on around her, and which she herself is forced to take on. At the same time she is complete in herself, and in her relationship with Shelmerdine in very much the way Fleishman describes. She need not follow the "rules" prescribed by the goddesses as a means of controlling her impulses and remaining "pure", for she has within herself all the dynamics of expression and control. She can create works of art -- it is as a woman that she finally completes her 350-year old masterpiece "The Oak Tree". And she can live in an integrated way -- so long as she keeps out of the way of society and its conventions.

A part of Virginia Woolf's continuing dialectic in her public and private writings is her effort to separate true sexual differences from those imposed by traditional standards. Helen Ambrose, in The Voyage Out recommends talk, continual talk between the sexes as a way out of the dilemma. Katharine and her circle in Night and Day engage in such talk,

12. Rose, 184-5.

as indeed Virginia and Vanessa had done personally with the members of "Old Bloomsbury" during the era commemorated by the novel.<sup>13</sup> Through such talk they were able to arrive at answers to the question why are women -- even "good" women such as Helen Ambrose, Mrs. Hilberry, and Mrs. Ramsay, somehow incomplete? And why are the Ridley Ambroses and Hilberrys and Mr. Ramsays of the world obtuse emotionally? Partly, it appears, such differences do come from nature, which tends to endow women more liberally with intuition and men with reason. But much of the disparity between the sexes rested upon such culturally determined distinctions as "Arthur's Education Fund" and "infantile fixation" referred to by Virginia Woolf in Three Guineas. Most "sexual" differences arise from continually playing the roles we assign to ourselves or have assigned to us by history and, more immediately, our upbringing. Eleanor, in The Years, caters to her father's whims in a way that Vanessa, in real life, refused to do with Leslie Stephen. As a result, Eleanor has no real life of her own, although she does have plenty of time to come up with a philosophy of life which she expresses at Delia's party. But philosophy at such a cost!

Orlando defies convention at every turn, and it is this defiance which makes him and her free. Vita Sackville-West, the real life model

13. See Leon Edel, Bloomsbury: A House of Lions (New York: Avon) 1979, 131.

for the character, is described by Virginia in a diary entry in terms which reflect this freedom:

Vita very free & easy, always giving me great pleasure to watch, & recalling some image of a ship breasting a sea, nobly, magnificently, with all sails spread & the gold sunlight on them. (DVW III, Mon., 4 July, 1927)

The imagery is apt, as usual. Sailing is freedom, adventure, discovery. It is noble and magnificent, adjectives usually applied to masculine endeavours. But the sea is the eternal feminine as are the sails spread to catch the sunlight. That ship sailing on that sea is an image of the ideal sexual reality for Virginia Woolf.

Miss LaTrobe and William Dodge, the "outsiders" in Between The Acts have both refused the roles to which they were assigned by life. As a result, though they are often unhappy in their personal lives, they are whole, as Orlando is whole, and they possess the rare capacity to communicate with their fellow kind. LaTrobe does it through her pageant, which is not quite the failure she believes it to be in her post-natal depression. Dodge does it through conversation of the sort which reveals him as intuitive, receptive, nurturing. He introduces himself to Isa.

Then they talked as if they had known each other all their lives; which was odd, she said, as they always did, considering she'd known him perhaps one hour. Weren't they, though, conspirators, seekers after hidden faces? (BTA, 85-6)

In spite of some rather disparaging remarks by Virginia in her diaries and letters about the activities of "the buggers" we know that a personality like that of Lytton Strachey appealed to her. She found him gentle and receptive (whenever he wasn't heartbroken over his "fame" or one of his love affairs.) She was, in fact, briefly engaged to him (QB I,141), and sought his opinion on matters of importance throughout his lifetime. Strachey too, in his fascination with character and in his calling as a biographer, was a "seeker after hidden faces". Personal integrity and the courage to dispense with convention seem, then, to be integral to the kind of androgyny which Virginia Woolf felt was necessary to correct the traditional imbalance between the sexes.

## TIME

Virginia Woolf saw a chiasmic division between two kinds of reality: the daytime of fact and clocktime, ruled by flux, and the night of intuition and psychological time, which had an unchanging permanence. These two realities often clash in her novels, sometimes painfully, but frequently with astonishing beauty which releases a moment of understanding by one or more characters in the work. Such moments were called "moments of being" by Virginia Woolf in what was her only deliberate attempt to discuss this concept -- the childhood memoir which she wrote during the last year of her life entitled A Sketch of the Past. Here she recalls that the division between "the cotton-wool" of life and the abrupt, shocking "moment of being" has been apparent to her from the time of her earliest childhood memories. In other words, the various and original time schemes which she used in her novels were not simply a part of her "method" as a conscious artist, but part of a perspective which grew out of her experience as a human being.

What then has remained interesting? Again those moments of being....There was the moment of the puddle in the path; when for no reason I could discover, everything suddenly became unreal; I was suspended; I could not step across the puddle; I tried to touch something...the whole world became unreal. (MB,90)

When Rhoda learns, in The Waves, of Percival's death, she too is frozen by a puddle:

'There is the puddle,' said Rhoda, 'and I cannot cross it. I hear the rush of the great grindstone within an inch of my head. Its wind roars in my face. All palpable forms of life have failed me. Unless I can stretch and touch something hard, I shall be blown down the eternal corridors forever. What, then, can I touch? What brick, what stone? and so draw myself across the enormous gulf into my body safely.' (W, 107)

Time stopped, for Virginia Stephen as a little girl in Kensington Gardens, in the same way that it stopped for the character Rhoda. In both cases there appears to be a loss of reality, and in the diary entry which Virginia made about this same incident (DVW, III, Thurs., 30 Sept., 1926) she adds that she could not proceed "for thinking, how strange -- what am I? etc." She must have seen her own reflection in the puddle, and felt separated from the rest of reality at the same time as <sup>she</sup> questioned her own identity. Instances of this sudden perception of self as distinct from the rest of reality are fairly common, particularly in adolescence, but such perceptions are not usually terrifying. They were terrifying for Virginia (and her character Rhoda) because their perception of reality normally occurs in the diffuse mode. That is, their very sense of reality derives from seeing themselves as a part of everything else. To see themselves suddenly as distinct and separate would naturally upset their equilibrium, and their immediate reaction would be to attempt to touch something outside themselves, paradoxically, in order to "prove"

their own existence! The fact that Virginia also experienced a fear of mirrors -- "the looking-glass shame" as she calls it (MB,78) tends to support this interpretation of the puddle incident.

Jean O. Love gives the clearest analysis of Virginia's diffuse mode of perception in her study of the Stephen family and milieu,

Virginia Woolf: Sources of Madness and Art :

Virginia Woolf recalled a number of idiosyncratic and mythic ideas from early childhood which suggest that she was impressed with, indeed almost overpowered by, the vividness of her own sensations... [To her,] sights and sounds seemed to be the product of a peculiarly intimate union of the world and her mind, as if the world broke through and precipitated its contents into her mind. It seemed to her that her mind was a receptacle into which moments of time and segments of space actually entered. Such moments would then remain forever within her mind. (Love, 219)

Love refers to the earliest "moments of being" which Virginia mentions in the memoir -- those moments of ecstasy when she perceived the flower and the soil as a unit or herself as a part of the sunlight and breezes -- and connects the diffuse mode of perception with Virginia's need to write.

She was elated when her inner sensations seemed to be fused with sensations coming from the world around her. She remembered being intensely aware of the diffusion and unity of all her sensations and emphasized that a sense of unity and wholeness was essential to her feelings of pleasure. While recounting her pleasurable memories, she associated the sense of wholeness with her writing, saying that the rapture of writing for her came from putting parts together to achieve wholeness and to take away the separateness of things in her world. (Love, 224)



Through writing, as Virginia explains in A Sketch of the Past, she can "make it real"(MB,84). Reality, then, is wholeness for Virginia Woolf. When things become separate, or when she herself feels separated from the rest of creation, the feeling of unreality sets in. Such a concept of the nature of being is certainly "abnormal" in the psychological sense, but it is a highly acceptable notion to mystics and some physicists who have begun to question our "ordinary" perceptions of reality. In any case, the diffuse mode of perception was responsible for

what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we -- I mean all human beings -- are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock.(MB,84)

Things came together for Virginia Woolf during a "moment of being". Clock-time and being-time intersected to allow a vision of the pattern underlying the flux of everyday life. The result for her character Rhoda of her "moment of being" at the puddle is a similar vision of a pattern-- her famous square set upon the oblong -- which could be art or death or both. It is "the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing"(W,110).

Madeline Moore explains this notion in Heideggerian terms: "We are aware of ourselves as 'existents' when we traverse certain experiences

like anguish which put us in the presence of nothingness from which Being erupts."<sup>1</sup> For Virginia Woolf, who may or may not have read Heidegger, the physical and emotional nature of her own experience was "proof" enough of its validity. Her notion of time has also been compared with that of Bergson, but once again, although there are definite similarities in their thought, there is no real question of influence. Virginia Woolf's concept of reality, including her notion of "moments of being" is derived solely and entirely from her experience of living, as the evidence of her memoirs and diaries now confirm. In fact, one of the threads of meaning uniting the last volume of her diary is her worry that such "moments of being" are growing scarcer.

Settled in for another 2 weeks, & only village meetings & books; which, however, are very 'real'...And I cling to my tiny philosophy: to hug the present moment (in which the fire is going out).(DVW V,Wed.,31 Jan.,1940)

Books were, of course,"real" to Virginia in that they "happen" in the eternal Now of being-time. When she wishes to "hug the present moment" she attempts to turn it into a moment of being-time, in which she can be truly alive.

I'm inducing a state of peace and sensation feeling -- not idea feeling....I think I'll also dream a poet-prose book, perhaps make a cake now & then.  
(DVW V,Fri.,29Mar.,1940)

1.Madeline Moore, "Nature and Community: A Study of Cyclical Reality in The Waves", in Virginia Woolf:Revaluation and Continuity, ed. Ralph Freedman (Berkeley: University of California Press) 1980, 221.

"Sensation feeling" is an apt description of the diffuse mode of perception which often led Virginia to a "moment of being". She is probably making use of this mode as well when she says she will "dream" a "poet-prose" (she may mean "poem-prose") book.

Coventry almost destroyed. The usual traffic last night. All the hounds on their road to London. A bad raid there. When I am not writing fiction this fact seeps in. The necessity of living in the upper air. (DVW, V, Fri., 15 Nov., 1940)

"Fiction" and "the upper air" are associated with "being-time" by Virginia Woolf (MB, 84-5) whereas "facts" belong to the "cotton wool" of life.

Its rather a hard lap: the winter lap. So cold often. And so much work to do....I will write memoirs I think: then Reading at Random. Measure, order, precision are now my gods. Even my hand shakes....I forget. I forget what I wished to say. (DVW, V, Mon., 16 Dec., 1940)

This entry is surely one of the saddest in the entire volume. Virginia seems in danger of being overwhelmed by unreality which she attempts to control by "measure, order, precision". But she is becoming distracted and forgetful, less able to experience "being-time".

This trough of despair shall not, I swear, engulf me....What I need is the old spurt. 'Your true life, like mine, is in ideas' Desmond said to me once. But one must remember one cant pump ideas. I begin to dislike introspection....Yes, I was thinking: we live without a future. Thats whats queer, with our noses pressed to a closed door. (DVW V, Sun., 26 Jan., 1941)

Never mind. Adventure. Make solid. But shall I ever write again one of those sentences that gives me intense pleasure? (DVW V, Wed., 26 Feb., 1941)

These two entries are both connected with the author's perception that her powers of thinking and writing imaginatively are dwindling as her depression deepens. Both of these activities she connected with "being-time". It must have seemed to her that she was "dying" a little at a time as her experiences of "being" became fewer and fewer.

No: I intend no introspection. I mark Henry James's sentence: Observe perpetually. Observe the oncome of age. Observe greed. Observe my own despondency. By that means it becomes serviceable. Or so I hope. I insist upon spending this time to the best advantage. I will go down with my colours flying. This I see verges on introspection; but doesn't quite fall in.... Occupation is essential. And now with some pleasure I find that it's seven; & must cook dinner. Haddock & sausage meat. I think it is true that one gains a certain hold on sausage & haddock by writing them down.... Oh dear yes, I shall conquer this mood. Its a question of being open sleepy, wide eyed at present -- letting things come one after another. Now to cook the haddock. (DVW V, Sat., 8 Mar., 1941)

This windy corner. And Nessa is at Brighton, & I am wondering how it wd be if we could infuse souls. (from final entry, Mon., 24 Mar., 1941)

"Being" has almost vanished from Virginia's experience of life. In the already famous haddock and sausage entry<sup>2</sup> the "certain hold" she wishes to gain on them seems connected with this notion. We need to gain a hold on things when they are flying away from us, fragmenting, "un-being".

2. The passage is invariably quoted in book reviews; see esp. "Superchild", by John Bayley in the London Review of Books, VI, #16, p. 9.

In the final rather obscure entry Virginia seems to be wishing for an infusion (of being?) into her own soul, possibly from Vanessa's, since she invariably saw her sister, during her own times of depression, as being infinitely more alive than she was herself. Such an infusion did not, of course, take place, but one of the benefits for the readers of Virginia Woolf's novels of a close reading of this last volume of her diaries is the detailed psychological picture it gives of her concept of reality, a concept which is far more closely related to Virginia's diffuse mode of perception than it is to any kind of philosophy. When she, as an individual, was able to exert some control over "moments of being" which explained them, as she did when she saw the flower and the soil as one entity, the experience made her more fully alive. But when there were no "moments of being", or when, on the other hand, her consciousness felt "invaded" by a meaning which she could not fully grasp, as it did during the puddle incident, then her diffuse mode of perception led her into another, schizophrenic type of unreality which could also be defined as "too much" reality. Such an experience was also the fate of her character Rhoda, who commits suicide as a result. It seems evident that to the author's diffuse mode of perception can be traced the chiasmic relationship between clock-time and "being-time" which is everywhere apparent in her major works as a novelist.

From the beginning critics have concerned themselves with Virginia Woolf's handling of time in her novels. David Daiches, writing in 1942, saw her use of memory as the key to all her varied manipulations. The conscious memories of, for example, the Pargiters

constitute a unity and yet a diversity, like the disparate and individually experienced moments of time which nevertheless flow inevitably into a single stream in which past and present condition and indeed constitute each other, so that memory is the faculty which makes life real.<sup>3</sup>

Certainly the memories of a host of characters in Virginia Woolf's fiction -- Mrs. Dalloway and Peter Walsh, Mrs. Ramsay and Lily, Eleanor Pargiter or old Lucy Swithin and Bart -- seem to impregnate their present situations with a kind of Proustian meaning, but personal memories are only a part of what is going on in these novels. Orlando contains historical memories; Between the Acts reaches back to pre-history; and The Voyage Out, supposedly one of her more "conventional" novels, uses a passage from Milton's Comus to carry us back to a mythical world beneath the sea.

A later critic, Jean Guiguet, following up upon James Hafley's remark that Mrs. Dalloway showed "that there is no such thing as a single day",<sup>4</sup> concluded that Virginia Woolf, regardless of possible

3. David Daiches, Virginia Woolf (New York: New Directions) 1942, 112.

4. James Hafley, The Glass Roof (New York: Russell & Russell) 1963, 73.

influences, was in her own perception of things, an existentialist.

From all this we gather that for Virginia Woolf the problem was not the reconciliation of time and duration.... We must give up referring to Bergson. Nor is it the search for lost time, for although time is here often regained it is so only incidentally; we must give up referring to Proust. The central problem... is the analysis of anguish. Anguish is precisely that feeling of threat that hangs around the moment, of the precarious nature of vision which extends to the whole being, since the whole being is basically that vision.<sup>5</sup>

Like Madeline Moore, Guiguet is certain that Virginia Woolf was an existentialist philosopher trapped in a novelist's psyche, although he claims that her "philosophy" was of her own devising rather than the result of influence by Heidegger or Bergson. He was right to disassociate her work from Bergson's concept of durée, but he is not convincing when he argues that time is really rather unimportant in her work and that she herself was an anguished existentialist. Mrs. Ramsay may have been one when she was terrified by the sound of the waves which she imagined engulfing their island (TTL,20) or Clarissa Dalloway when she felt that "it was very very dangerous to live even one day"(MD,9), but neither of these attitudes are necessarily existentialist, nor is the analysis of anguish a sufficient explanation of Virginia Woolf's dealings with time in her novels.

It seems more likely that Virginia's "moments of being" were a personal construct resulting from her diffuse mode of perception. She

5. Guiguet, 396.

was able to use this construct in a creative way in order to make sense of reality rather than allowing her peculiar sensations to overwhelm her (most of the time, that is.) Existentialism, Bergsonian durée, and Modernist elliptical tendencies were all "in the air" and undoubtedly influenced her in the ways in which milieu is capable of being an influence. It is certainly possible to find "existentialist" remarks in her writing (Rhoda, Mrs. Ramsay, Clarissa Dalloway, Bernard) and to find Peter Walshes and Lily Briscoes reconstructing their memories of the past rather like Proustian characters. It is even possible to retreat to the eighteenth century and find Sterne's comic treatment of time infusing the mind and funny bone of Orlando's biographer. But it is not possible to explain Virginia Woolf's work as a whole in these terms. The author's individual and highly idiosyncratic concept of reality -- "moments of being", with all that that notion implies -- is the one consistent ingredient in all the work of Virginia Woolf, the diaries and letters which reflect her personal experiences as well as the novels which express her artistic vision. This concept of reality is connected, I believe, with her notion of androgyny, and may, in fact, be simply another expression of it; or both concepts may be offshoots, as it were, of something even more fundamental: a religion of sorts for mystical agnostics which developed in Virginia's mind slowly over a lifetime, and perhaps found fragmented expression in her diaries during her more introspective moods.



All of the novels of Virginia Woolf are set within a sequential, linear time-frame. It hardly seems possible to emphasize this fact enough. Furthermore, all of her major characters are acutely aware of the passage of time and its destructive effects:

Meanwhile, the great clock on the landing ticked and Sandra would hear time accumulating, and ask herself, 'What for? What for?' (JR, 157)

'Time has passed over me,' she thought, trying to collect herself; 'this is the oncome of middle age. How strange it is!'...Her eyes filled with tears.(O,190)

That was what it came to -- thirty years of being husband and wife -- tut-tut-tut -- and chew-chew-chew. It sounded like half-inarticulate munchings of animals in a stall. (Y,286)

Sandra Wentworth, the "older woman" who falls for Jacob during his trip to Greece, is expressing a fairly typical "mid-life crisis" fear that her own time is running out without having provided her the opportunity for accomplishment or happiness. Orlando, on the other hand, finds middle age "strange" but rather beautiful; it brings tears to her eyes. She, at least, has been happy and accomplished during her allotted life-span of 350 years and counting. But the third comment is made by a young man -- North, of The Years -- upon viewing his fat old Aunt Milly who married, it seems, in order to eat well for thirty years. The sight is ugly and depressing to the young man, but ultimately an incentive which strengthens his determination to "live differently" (Y, 298).

But linear time is exciting too, because it contains all of human experience and all artistic expression. Through literature we become time travellers. Shakespeare and Sophocles, Byron and Shelley, Gibbon and H.G. Wells with his Outline of History weave their way through the minds of characters in the novels, enriching their present moments with insights and experiences out of the past of all mankind. "Fear no more the heat o' the sun", from Cymbeline, expresses for Clarissa and Septimus an acceptance of physical death which consoles and unites them, although they never meet in "real life". The issues raised in the Antigone inform much of The Years as well as forming a "technical" device of unity between Edward Pargiter and his cousins. And Rachel's reading of Gibbon's masterpiece, like old Lucy's reading of the Outline of History seem to reflect a certain "mind-set" of the characters who are doing the reading as well as providing historical "devices" which extend the time-frame of the respective novels in which they are used.

But linear time also brings about, inevitably, wisdom and experience which cannot be gained from books. Mrs. Hilberry, fresh from Shakespeare's tomb with her arms full of roses, saves the day for the two young couples with a wisdom which comes more from her experience of life than from her reading of Shakespeare. Eleanor Pargiter, in her old age, begins to see a pattern in things. Even Bernard, though he mourns the passage

of time, is wiser for it. He sees through his own aimlessness:

Time, which is a sunny pasture covered with a dancing light, time, which is widespread as a field at midday, becomes pendant. Time tapers to a point. As a drop falls from a heavy glass with some sediment, time falls. These are the true cycles, these are the true events. Then as if all the luminosity of the atmosphere were withdrawn I see to the bare bottom. I see what habit covers. I lie sluggish in bed for days. I dine out and gape like a codfish. I do not trouble to finish my sentences, and my actions, usually so uncertain, acquire a mechanical precision. On this occasion, passing an office, I went in and bought, with all the composure of a mechanical figure, a ticket for Rome. (W, 125)

Bernard sees the time he has left as narrowing, tapering to a point; for, like Richard II, he has wasted time and now doth time waste him. He has mechanically purchased a ticket for Rome where he is, perhaps, no happier than he was in London; but it is on this excursion that he is able to gather his thoughts together and sum up the meaning of all the experiences of himself and the others as well. His action was therefore fruitful, though mechanically performed, and the passage of time has made him wiser to his own, and others', folly.

But linear time, even if we include all of recorded human history and the stories told by rock formations of the time before that, is not enough; it does not contain all of reality, though it does hold all that is logical, sequential, masculine. But the eternal is missing, the unconscious, the non-rational -- what Virginia Woolf saw as the feminine pole of reality.

If we think of linear time as a vertical continuum, then "moments of being" are a widening out on a horizontal plane of points along that continuum. Clock-time is progressing at its usual rate, but more experience fills such a moment; there is more "being" in it; and therefore it becomes wider, more all-encompassing, more able to partake, like Mrs. Ramsay's boeuf en daube, of eternity.

Nothing need be said; nothing could be said.  
There it was, all around them. It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity; as she had already felt about something different once before that afternoon; there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that remains forever after. This would remain. (TTL,97)

Because of her carefully planned sentence structure, Virginia Woolf is able to let Mrs. Ramsay help Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece of eternity.<sup>6</sup>

There is no better description in the novels of a "moment of being". It is that glimpse of the permanent, the coherent, shining out in a sea of flux, which shapes the pattern which is always there behind the cotton wool of life. Linear time is that time in which we get, by means of logic, from Q to R. "Moments of being", on the other hand, "get" nowhere because they do not need to move; they are those rare moments when, like Sophocles,

6. I wish to thank Dr. Mary O'Connor for drawing my attention to this passage.

we are able to "see life steadily and see it whole". Psychologists call the experience a gestalt and link it with intuition, the sudden complete understanding which is the opposite of logic. Logic imposes order on experience; intuition finds it lying there, "the thing beneath the semblance of the thing"(W,110). As Nancy Topping Bazin explains in The Androgynous Vision,

What Virginia Woolf called 'design' was not for her, as it may be for many artists, simply a way of ordering her subject matter. Like Mrs. Ramsay, she intended, I believe, to convey through pattern, the peculiar sense of 'reality' or oneness which she claimed to perceive and longed to express. She visualised this 'reality' as a permanent shape which exists beneath the constant movement and change inherent in life.<sup>7</sup>

This "permanent shape" of reality became associated, for Virginia Woolf, with the feminine pole of reality, perhaps because the "moment of being" receives all things and holds them as a woman receives a man in the act of sexual intercourse. Such a moment is still rather than active; it is the unmoved -- not mover, but holder, which gives back to us, reflectively, all that we are and all that there is, so that we can experience the wholeness which is "self" (in Jungian terms).

But it should be noted that Virginia Woolf is not, here or elsewhere, claiming a native superiority in the female sex because the "moment of being" occurs in feminine territory. In fact, many such "moments" throughout her work and in her own life were very painful experiences in no way "superior"

to everyday life. Her whole point throughout the lifework is that masculine clock-time as well as feminine "moments of being" are necessary ingredients of life, and that both should be experienced by androgynous men and women who have integrated both aspects of their personalities sufficiently to see both realities -- the temporal and the permanent.

By the time she wrote To The Lighthouse in the mid-twenties Virginia Woolf seems to have had her notion of "moments of being" firmly established. But it is necessary to trace her manipulation of time through all her novels, beginning with The Voyage Out, in order to trace the technical advances which made possible her masterpiece and the almost equally impressive works which followed it. The line of development seems to alternate between experiment and consolidation throughout her work as a whole leading to the final confident handling of all her various time schemes in Between the Acts.

The Voyage Out "happens" over a period of a few months, but the characters' thoughts and certain of the narrator's descriptions send us reeling back through time to the very heart of darkness at the foundation of the world while Rachel's dreams and deliriums open up the world of timelessness. Frederick P.W. McDowell, in an essay on The Voyage Out, contends that "Mr. Pepper's reflections on the English settling of

Santa Marina in South America are superfluous",<sup>7</sup> but I believe they can be justified within the logic of the novel as the first backward step leading to the primeval life of the jungle, which is where Terence and Rachel end up, literally and figuratively, when they fall in love. Those Elizabethan explorers, whom Virginia Woolf as critical writer and thinker celebrates elsewhere ("The Elizabethan Lumber Room", CR I) sought to impose their order upon the jungle; but they were beaten back until now only a few hardy adventurers "in search of something new" (VO, 88) choose to spend their winter months in the sleepy village at the edge of the primitive rain forest. The further voyage upstream is really a time trip, a point which is emphasized when they pass the hut of "Mackenzie, the famous explorer, [who] died of fever some ten years ago, almost within reach of civilization -- Mackenzie, ... the man who went further inland than anyone's been yet" (VO, 284). The end of the trip upstream, in space and time, is the heart of darkness, where the forces of the id, uncontrolled as yet by the laws society establishes, still run free.

The women's hands became busy again with the straw; their eyes dropped. If they moved, it was to fetch something from the hut, or to catch a straying child, or to cross the space with a jar balanced on their heads; if they spoke it was to cry some harsh unintelligible cry....

'Well,' Terence sighed at length, 'it makes us seem insignificant, doesn't it?' (VO, 292)

7. Frederick P.W. McDowell, "Surely Order Did Prevail: Virginia Woolf and The Voyage Out", Freedman, 74.

The visit to the village occurs immediately after the bizarre meeting of Terence, Rachel, and Helen Ambrose in which the unconscious motivations of each spill over and colour their conscious reactions. We have been taken back to the very beginning of time.

But the artist takes us forward as well, through the device of Helen's embroidery, as J.K. Johnstone points out:

Helen Ambrose's embroidery, which recurs in the book and depicts in advance the tropical river where Rachel likely contracted her fever, helps to hold the novel together by showing the stream of time and merging the present and the future. It is the first device that Virginia Woolf uses in her novels to help her escape from the tyranny of the time sequence.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the lines from Milton's Comus which introduce Rachel's illness and final delirium -- "Under the glassy, cool, translucent wave" -- take us to a mythical location in the misty pre-history of Britain, a place of timeless dreams which occur, however, within the time-frame of Rachel's fever. Time and timelessness intersect.

Night and Day is a work of consolidation of the skills which Virginia Woolf had learned in the earlier, more brilliant but more uneven, first novel. But it is also the first of her literary parodies, of which Orlando and Between the Acts are mature examples. (See Fleishman's discussion, p. 23 of Virginia Woolf: A Critical Reading.) Mrs. Hilberry,

8. J.K. Johnstone, The Bloomsbury Group (New York: The Noonday Press) 1963, 325.



speaking of the relics of her dead father, the great Victorian poet, exclaims almost immediately, "After all, what is the present? Half of it's the past, and the better half too, I should say"(ND, 12). And so we are warned at the outset that past literary styles -- particularly Shakespearian romance and Jane Austen's brand of social comedy -- will be the foundation upon which the book will rest.

But the most important aspect of this book, for the study of Virginia Woolf's time techniques, is contained in its metaphorical title, which becomes one of her symbolic expressions of the inner, contemplative, feminine and essentially timeless world with the outer world of masculine fact and action in linear time.

Why, she reflected, should there be this perpetual disparity between the thought and the action, between the life of solitude and the life of society, this astonishing precipice on one side of which the soul was active and in broad daylight, on the other side of which it was contemplative and dark as night? Was it not possible to step from one to the other, erect, and without essential change? (ND, 306)

In her later work Virginia Woolf the artist would learn to do just that, and succeed thereby in healing the platonic split which Katharine Hilberry finds in life.

Jacob's Room is highly experimental in technique, though not in content. It is the narrator who is the chief experimenter here, as she (or possibly he) leaps through space and time in the almost Shandean

universe of the novel, attempting to grasp the elusive thread which will connect the outer "facts" of Jacob's life with the person within. The work is, I think, more comic than has generally been acknowledged, and part of the comedy lies in the juxtaposition of times in Jacob's life with thoughts and feelings of other characters in the novel. Jacob's unread letter from his mother, which lies lonely and forlorn outside the bedroom where he and Florinda make love, takes us across miles and hours to the place and time in which Mrs. Flanders wrote it with feelings utterly removed from those of her son in bed with his lady. The theme is repeated at the end when Jacob, again in the arms of a lady, gives her the poems of a seventeenth-century romantic while they recline beneath the ancient Acropolis and Mrs. Flanders, far off in England, ponders eternity.

Sandra's veils were swirled about her.

'I will give you my copy,' said Jacob. 'Here. Will you keep it?'

(The book was the poems of Donne.)

Now the agitation of the air uncovered a racing star. Now it was dark....The salt gale blew in at Betty Flanders's window, and the widow lady, raising herself slightly on her elbow, sighed like one who realises, but would fain ward off a little longer -- oh, a little longer! -- the oppression of eternity.

But to return to Jacob and Sandra. They had vanished. There was the Acropolis; but had they reached it? The columns and the temple remain; the emotion of the living breaks fresh on them year after year; and of that what remains?(JR,156-7)

This narrator resembles Tristram Shandy in her uncertainty about absolutely everything. She cannot make sense of the "facts" of a person's history,

even though she possesses the uncanny ability to fly through space and time. She is unsure of the place or even the value of emotion, though she acknowledges that it exists; and eternity, symbolized by the Acropolis, is positively inscrutable. The magic in the book is apparent when we realise that we, as readers, absorb more about all of these than the narrator ever lays claim to understanding. Jacob's life and personality accumulate in our minds as we read, while we are continually reminded of the brevity of personal existence and the tragedy of the human condition in which the young, the beautiful, the valuable, are crushed like insects. The comedy is black at many points, but it remains comedy largely because of the disparity between what the narrator claims to know and what she actually succeeds in conveying during her miraculous flight through time and space.

The chief technical <sup>advance</sup> in Mrs. Dalloway is "what I call my tunnelling process" (DVW II, Mon., 15 Oct., 1923). This is the method by which the past histories of the characters, especially Clarissa and Peter Walsh, are reconstructed through their memories. It is in this novel that Virginia Woolf's writing most resembles that of Proust, although she did not read him seriously until after she had completed it (DVW III, We., 8 April, 1925). Clock-time and "being-time" are here clearly distinguished and embedded in the structure of the work, Big Ben being often the signal for a move

of the narrative consciousness from Clarissa to Peter or Septimus. It is significant that her original title for the novel was The Hours, for the book is composed of hours which, however, comprise lifetimes when their memories are included. As Harvena Richter explains, paraphrasing Bergson:

Not only is the past always with us, but consciousness is forever changing, and so our memories, redefined each moment by the present self and coloured by fresh perceptions, are in a state of continuous alteration. By presenting the initial stimulus, the character's successive memories of it, and the means by which those memories are revived, the sense of internal change and motion which we feel as living or growing older, can be expressed.

Mrs. Dalloway also contains the first literary example of a "moment of being" which occurs when Clarissa is sewing her dress:

Quiet descended on her, calm, content, as her needle drawing the silk smoothly to its gentle pause, collected the green folds together and attached them, very lightly, to the belt. So on a summer's day waves collect, over-balance, and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying 'that is all' more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, that is all. Fear no more, says the heart. (MD, 36-7)

The "tunnelling process" as used by Virginia Woolf seems to arise from her own idiosyncratic notions of being and time, though the work which results resembles in some ways that of Proust and can be explained (in some of its aspects) by referring to the theories of Bergson. But in her next novel, in which the androgyny theme is developed in conjunction with the "moments of being" Virginia Woolf is being most completely and successfully herself, influenced by nothing but her own perceptions of life.

Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, like Milton's Adam and Eve, are mythic representations of the male and female principles, as well as being characters in a novel (who happen to be based upon real people -- Virginia's parents.) Mr. Ramsay does not usually have "moments of being". He sees time as a vertical continuum leading down to the grave.

He had not genius; he laid no claim to that; but he had, or might have had, the power to repeat every letter of the alphabet from A to Z accurately in order. Meanwhile, he stuck at Q. On, then, on to R.

Feelings that would not have disgraced a leader who, now that the snow has begun to fall and the mountain-top is covered in mist, knows that he must lay himself down and die before morning comes, stole upon him, paling the colour of his eyes, giving him, even in the two minutes of his turn on the terrace, the bleached look of withered old age. Yet he would not die lying down; he would find some crag of rock, and there, his eyes fixed on the storm, trying to the end to pierce the darkness, he would die standing. He would never reach R. (TTL, 37)

In the "Time Passes" section of the novel, Virginia Woolf shows that this vision of time is also true. You cannot tamper with a fact because farther down the continuum it will trip you up. People die, or are killed; houses are weatherbeaten; children grow up and out, and their lives are not always happy. "By showing that the masculine approach to truth is valid, just as the feminine is valid, the way is prepared for the balancing of the two in the final section of the novel."<sup>10</sup> In this section the effects of the passage of linear time are clearly seen in the persons of Cam and James, but the validity of the "moment of being" is re-stated when James

has his double vision of the lighthouse and Cam sees their island as "the top of a rock which some big wave would cover"(TTL,176). He sees the feminine truth here; she the masculine; and both of them realise that both are true and necessary. At almost the same time, Lily has her vision and completes her painting by drawing a line down the middle to symbolize the border between the two species of reality. And thus ends perhaps the most perfectly expressed of Virginia Woolf's double visions of reality, in which linear and "being" time intersect to produce the wholeness which is ever the artist's quest.

Orlando experiences more "moments of being" than any other character in Virginia Woolf's novels. Of course it should be added that he/she has more "real" time to experience them in -- 350 years of it; but, significantly, these "moments of being" are invariably related to Orlando's androgynous sexuality:

For as he looked the thickness of his blood melted; the ice turned to wine in his veins; he heard the waters flowing and the birds singing; spring broke over the hard wintry landscape; his manhood woke; he grasped a sword in his hand; he charged a more daring foe than Pole or Moor; he dived in deep water; he saw the flower of danger growing in a crevice; he stretched his hand -- in fact he was rattling off one of his most impassioned sonnets when the Princess addressed him, 'Would you have the goodness to pass the salt?' (0,26)

Orlando compresses reality into a split-second's worth of imagination because for him only "being-time" exists. As his biographer wryly notes,

An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second. This extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind is less well known than it should be and deserves fuller investigation.(0,61)

Time is also connected, prosaically, with Orlando's sex change.

Many people,...holding that such a change of sex is against nature, have been at great pains to prove 1) that Orlando has always been a woman, 2) that Orlando is at this moment a man. It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since.

But let other pens treat of sex and sexuality; we quit such odious subjects as soon as we can.(0,87)

What the deliberately obtuse biographer has failed to grasp is that Orlando is unchanged; he was a woman all along, and is still a man. The "odious subject of sex and sexuality" is intimately connected with the puzzling subject of time, which "deserves fuller investigation." Throughout this sham biography the author is playing with her own androgynous and time notions, saying again and again to her readers, "Isn't it funny that life really is like this?"

The Waves began as a personal vision by Virginia Woolf of "a fin passing far out"(D VW III,Thurs.,30 Sept.,1926). In her diary entry for that day she connects it with the puddle incident from her childhood, and connects that with reality. Her rather vague conclusion, that "Life is, soberly & accurately, the oddest affair", reads like a gloss on this

oddest of her novels, which was, in September, 1926, merely an "impulse". Artistically, The Waves is undoubtedly a success which, as one critic says, "articulates a vision of reality beyond words",<sup>11</sup> but it is in many ways less powerful and less moving than her later and much maligned masterpiece The Years. Perhaps this is so because there is simply too much reality in The Waves, too many "moments of being", not enough of the everyday world. The Years, in spite of its "artistic" failure (if, indeed, the fragmentary nature of its action can be said to constitute failure) contains a better balance between the "day" and "night" portions of its characters' lives. Years, after all, are strictly linear divisions of time whereas waves are cyclical. I believe that The Waves arose out of a specific crisis in Virginia's life: her acceptance of aging (she was 49 when it was published in 1931) whereas The Years was written when she was in her fifties and had already made the adjustment to the fact of aging.

In a diary entry for January, 1929, we find Virginia speculating, once again, on time.

Now is life very solid or very shifting? I am haunted by the two contradictions. This has gone on forever; goes down to the bottom of the world -- this moment I stand on. (DVW III, Sat., 4 Jan., 1929)

Now this sounds remarkably like Clarissa Dalloway walking towards Bond Street thinking of "life; London; this moment in June" (MD, 6). But Virginia

11. Joseph Allen Boone, "The Meaning of Elvedon in The Waves", Modern Fiction Studies, 27 (4) 1981, 629-637.



goes on to regret that "I shall pass like a cloud on the waves." She concludes that humanity may be somehow continuous

& show the light through. But what is the light?  
I am impressed by the transitoriness of human life  
to such an extent that I am often saying a farewell  
-- after dining with Roger for instance; or reckoning  
how many more times I shall see Nessa. (Ibid.)

In the very next entry she vows "to enter a nunnery these next months; and let myself down into my mind" for the purpose of writing what would be The Waves, but adds that "now my mind is so impatient, so quick, in some ways so desperate." And immediately there follows a black and forlorn passage on aging:

Old age is withering us; Clive, Sibyl, Francis -- all wrinkled and dusty; going over the hoops, along the track. Only in myself, I say, forever bubbles this impetuous torrent. So that even if I see ugliness in the glass, I think, very well, inwardly I am more full of shape and colour than ever. I think I am bolder as a writer. I am alarmed by my own cruelty with my friends. Clive, I say, is intolerably dull. Francis is a runaway milk lorry. (DVW III, Thurs., 28Mar., 1929)

In The Waves it is Jinny who looks in the mirror and sees herself turning gaunt. But she is not afraid because she has "triumphed over the abysses of space, with rouge, with powder, with flimsy pocket-handkerchiefs" (W, 154). Bernard sees a little more deeply.

'Marriage, death, travel, friendship,' said Bernard; 'town and country; children and all that; a many-sided substance cut out of this dark; a many-faceted flower. Let us stop for a moment; let us behold what we have made. Let it blaze against the yew trees. One life. There. It is over. Gone out.' (W, 155)

This is the very transitoriness which worried Virginia in the diary entries quoted above. Jinny is very brave, but she is wrong. Time cannot be staved off with a "flimsy pocket-handkerchief". And life must be set against yew trees because all individual lives end in death. But one lifetime is not enough for Bernard. He is not satisfied until he discovers the solution presented by the waves themselves: "Yes, this is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and rise again"(W,200).

Such a solution is not, on the whole, very satisfactory, no matter how artistically complete it may be. At the bottom of this novel there lies the failure to accept the transitoriness of life, and it is this failure which gives the work its air of unreality; not the stylistic experiments; not the "wraith-like" presentation of character; not even the total absence of all that could be classed as "real life" (though this, I admit, becomes wearying); but the need to overflow the bonds of natural life, "children and all that", in order for any of it to matter. Rachel Vinrace did not need this. Her life, cut off at the age of twenty-four, was still complete, a whole. So was Jacob's (although the narrator seems unwilling to let him die as well.) Mrs. Dalloway had the need to see herself in trees and houses after she was gone, but her life was incomplete, deliberately so. The difference is that here (and perhaps in Jacob's Room) the need for something else is part of the artistic vision itself. Virginia Woolf

needs something more as much as Bernard does. And it doesn't quite come off. We can accept the something permanent which Mrs. Ramsay gives us because she makes us see it, gleaming there like a ruby behind the flux. We cannot accept that such a ruby can somehow annihilate death itself.

By the time she came to write The Years, Virginia Woolf had achieved a grittier kind of acceptance of time; or perhaps this novel represents an extension of her notion of successive lives fulfilling the inadequacies of the individual life. In any case transitoriness no longer equates with meaninglessness as it seems to in many of the speeches in The Waves. The Years is long, depressing, fragmented; the flux of everyday life is presented as unrewarding, and linear time takes its toll without mercy; but there are "moments of being" and the book as a whole, while far from optimistic, is not without hope. It is the one mature work by Virginia Woolf which is close to being a "realistic" novel in the traditional sense, and in the individual lives of the Pargiters we sense an un-mystical individual worth which lives and dies with them. But in the next generation there is the hope of "living differently" which is associated once again with androgyny as Eleanor has a vision identical with the one which inspired Virginia Woolf in A Room of One's Own: a man and a woman getting into a taxi cab together.

Between the Acts is the story of time itself far more than it is the story of Giles or Isa or any other of its human characters. On the very first page we are reminded of the scars made by time on the land "by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat during the Napoleonic wars"(BTA,7). Lucy Swithin's reading takes us back to pre-history when rhododendrons bloomed in Piccadilly;

when the entire continent, not then, she understood, divided by a channel, was all one; populated, she understood, by elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom, presumably, she thought, jerking the window open, we descend.(BTA,11)

Miss LaTrobe's pageant rushes us through all of English literary history (which turns out to be mostly the history of relations between the sexes) to the present moment and ourselves -- "scraps, orts, and fragments"(BTA,137). Mrs. Swithin, we are told, "was given to increasing the bounds of the moment by flights into past or future"(BTA,11), and several characters reconstruct their past lives through memories in the manner of Mrs. Dalloway. Times are juxtaposed, as they were in Jacob's Room, to elicit incongruous emotional responses -- as, for example, the opposed reactions of the two elderly widows, Mrs. Lynn Jones and Etty Springett, to the Victorian section of the pageant (BTA,126). Male and female truths are once again

opposed, as in To The Lighthouse, this time through the characters of Bart and Lucy. "What he saw she didn't; what she saw he didn't -- and so on, ad infinitum"(BTA,23). Literature is parodied again, as in Night and Day and Orlando, this time including Milton and Restoration comedy as well as Shakespeare and Chaucer. The author's own earlier mysticism seems also to be parodied through the thoughts of Lucy, who is also known as "Flimsy" and "Batty" by the villagers who are convinced she is both.

Mrs. Swithin caressed her cross. She gazed vaguely at the view. She was off, they guessed, on a circular tour of the imagination -- one-making. Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves -- all are one. If discordant, producing harmony -- if not to us, to a gigantic ear attached to a gigantic head. (BTA,127)

But there is a "moment of being" in this novel which includes all its characters and us as readers as well. It occurs at the end of the pageant, after the mirrors have stopped dancing and flickering, after the megaphone voice has made its speech, and while the music -- "was it Bach, Handel, Beethoven, Mozart?" is playing, in a passage which is reminiscent of A Sketch of the Past, the memoir which was being written concurrently with the novel.

The tune began; the first note meant a second; the second a third. Then down beneath a force was born in opposition; then another. On different levels they diverged. On different levels ourselves went forward;...and dawn rose; and azure; from chaos and cacaphony measure; but not the melody of surface sound alone controlled it; but also the warring battle-plumed warriors straining assunder: To part? No. Compelled from the ends of the horizon;

recalled from the edge of appalling crevasses;  
they crashed; solved; united. And some relaxed  
their fingers; and others uncrossed their legs.

Was that voice ourselves? Scraps, orts, and  
fragments, are we, also, that? The voice died away. (BTA, 137)

It is the final summing up of the lifework: "we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself" (MB, 84). The mystical, feminine approach all by itself is not enough, nor is the hard, masculine, factual approach. They must come together and crash before they can unite, as Giles and Isa must fight before they love, "in the heart of darkness, in the fields of the night" (BTA, 158). We have come full circle from The Voyage Out, which also reached the heart of darkness, but at the expense of the heroine's life. This time, we are told, a new life might come of the fight and the embrace.

## LIFE AND LOVE

Anyone seeking a "slice of life" in a novel by Virginia Woolf would come away with a very watery piece of pie. What most people would consider the big events in any lifetime are the very things she scarcely mentions. Of the three biggest -- birth, marriage, death -- only death comes in for a scrutiny which is all the more intense perhaps because of the absence of the other two. Of the smaller events which make up everyday life, only eating is given a prominent place in her work. Few characters have "jobs" in her novels and nobody ever gives birth on these pages, although Susan (The Waves) does so frequently offstage, as it were, and tells us how important her children are (though we never learn even one of their names.) Virginia Woolf's characters rarely go anywhere (except to each other's dinner parties) and they have few adventures except the sort which happen only in the mind. They eat frequently, but they never go to the bathroom as they would in a novel by Joyce. They fall in love (less frequently) but they never make love as they would in a novel by Lawrence. They also die (almost too frequently) but there is some question of their ever having lived, in the ordinary sense of the word.

- But Virginia Woolf is no ordinary novelist. She herself doubted that the term "novel" truly reflected what her books contain.

I have an idea that I will invent a new name  
for my books to supplant 'novel'. A new \_\_\_\_\_  
by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy? (D.V.W. III, Sat., 27 June, 1925)

Since she was at work on To The Lighthouse at the time she made this reflection in her diary, it is understandable that Virginia would think of "elegy" as an appropriate description of what she was doing. I do not believe the term can be applied to all her books, however. On the other hand, it seems self-evident that what she was writing cannot be called "novels" in any conventional sense of the term. They are not "realistic", by which I mean that they do not convey a sense of the fabric of everyday life lived by more or less ordinary people, as a work by Jane Austen invariably does. They rarely tell a story, and when they do it is so poetic and impressionistic as to be scarcely a story at all. Even in a book which is externally more conventional than the rest of her work -- Night and Day, for example -- the characters never "live" so much as talk and think about living.

We must use the term "novel" in any discussion of the work of Virginia Woolf because as yet we have no term which fits any better, but it is useful to keep in mind that novels were not really what this artist was attempting to achieve; to her, "true life" was something very different from the reality most novelists attempt to demonstrate.



She saw things through her own peculiar bifocals:

Why is life so tragic; so like a little strip of pavement over an abyss. (DVW II, MON., 25 Oct., 1920)

The part which can be ordered by "common sense" seemed to her so narrow, while a deep and often terrifying reality yawned beneath. But art could sometimes see the order even here, and at such times she preferred her reality infinitely to the world of the mundane:

There is something indescribably congenial to me in this easy artists talk; the values the same as my own & therefore right; no impediments; life charming, good & interesting; no effort; art brooding calmly over it all; & none of this attachment to mundane things which I find in Chelsea. (DVW II, Sun., 7 Jan., 1923)

She sought adventure as a means of defeating the ogre time:

A change of houses makes me oscillate for days. And that's life; that's wholesome.... And if we didn't live venturously, plucking the wild goat by the beard, & tumbling over precipices, we should never be depressed, I've no doubt; but already should be faded, fatalistic & aged. (DVW II, Sat., 2 Aug., 1924)

And she felt (on good days) that life actually improved with age:

All this rushes on apace. Fame grows. Chances of meeting this person, doing that thing, accumulate. Life is as I've said since I was 10, awfully interesting -- if anything, quicker, keener at 44 than 24 -- more desperate I suppose, as the river shoots to Niagara. (DVW III, Tues., 23 Nov., 1926)

But she often saw life (particularly when she was depressed) in platonic terms, which depressed her even more because the split seemed to demand an "either/or" type of decision on her part:

yes & I have no children of my own; & Nessa has; and yet I don't want them anymore, since my ideas so possess me; & I detest more & more interruption; & the slow heaviness of physical life, & almost dislike peoples bodies I think, as I get older; & want always to cut that short, & get my utmost fill of the marrow, of the essence. (DVW III, Wed., 8 Aug., 1928)

On a trip to Greece with Leonard in 1932 she seems to have achieved -- at least temporarily -- a more integrated view of life:

Then I had the vision, in Aegina, of an uncivilised, hot new season to be brought into our lives -- how yearly we shall come here, with a tent, escaping England, & sloughing the respectable skin; & all the tightness & formality of London; & fame, & wealth; & go back & become irresponsible, livers, existing on bread yaot, butter, eggs, say in Crete. This is to some extent a genuine impulse, I thought, coming down the hill with easy strides; London is not enough; nor Sussex either. One wants to be sunbaked, & taken back to these loquacious friendly people, simply to live, not to read & write. (DVW IV, Sun., 8 May, 1932)

But even in Greece, although body and soul seem to be united in the act of living, Virginia feels that there is no room for reading and writing. Obviously there are two levels of existence, which she hints at in the following entries:

For the past fortnight I have lived, I say, as other people live -- that is outwardly. (DVW IV, Sat., 23 Sept., 1933)

Well of course it's extremely interesting having to deal with so many different selves. There's the one that enjoys external life. (DVW IV, Thurs., 4 July, 1935)

And now, ... I must dream myself back in to my own world. (DVW IV, Mon., 15 July, 1935)

The external and internal realities she speaks of, though they resemble

in some ways the platonic split between body and soul, seem increasingly throughout the lifework to represent the male and female realities. The problem, faced again and again by Virginia Woolf in her fiction, is not distinguishing between the two, but rather finding the solvent which will melt them and make them one. The solvent which works in her novels is love, the kind of love which makes possible complete and open communication between individuals. If we can share our internal world with another person, we can, in effect, bring it into the light of day as Katharine Hilberry longed to do. I believe that this attempt seemed to Virginia Woolf to be the only worthwhile business of life, and therefore the only business worth writing about. The fiction she produced is honest in the sense that it reflects what its author saw as the true realities. Whether or not it is also of the novel genre is another question, to which I suspect the answer is "No". The world of the novel has been traditionally perceived as the "masculine" world of fact and events in time and space. Even the inner world of the individual mind as presented by Joyce or Lawrence is related to this external reality and not <sup>to</sup> a mystical fifth dimension "on the other side", which has been traditionally reserved for poetry. Virginia Woolf chooses to discuss this dimension in prose fiction, but the results, though very beautiful and often singular in perspective, are rarely "novels".

The Voyage Out is a good example of its author's techniques and perspective. Unlike the true novelist (E.M. Forster, for example, in A Passage To India) she does not embroil her readers in the political, economic, social or historical realities of a different country and culture. Rather, she transposes a group of upper middle-class English men and women (who speak, as James Naremore points out, with a definite "Bloomsbury accent"<sup>1</sup>) from their London drawing rooms to a primitive world somewhat akin to Shakespeare's magical island in The Tempest; there she leaves them to sort out their own perceptions of what is real and true as best they can in such alien surroundings.

The narrator of this work draws us from a realistic shipboard world to a symbolic world in which the Euphrosyne is likened to the virgin Rachel herself. (Naremore, 12-13)

She was a bride going forth to her husband, a virgin unknown of men; in her vigour and purity, she might be likened to all beautiful things. (VO, 28)

Such a narrative device is not simply one more example of the Modernist tendency towards the lyrical, but rather the author's first statement of a preoccupation which will remain central in all her work -- the exploration of the reality which lies beneath the cotton wool of

1. James Naremore, The World Without a Self (New Haven: Yale University Press) 1973, 14.

everyday life (MB,84). The narrator of this first novel already sees a pattern lying beneath the surface reality, but she is unsure as yet what to do with it. Terence and Rachel are also confused. These two central characters, as Naremore explains

seek to realise a sense of unity with the world outside themselves, to share their deepest feelings with at least one other person. But here is a difficult problem for Virginia Woolf; indeed, it is the crucial problem in all her fiction; the gulf between people or between the ego and the world outside is not to be traversed without some cost. Once the voyage is made, a certain loss of individuality, a dissolution of the self, is the inevitable result. One cannot, at least not in the terms of Virginia Woolf's fiction, come to a heightened awareness of one's unity with what is 'out there' and at the same time conceive of significant individuals. Mrs. Woolf suggests that beneath the surface of civilization there runs a current of emotion, a general truth that unites all men who submit to it. To make oneself fully aware of this current is to subordinate reason to feeling, and to lose awareness of the self. (Naremore,25-6)

In The Voyage Out both Rachel and Terence fear what they perceive as a loss of individuality inherent in the act of loving. In Rachel's case the fear is so intense that she actually dies to escape it, and Terence pulls himself back just in time from the abyss as he experiences a vision a unity which is disrupted by the necessity of leaving her room after she dies.

Even in her earliest work Virginia Woolf seeks to portray, not the surface of things, but the vast underworld as well as the mysterious rivers which connect it with the surface. The passage from one level to

the other can only be made through one or the other of the senses because "physical" and "spiritual" realities do constitute a unity in Virginia Woolf's concept of reality. Thus we see that Rachel's primary connection with life, before her experiences with the Ambroses and Terence, had been through music. "Music, you see...music goes straight for things. It says all there is to say at once"(VO,211-12). Here we see the first statement of a theme which will be completely expressed in the memoir of 1939-40 and in her final work, Between The Acts. But Rachel wants to see things as well as an alternative route to reality. "It isn't as if we were expecting a great deal -- only to walk about and look at things"(VO,308). This comment sounds strikingly like one Virginia made about herself and her desire for life, several years later in a diary entry.

I meant to write about death, only life came breaking in as usual....Then, some bird or light, I daresay... set me off wishing to live on my own -- wishing chiefly to walk along the river and look at things.(DVW II,Fri,17 Feb.,1922)

On another occasion Rachel approaches reality through dancing, and announces to Helen that she has changed her whole view of life as a result. But after staying up all night she can no longer <sup>explain</sup> how it has changed. To Helen's question she replies, "I feel like a fish at the bottom of the sea"(VO,168). Too much reality has overwhelmed her. In James Naremore's words, she has lost "awareness of the self". A more

serious loss occurs, of course, at the end of the book when Sabrina, the river goddess and protector of chastity, takes her down beneath the 'glassy cool translucent wave' and away from surface reality forever.

The possessiveness of the love relationship is seen as the biggest obstacle to communication. As soon as Terence perceives that Rachel "was his forever"(VO,289), he sees "innumerable delights" before them; but when the touch of her hand on his cheek gives a sense of her possession of him he is enveloped by "the overpowering sense of unreality. This body of his was unreal; the whole world was unreal"(VO,289).

The problem is not solved in this first novel. The heroine must die, not to round off a plot which had become unwieldy, but because there literally was no solution for her dilemma. Neither the artist nor any of her characters has figured out how to apply the solution of love to the problem of life. It need scarcely be added that The Voyage Out was written in the years immediately preceding Virginia's own marriage, years of uncertainty culminating in her longest and most frightening mental illness which was characterized by her paranoid fear of loss of identity. Leonard Woolf himself connects the two in his autobiography when he tells about reading a draft of the novel in March of 1912:

I thought it extraordinarily good, but noticed even then what a strain it was upon her. Then

came the emotional strain of our engagement and she got a severe headache and insomnia and had to go for a time to a nursing home in Twickenham and rest there. (Beginning Again, R1-2)<sup>2</sup>

Although I cannot agree with Roger Poole's wholehearted condemnation of Leonard's actions at this time, it does appear self-evident that for Virginia life and art are inextricably interwoven, and that Leonard -- whatever his intentions may have been -- represented a threat to her individuality which she expressed artistically through her portrayal of Rachel Vinrace.

But by the time Virginia wrote Night and Day the threat had been overcome and she was able to rewrite the story of love and marriage more hopefully and perhaps more analytically; she was able, that is, to trace the problem to its source and solve it rather than abandoning herself (and her heroine) to its clutches. As Melinda Feldt Cumings points out: "Through love Katharine and Ralph momentarily dissolve the barriers of individual consciousness to become one with the flow of existence."<sup>3</sup>

The key word here is "momentarily", for it is the realisation by Katharine and Ralph that such unity can and must take place only at rare moments which saves them from drowning in the ocean of reality which drowned Rachel and threatened to do the same to Terence. The idea of the 'moment

2. Quoted by Roger Poole, The Unknown Virginia Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 1978, ch.7.

3. Melinda Feldt Cumings, "Night and Day: Virginia Woolf's Visionary Synthesis of Reality", MFS 27 (4) 1981, 339-349.



of being" had not yet been fully developed by Virginia Woolf, but I believe she was approaching it in her second novel through the thoughts of Katharine and Ralph. Katharine ruminates here on the world of night:

It was a place where feelings were liberated from the constraint which the real world puts upon them; and the process of awakenment was always marked by resignation and a kind of stoical acceptance of facts.(ND,145)

Ralph equates Katharine herself with the feminine reality symbolized here (for the first time) by a lighthouse:

He did not see her in the body; he seemed curiously to see her as a shape of light, the light itself; he seemed, simplified and exhausted as he was, to be like one of those lost birds fascinated by the lighthouse and held to the glass by the splendour of the blaze.(ND,358)

Ralph wishes to unite himself with the eternal feminine; but earlier he had felt himself to be an androgynous character already:

He had a strange sensation that he was both lighthouse and bird; he was steadfast and brilliant; and at the same time he was whirled, with all other things, senseless against the glass.(ND,357)

Here, then, is the beginning of the androgyny theme which is connected also with "moments of being" and the nature of reality. As Harvena

Richter explains,

Night, with its mysteries, intuitions, and dreams, is related to woman; daylight, with its rationality and logic, to man....Like the imagery of sun, moon, stars, and planets, the characters dramatize these sexual aspects of self, which revolve around the central core of being.<sup>4</sup>

4. Richter, 221.

Mrs. Hilberry solves the lovers' dilemma when she points out to Katharine that love takes chances; it is like getting into a boat together with a great sea all around, to take a voyage forever and ever. Katharine experiences what amounts to a "moment of being" similar to the one Clarissa Dalloway felt while sewing her dress, as Mrs. Hilberry "croons" about love

and the soft sound beating through the dim words was heard by her daughter as the breaking of waves solemnly in order upon the vast shore that she gazed upon. She would have been content for her mother to repeat that word almost indefinitely -- a soothing word when uttered by another, a riveting together of the shattered fragments of the world.(ND,438)

Love is that which heals the split between night and day, fact and intuition, masculine and feminine poles of reality. Love is a sharing of modes of being as well as prerogatives of living. It is not a total surrender of personhood as Terence and Rachel had feared it would be, but rather a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts. By the time Virginia Woolf had come to write Night and Day she had been living this kind of love relationship with Leonard for several years. In spite of whatever sexual inadequacies there may have been, for Leonard and Virginia the open communication of a loving relationship was capable of riveting together the shattered fragments of the world -- at least until 1941.

In her next novel, Jacob's Room, Virginia Woolf unveils a new

technique to solve an old problem -- getting at the meaning beneath the surface reality of life. The narrator of the work, who is a semi-character addicted to psychological reverie, insists that she at least knows nothing but the facts of Jacob's case. She knows, for instance, that Jacob transcribed a whole page from Marlowe. "But what brought Jacob Flanders to read Marlowe in the British Museum"(JR,103)? She does not know; therefore we cannot know. Jacob's reading, like his love affairs, is a dead-end street for us since we cannot know why he does anything.

But there are hints on another level -- what Jean O. Love calls the "diffuse" level, which includes "the scene, the surroundings of the man, and the objects to which the images refer."<sup>5</sup> The problem with the book as a whole lies in merging the thoughts of the self-conscious "know-nothing" narrator with the information she is actually conveying by indirect means. As Love explains,

Although the diffusion of Jacob as a personality is well expressed by form and pattern...the author seems to lack confidence that it is adequately expressed and that the reader can comprehend her meaning. Therefore she steps in and out of the novel repeatedly, with annoying preciosity and self-consciousness, to tell the reader what she is demonstrating quite adequately.

Love associates the narrator too literally with the author; she therefore fails to distinguish between two literary techniques with which Virginia Woolf is experimenting. Jacob's Room is her first attempt at biography,

5. Love, Worlds In Consciousness, 127.

6. Love, Worlds In Consciousness, 127.

a sham biography based loosely upon the life of her brother Thoby Stephen, who died in 1906 at the age of twenty-six. Her attempt to mix the methods of biography with her new technique of diffuse presentation actually results in "two kinds of fact" which "will not mix", as she herself explains in "The Art of Biography", written several years later (DM,166).

Jacob's Room, then, is an artistic failure, but a fascinating one.

The narrator-biographer often adds a touch of humour to the proceedings by her comic exaggeration of the difficulties involved in understanding character:

It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done. Some, it is true, take ineffaceable impressions of character at once. Others dally, loiter, and get blown this way and that. Kind old ladies assure us that cats are often the best judges of character. A cat will always go to a good man, they say; but then, Mrs. Whitehorn, Jacob's landlady, loathed cats. (JR,150)

The little phrase "not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done" has often been interpreted as a serious statement by Virginia Woolf of her artistic intentions which she has unaccountably dropped into the middle of a novel instead of reserving for an essay. Seen in its context, as a statement by a narrator-biographer who is the literary ancestor of Orlando's biographer, the comic intent of the phrase becomes apparent. Unfortunately, such narratorial intrusion does

not blend well with the imitation of consciousness which is carried off unhesitatingly in Betty Flanders' case:

'So of course,' wrote Betty Flanders, pressing her heels rather deeper in the sand, 'there was nothing for it but to leave.'

Slowly welling from the point of her gold nib, pale blue ink dissolved the full stop; for there her pen stuck; her eyes fixed, and tears slowly filled them. The entire bay quivered; the lighthouse wobbled; and she had the illusion that the mast of Mr. Connor's little yacht was bending like a wax candle in the sun. She winked quickly. Accidents were awful things. She winked again. The mast was straight; the waves were regular; the lighthouse was upright; but the blot had spread.

'...nothing for it but to leave,' she read. (JR, 5)

Here the narrator is scarcely present; we see what Betty Flander sees and hear what she thinks; we can almost feel what she feels (see Jane Novak's analysis, pp. 86-7)<sup>6</sup>. The attempt to combine the two types of narration destroys the unity of the book, a unity which she develops with consummate skill in her next work, Mrs. Dalloway, in which the narrator uses almost exclusively the imitation of consciousness technique.

Life, on a number of levels, is one of the unifying themes in Mrs. Dalloway. First there is "life; London; this moment in June" (MD, 6), which so excites Clarissa as she walks towards Bond Street. Then there is the past life of Bourton, shared by Clarissa, Peter, Richard, and Sally. There are Septimus's confused musings on life in Regent's Park, and Rezia's desire for a normal life with her husband which will include

6. Jane Novak, The Razor Edge of Balance (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press) 1975.

making hats and having babies. And there are her memories, and her husband's, of a previous life in Italy during the war. Finally, there is the life of clock-time hanging over it all and ruthlessly subdividing the day into hours for performing mundane chores and making money.

\* The external events in Clarissa's day make a very short list indeed; she walks to the flower shop and back, reads Richard's note, mends her dress, visits with Peter, chats with Richard, and gives her party. Internally, however, she experiences and re-experiences everything which makes her who she is. She experiences the hurt of her snubbing by Lady Bruton and, through memory, re-experiences her love for Sally and her coldness with Richard. She experiences her hatred for Miss Kilman and her cold dislike for Bradshaw, and re-experiences her confused feelings for Peter. All these "life experiences" taken together give us a complete picture of Clarissa which we could never derive simply by knowing that she went to Bond Street to buy flowers, as we knew, for example, that Jacob had gone to the British Museum to read Marlowe.

Because of the scarcity of external events in Mrs. Dalloway's day, we as readers are easily convinced that the life going on in her mind is all that really matters. Katharine's (ND) moments of reverie,

on the other hand, slow down the movement of the external narrative causing a continual conflict between the demands of realistic "story" and the demands of internal "meaning". In Mrs. Dalloway no such conflict can arise because surface reality is barely there and, taken by itself, could not make much of a story in any case. And the half-comic offbeat narrator of Jacob's Room has vanished, to be replaced by a subtle, indirect liberator of the major characters' thoughts and feelings.

Life is presented, in Mrs. Dalloway, mainly as a quest for integrity. Being true, first to yourself, and then to those around you, is the highest value in life, according to all the major characters. Lack of integrity is satirized through Bradshaw, Lady Bruton, and Hugh Whitbread among the minor characters, and is mourned by Peter when he discovers it in Sally too. But Clarissa is the central character (with Septimus, her double) and it is their struggle with integrity which forms the heart of the novel.

While writing Mrs. Dalloway Virginia made the following diary entry:

I am a great deal interested suddenly in my book. I want to bring in the despicableness of people like Ott: I want to give the slipperiness of the soul. I have been too tolerant often. The truth is people scarcely care for each other. They have this insane instinct for life. But they never become attached to anything outside themselves. (DVM II, Mon., 4 June, 1923)

Clarissa, sad to say, seems to have been endowed with slipperiness almost as a birthright, as all her external conversations indicate. But she also

has "this insane instinct for life":

(June had drawn out every leaf on the trees. The mothers of Pimlico gave suck to their young. Messages were passing from the Fleet to the Admiralty. Arlington Street and Piccadilly seemed to chafe the very air in the park and lift its leaves hotly, brilliantly, on waves of that divine vitality which Clarissa loved. To dance, to ride, she had adored all that.) (MD,8)

But a life of integrity is frightening to her:

She would not say of anyone in the world now that they were this or that....She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxicabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very very dangerous to live even one day. (MD,9)

Peter Walsh remembers the day Clarissa lost her integrity; it was the day when she became so angry with the pregnant housemaid who had been married by her master, a neighbour of theirs at Bourton:

He hadn't blamed her for minding the fact, since in those days a girl brought up as she was knew nothing, but it was her manner that annoyed him; timid; hard; arrogant; prudish. 'The death of the soul.' He had said that instinctively, ticketing the moment as he used to do -- the death of her soul. (MD,54)

But Peter's analysis is only partly right. Clarissa lost her soul, paradoxically, because of the purity of her love for Sally Seton, a love which she dared not acknowledge openly, as the man had done in the situation with his pregnant housemaid.

Then somebody said -- Sally Seton it was -- did it make any difference to one's feelings to know that before they'd married she had had a baby? (In those days, in mixed company, it was a bold thing to say.) He could see Clarissa now, turning bright pink; somehow contracting; and saying, "Oh, I shall never be able to speak to her again!" (MD,54)



The "her" is deliberately ambiguous, and probably refers to Sally at least as much as it refers to the squire's <sup>wife</sup> whom Clarissa had only met once. In any case, "the whole party sitting round the tea-table began to wobble. It was very uncomfortable" (MD, 54). Later that day Richard Dalloway appeared on the scene, and Clarissa soon gave up both Sally and Peter for him.

It is a "moment of being" that clears matters up for the heroine of Mrs. Dalloway. Her "insane instinct for life" gives way to a kind of acceptance which links her with Septimus, who will give his life for his integrity. "Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall" (MD, 37). This seems to be the same sea which had comforted Katharine in Night and Day when her mother talked of love. It is also, of course, the sea in The Waves which consoles Bernard for the fact of death. But Clarissa does not simply die. Instead she is reborn with a new respect for honesty, a value now more significant to her than life itself. "A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved" (MD, 163).

Septimus has preserved his integrity, his belief that trees are alive and that there is no crime, but rather universal love; and Clarissa has lived to regain her lost integrity through his death and her own intuitive

recognition of its significance.

Mrs. Dalloway is the first complete and unified expression of Virginia Woolf's vision. She was able here, for the first time, to relegate external life to the position of little importance which her vision required, and at the same time to express the inner life in a clear and interesting, even exciting manner, through her "tunnelling process". The diffuse perspective of Septimus and, at times, of Mrs. Dalloway herself, suggests more reality than we are aware of in our everyday lives, but this perspective, limited as it is to these two characters, does not overwhelm us with "too much reality" as it does in The Waves, in which the entire work is written from the diffuse perspective.

Love is the emotion questioned most in To The Lighthouse. We are presented with several varieties of love, and led to a vision of androgynous love, which is best because most generous and most free.

In the opening section, James Ramsay loves his mother, "who was ten thousand times better in every way" than his father (TTL,10), with all the oedipal passion of which a six-year old boy is capable. Lily Briscoe is, at this point, "in love" with all the Ramsays as a family unit and Mrs. Ramsay in particular (TTL,23). And Mrs. Ramsay, of course, loves everyone, but there is a selfish streak which runs right through

her love, tainting it with possessiveness and a strange hunger for power, as she herself recognizes when Mr. Carmichael snubs her:

For her own self-satisfaction was it that she wished so instinctively to help, to give, that people might say of her, 'O Mrs. Ramsay! dear Mrs. Ramsay...Mrs. Ramsay, of course!' and need her and send for her and admire her? Was it not secretly this that she wanted, and therefore when Mr. Carmichael shrank away from her ...she was made aware of the pettiness of some part of her, and of human relations, how flawed they are, how despicable, how self-seeking, at their best.(TTL,42-3)

Mr. Ramsay is deeply in love with his wife ("Ah! She was lovely, lovelier now than ever he thought her,") but is unable to express his love except in a protective and corrective fashion:

'You won't finish that stocking tonight,' he said, pointing to her stocking. That was what she wanted -- the asperity in his voice reproving her.(TTL,113)

Mrs. Ramsay cannot even tell her husband that she loves him:

A heartless woman he called her; she never told him that she loved him. But it was not so -- it was not so. It was only that she never could say what she felt. Was there no crumb on his coat? Nothing she could do for him? (TTL,113)

Only once in the first section is there an open and generous expression of love; this occurs in consequence of Mrs. Ramsay's shared "moment of being" during her serving of the boeuf en daube. The meal ends with Mr. Ramsay reciting the romantic and fantastic Luriana Lurilee, which seems to Mrs. Ramsay to be a poetic rendering of "what had been in her mind the whole evening while she said other things."

And all the lives we ever lived and all the lives to be  
Are full of trees and changing leaves. (TTL,102)

Mr. Carmichael takes up the song, "and as she passed him he turned  
slightly towards her repeating the last words:

Luriana, Lurilee

and bowed to her as if he did her homage"(TTL,103). The old poet has  
recognized the integrity of this generosity of Mrs. Ramsay's, which  
is so different from her various "acts of kindness"; for through her  
dinner party she has been able to share the deepest part of herself --  
her "moment of being" -- with those around her, rather than keeping  
the experience to herself in a "wedge of darkness"(TTL,61).

Later, after time and life have done their worst, killing Prue  
and Andrew and Mrs. Ramsay herself, Cam and James learn the lesson of  
love as they sail to the lighthouse with their father. He too learns  
to love his children less selfishly. And Lily is able to let go of her  
obsession with a dead woman and come to appreciate Mr. Ramsay in a new  
way, in spite of his egotism, his pleading for sympathy, his immensely  
self-conscious grief. She has been grateful to Mrs. Ramsay for saying,  
"Life, stand still here," but it is not enough. The more she recalls  
the past and Mrs. Ramsay's errors in judgment (the Rayleys should not  
have married, Lily herself is now happy in her unmarried state) the more

she realises that it is Mr. Ramsay and masculine truth that she wants now.

Finally Mr. Carmichael, "like an old pagan God" brings the two poles together:

He stood there spreading his hands over all the weakness and suffering of mankind; she thought he was surveying, tolerantly, compassionately, their final destiny. Now he has crowned the occasion, she thought, when his hand slowly fell, as if she had seen him let fall from his great height a wreath of violets and asphodels which, fluttering slowly, lay at length upon the earth. (TTL, 191)

Mr. Carmichael seems to blessing Mr. Ramsay's belated reconciliation with his children as he had earlier blessed Mrs. Ramsay's sharing of her "moment of being". The immediate result for Lily is that she finds Mr. Ramsay's proper position in her picture and completes her painting. She has had her vision -- with Mr. Carmichael's help -- and it was a vision of androgyny.

In Orlando Virginia Woolf solved the artistic dilemma which had been raised by the narrator of Jacob's Room: how to convey "a life". As Thomas S.W. Lewis notes in "Virginia Woolf's Biographies",<sup>7</sup> Orlando is the perfect marriage of "granite" and "rainbow;" the facts of life and the truth of personality have been united to express at once the history of the Sackvilles and the personality of the last of that line, Vita Sackville-West. Thomas points to the various sources for the work: Vita's Knole and the Sackvilles and Pepita as well as the Victorian

7. Thomas S.W. Lewis, "Virginia Woolf's Biographies", Virginia Woolf: Centennial Essays, eds. Elaine K. Ginsberg & Laura Moss Gottlieb (Troy, N.Y.: Whitson Publishing Company) 1983.

miscellany called Book of Days which described the great frost in the reign of James I. He also mentions Vita's protracted and doomed love affair with Violet Trefusis which ended when Vita's husband, Harold Nicolson, flew to Amiens on Valentine's Day, 1920, to "rescue" his wife from her planned elopement with Violet (cf. Victoria Glendinning's Vita);<sup>8</sup> the incident receives a veiled reference at the end of Orlando when Shelmerdine swoops down from the skies to carry off his wife in his airplane, an incident which reveals at least as much about Harold's personality as it does about Vita's.

The symbols of personality and imagination in Orlando are the eyes and forehead. Shakespeare is noteworthy for "his eyes, globed and clouded like some green stone of curious texture"(0,14), while Orlando himself had "eyes like drenched violets" and "a brow like the swelling of a marble dome"(0,10).

Woolf makes the connection between Orlando and Shakespeare only through the eyes and forehead, but it takes on a symbolic importance suggesting that only the imagination may truly understand the inner life. (Lewis, 300)

Unlike the narrator of Jacob's Room, Orlando's biographer, who makes a great fuss about official documents and sticking to the facts, actually dives headfirst at every opportunity into the vagaries of Orlando's inner life while reciting with a careless bravado worthy of his subject the

8. Victoria Glendinning, Vita: The Life of Vita Sackville-West (Harmondsworth: Penguin) 1984.

350 year sequence of events in Orlando's outer life.

Virginia Woolf is, of course, having a grand joke with life and with biography. It is humanly impossible to live as intensely, inwardly and outwardly, as Orlando does, but what fun to read (or write) a life of such unparalleled adventure! As a man Orlando falls in love and ponders life and writes reams of poetry while performing diplomatic offices for his country; as a woman she falls in love and lives with the gypsies and wins a poetry prize and fights a lawsuit while entertaining Pope and Dryden in her spare time.

In "The Art of Biography" Virginia Woolf expresses the opinion that created characters such as Falstaff will "outlive" biographical creations such as Boswell's Dr. Johnson (DM,168). But in Orlando she herself has so blended "fact" and "personality" that her characters take on a life of their own, more like Falstaff than Dr. Johnson. Thus we can expect Vita (and Harold) to achieve immortality, not because they were wealthy aristocrats, not even because they designed lovely gardens, and certainly not because they themselves wrote books, but because Virginia Woolf conferred immortality upon them when she recreated their lives and personalities in her sham biography Orlando. It is unfortunate that in her next work she left out everything Orlando was brimming with: life and love.

Critical enthusiasm for The Waves seems to exist in inverse proportion to critical appreciation of The Years. Earlier critics -- those writing mainly in the fifties and sixties -- prefer the earlier work for its technical mastery, while later critics of the seventies and eighties (many of whom are feminists) prefer the later work for its political content and realism. A synthesis of critical opinion does not seem possible -- at least not at this time. But it should be possible at least to uncover the causes of the discrepancy and to lay some kind of critical foundation upon which to judge these very different works.

A case against The Waves could go something like this: 1) People never talk like that in real life. 2) People are never as one-sided as that in real life. 3) Children in real life have homes and parents. They don't live in some vague unspecified location with five other parentless children. 4) The central character in a novel should not remain silent. How are we to know his character if he never says anything? A possible alternative to 4) could be: 4b) People in real life are never that ego-centric. The only decent character in the book is Percival, who -- mercifully -- never opens his mouth from the time of his introduction to the time of his unfortunate demise.

Enthusiasts such as J.K. Johnstone have, of course, tossed all



such objections out the window on the grounds of sheer irrelevancy.

"Real life" of the everyday variety, they insist, is not what Virginia Woolf was after. And of course they are right.

In a diary entry for June, 1927 the author claims that she will write a book in prose "which has many of the characteristics of poetry" which will "differ from the novel as we know it now chiefly in that it will stand further back from life." She wishes to

give the relation of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude. For under the dominion of the novel we have scrutinized one part of the mind closely and left another unexplored....We long for some more impersonal relationship. We long for ideas, for dreams, for imaginations, for poetry. (DVW III, 18 June, 1927)

Mitchell A. Leaska questions Virginia's last statement in a way which approaches the crux of the issue:

Were we really full of such longing? Or did Mrs. Woolf need to let something circling inside her wing its way to the external world? Was this interior something which, after the novel's publication, Mrs. Woolf herself could not explain or comprehend intellectually? <sup>9</sup>

The Waves is the supreme working out of Virginia's idiosyncratic and non-rational personal perspective, a perspective essentially cyclical and mystical which expresses the extreme feminine pole of reality. Jean Guignet, another enthusiast, argues that this is its strongest virtue as a work of art:

9. Mitchell A. Leaska, The Novels of Virginia Woolf (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson) 1977, 325.

The Waves is unquestionably Virginia Woolf's masterpiece, if such a term describes the creation that most faithfully conveys its author's conception of the world, and in which she includes the most completely what she thinks, feels, and is. The hostile comments, the objections called forth by The Waves are all connected with this completeness; they have nothing to do with literary criticism properly speaking, but are a matter of temperament or metaphysical attitude.<sup>10</sup>

Both critics agree that The Waves is the work which is connected most personally with Virginia Woolf's brand of mysticism. Waves, for example, are always symbolic of a comforting awareness of eternity throughout the lifework. But if we see Virginia Woolf's concept of reality as an attempt to balance the masculine rational pole of reality with its feminine mystical counterpart, then it becomes obvious that the artist has leaned too far in one direction in this particular work, making it an aberration rather than a "complete" expression of "what she thinks, feels, and is". As a writer and as a human being with diffuse perception Virginia Woolf was generally well aware of the dangers of merging with the objects in one's environment. Complete merging inevitably leads to suicide (Septimus, Rhoda, Virginia herself). But the interludes in The Waves, according to Johnstone, "merge the lives of the six characters with the vast and eternal sea of reality."<sup>11</sup> This merging is precisely the problem. There is no real death in the work because its cyclical perspective essentially

10. Guiguet, 297.

11. Johnstone, 357.

eliminates death; on the other hand, there is no real life either because all is merged "with the vast and eternal sea of reality." And unlike other novels in which this phenomenon occurs -- The Voyage Out, for example, the merging does not affect one character who is presented as having a problem; rather it is a part of the artistic<sup>vision</sup> itself which arose, as I have attempted to show, from Virginia's personal dilemma of learning to deal with the aging process.

Following the author's expressed concept of reality -- as a balance of sorts between two opposite poles, the male and female -- The Years appears to have a better claim to being its author's masterpiece of the thirties, since it is the work which "most faithfully conveys its author's conception of the world, and in which she includes the most completely what she thinks, feels, and is." Here we have the "poetic" reality of The Waves combined successfully with the factual reality of life in English patriarchal society over a span of fifty years. The 1907 section, for example, blends an actual party at Lady Pargiter's home with young Sara's imaginings of the party while she half-reads her cousin Edward's translation of the Antigone and gradually falls asleep. The extreme clarity of the writing allows us to distinguish easily between all the "realities" which are being presented practically simultaneously, but we never feel overwhelmed by too much reality, as Rachel did, and as readers of The Waves often do.

The Years is not a realistic historical novel of the War and Peace genre. We hear about Parnell, for example, because Delia is a follower of his, but we are told nothing of "the Irish question" or the man, except that he dies. Similarly, our only glimpse of the political reality of the monarchy in England is the news, which we overhear almost accidentally through Maggie's window, that the king is dead. All of World War I is condensed into an air raid which some of the characters suffer through in Maggie's basement after a dinner party. In fact, all of the historical events of those years take place somewhere far off in the background of the world the Pargiters live in. Nevertheless, I would argue that the novel is realistic; it is a realistic presentation of women's place in English society from the 1880's to the 1930's. All major events in national life were simply background for women then because they were not members of society on any professional or political level. Their lives, like Mrs. Ramsay's, consisted of dinner parties and taking care of other people -- their fathers, husbands, children. Eleanor Pargiter manages the family household accounts while her brother Morris goes to Cambridge and then <sup>to</sup> the bar; Milly marries a rich squire and spends thirty years getting fat because there is nothing else to do; Kitty trades her lessons with Miss

Craddock for a chauffeur-driven limousine and a title because a woman who possesses "quite an original mind" (Y,51) has no opportunity to use it except as an underpaid schoolmistress like Miss Craddock herself. The novel is long, depressing, fragmented, and true-to-life -- women's life in a patriarchal society.

But there is hope. Maggie's daughter Peggy becomes a doctor. Eleanor's self-centred old father finally dies leaving her free -- in her fifties -- to travel to Spain and experience beauty and independence. North returns from South Africa with a desire to "live differently"(Y,322). And in the end, at the final party which lasts all night and into a new dawn, Eleanor has her vision, a vision which is the closest Virginia Woolf comes in any of her fiction to a clear statement of her concept of reality:

There must be another life, she thought, sinking back into her chair, exasperated. Not in dreams; but here and now, in this room, with living people. She felt as if she were standing on the edge of a precipice with her hair blown back; she was about to grasp something which just evaded her. There must be another life, here and now, she repeated. This is too short, too broken. We know nothing, even about ourselves. We're only just beginning, she thought, to understand, here and there. She hollowed her hands in her lap, just as Rose had hollowed hers round her ears. She held her hands hollowed; she felt that she wanted to enclose the present moment; to make it stay; to fill it fuller and fuller, with the past, the present and the future, until it shone, whole, bright, deep with understanding. (Y,325-6)

"Another life" is the theme of The Years; to find another way to live is the task of its characters as they emerge from the shadow of the patriarchy into the light of "here and now". Unlike Bernard and company, Eleanor seeks life "not in dreams", but "in this room, with living people". There will be no drowning in a sea of reality for this strong and tender lady. She knows too that her own life will end:

It's useless, she thought, opening her hands. It must drop. It must fall. And then? she thought. For her too there would be the endless night; the endless dark. She looked ahead of her as though she saw opening in front of her a very long dark tunnel. But, thinking of the dark, something baffled her; in fact, it was growing light. The blinds were white. (Y, 326)

Personal death and the transitoriness of individual life are tragic; death will end Eleanor's participation in the life she is only just beginning to understand "here and there". But a new generation will carry on, building on the foundations laid by the old.

Not all of the women in Eleanor's generation "adjusted" to the patriarchy; some fought it and suffered as a result. Rose was arrested and jailed for throwing a brick through the window of a public window during a suffragist demonstration. Sara, living in genteel poverty, became increasingly strange -- not "mad" precisely, but with a queer habit of looking at things aslant and of saying things which have their own peculiar truth, like some of the speeches of Ophelia. But the new

generation will be less split; Eleanor's final vision is specifically of androgyny, and it is expressed through the same imagery of the man and woman in the taxicab which Virginia Woolf had used in A Room of One's Own.

A young man had got out; he paid the driver. Then a girl in a tweed travelling suit followed him. He fitted his latch-key to the door. 'There,' Eleanor murmured, as he opened the door and they stood for a moment on the threshold. 'There,' she repeated, as the door shut with a little thud behind them.

Then she turned round into the room. 'And now?' she said, looking at Morris, who was drinking the last drops of a glass of wine. 'And now?' she asked, holding out her hands to him.

The sun had risen, and the sky above the houses wore an air of extraordinary beauty, simplicity and peace. (Y, 331)

In The Years Virginia Woolf expressed in fiction the proposition she had argued with such brilliance and daring in Three Guineas: that the only logical conclusion of the patriarchal state was the totalitarian state, epitomized in the thirties by Hitler's Germany; and the corollary to this proposition: that the only solution to the dilemma was, not the matriarchy, but the androgynous state in which men and women both develop equally the two sides of the human personality. I believe the work escapes didacticism because of the brilliant realisation of situation and character in its presentation.

Life and love are the whole subject of Between the Acts. Virginia Woolf's presentation of the pageant itself and the characters who watch it is a continual exploration of the relations between the sexes and of the purpose of art in life. G.E. Moore had asserted that life was

a constant search for the Good and the Beautiful; but his philosophy ignored political realities and the rights and duties of artists to ensure the continuation of a just society. As Maynard Keynes explains in "My Early Beliefs",

In short, we repudiated all versions of the doctrine of original sin, of there being insane and irrational springs of wickedness in most men. We were not aware that civilisation was a thin and precarious crust erected by the personality and will of a very few, and only maintained by rules and conventions skilfully put across and guilefully preserved.<sup>12</sup>

Virginia Woolf, who seems never to have been seriously influenced by Moore, came to reject more and more strongly the "hothouse" atmosphere of "art for art's sake" which made Bloomsbury oblivious to the approach of World War I and some "Bloomsberries" equally naive about the road to war which Europe was racing down in the thirties. In Between the Acts, through Miss LaTrobe's megaphone, she shouts to us that the purpose of art is to show us ourselves, so that we may understand and continue to build the wall, "the great wall which we call, perhaps miscall, civilization"(BTA,136).

So that was her little game! To show us up,  
as we are, here and now.(BTA,135)

From within the consciousness of Miss LaTrobe we can hear Virginia Woolf

12. Maynard Keynes, "My Early Beliefs", reprinted in The Bloomsbury Group, ed. S.P. Rosenbaum (Toronto: University of Toronto Press)1975,62.



alternately cursing -- 'Reality too strong,' she muttered. 'Curse 'em!'

(BTA,130) -- and cajoling us, her audience, to find the pattern, to

preserve our integrity, to fight against the "insane and irrational

springs of wickedness" until we bring "from chaos and cacaphony

measure" (BTA,137). For her, life and love are that crash and resolution

because "we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself" (MB,84).

## DEATH

Until this point in my argument it has been possible to derive Virginia Woolf's concept of reality from her memoirs, diaries, and letters, and to see how such notions of hers as "moments of being", for example, illuminate the texts. But any consideration of death must account for the way in which the author almost invariably links death with sex. There is no logical explanation which can be derived from Virginia's private writings. She never says "Death is..." in the way that she frequently says "Life is...", although her diaries reveal a woman who is almost constantly mourning the death of a close friend or family member. In fact, most <sup>critical</sup> discussion of death in the novels of Virginia Woolf centres on her need to grieve; they see her books as she herself once expressed it, as "elegies". The emphasis has, in fact, been laid so heavily upon this aspect of the work that nobody so far has raised the equally valid question of the link she makes between sex and death in no less than six of her novels.

I believe that Virginia Woolf drew a logical connection between sex and death, but it was not one which she cared to explain, even in her personal writings. The connection was made, however, from her

experience of life, and might have been explained if she had lived to complete her memoirs, because by the time she came to write these she was becoming less reticent about many things -- gropings and fumbblings of her Duckworth half-brothers, for example. But she did not live to explain herself fully, and I am therefore going to attempt what she called "thinking back through our mothers" (AROO) in order to describe when and how the connection was made. Much of my evidence will be drawn from Leslie Stephen's Mausoleum Book which he wrote to preserve Julia's memory, as well as the information provided by the private letters of Leslie and Julia which are analysed by Jean O. Love in her Sources of Madness and Art. It will be seen how Julia Duckworth Stephen's life and death profoundly influenced the thought as well as the feelings of her daughter, who admits that she was "obsessed" with her dead mother.

In the Mausoleum Book Leslie Stephen describes Julia's attitude to marriage when she was a young girl of twenty:

Julia always felt instinctively -- and her letters during her engagement show this feeling clearly -- that a woman ought either to refuse a man unconditionally or to accept him absolutely and unreservedly. She made a complete surrender of herself in the fullest sense: she would have no reserves from her lover, and confesses her entire devotion to him in the most simple and explicit words. 'Surrender' is perhaps hardly the right word, though it seems to express what I mean, unless you understand that the surrender was mutual. The two lives were to become one; there was to be no shadow of difference or discord; and she speaks in a way, the more touching from its quiet simplicity, of her entire unity with him. (MB", 37, my emphasis)

Was not this "entire unity" the very problem which so worried, first Terence and Rachel in The Voyage Out, then Ralph and Katharine in Night and Day? For if unity is complete there must be loss of self, as Naremore points out (see p.78 of this thesis). And where there is surrender by both parties, there is also possession by both parties. Terence wishes to possess Rachel, but feels her resistance:

She seemed to be able to cut herself adrift from him, and to pass away to unknown places where she had no need of him. The thought roused his jealousy.(VO,309)

Rachel, significantly, has no conscious desire to possess Terence, but "a curious sense of possession" comes over her (VO,289) almost without her willing it, and her touch on his cheek makes him feel "unreal". Terence feels possessed by his lover, and the feeling only serves to augment his own need to possess her completely as well. "'There's something I can't get hold of in you,'" he says. "You don't want me as I want you -- you're always wanting something else'"(VO,309). Rachel realises he is right; that "she could not possibly want only one human being"(VO,309). Therefore she cannot maintain her perfect unity with him, as she thinks she must if their love is to be perfect. The looking-glass reveals the truth to Terence and Rachel:

They stood together in front of the looking-glass, and with a brush tried to make themselves look as if they had been feeling nothing all the morning, neither pain nor happiness. But it chilled them to see themselves in the glass, for instead of being vast and indivisible they were really very small and separate, the size of the glass leaving a large space for the reflection of other things.(VO,310)

Julia seems to have seen marriage as total unity, but when Terence and Rachel try to do the same, they are thwarted at every turn. And in "real life", so, of course, was Julia. She could not bear separation from Herbert Duckworth, as Leslie recalls, describing an occasion when he and his first wife had met Julia while she was waiting for her husband, whose train was late. "Julia was evidently in a state of painful anxiety, in an anxiety, indeed, which seemed to be unreasonable"(MBK,38-9). Having given up everything else life had to offer for Herbert, without him there was nothing left. When he died, Julia died too. In a sense she had already died when she chose to merge herself in Herbert, and even after his death it was easier to "lose herself" in caring for others than to feel her own pain:

'I was only 24 [she says] when it all seemed a shipwreck, and I knew that I had to live on and on, and the only thing to be done was to be as cheerful as I could and do as much as I could and think as little. And so I got deadened. I had all along felt that if it had been possible for me to be myself, it would have been better for me individually; and that I could have got more real life out of the wreck if I had broken down more. But there was Baby to be thought of and everyone around me urging me to keep up, and I could never be alone which sometimes was such torture. So that by degrees I felt that though I was more cheerful and content than most people, I was more changed.(MBK,40)

Julia was, in her own words, "deadened", and could not get any "real life" because she was unable "to be myself". The contrast between her mourning for Herbert and Leslie's for her is immediately obvious, for Leslie was

never more himself than he was during his absurd and melodramatic histrionics over the death of his wife. Far from being deadened, he was intensely alive to every shiver of emotion of which his soul was capable. There is no evidence to suggest that Leslie ever "merged" himself in anyone, least of all either of his wives, although he encouraged them to merge themselves unstintingly in his welfare if not in his person. To Virginia Woolf, each of her parents must have appeared absurdly wrong in equal but opposite proportions. She comments in her memoirs on the effect of her father's mourning:

The silence was stifling. A finger was laid on our lips. One had always to think whether what one was about to say was the right thing to say. It ought to be a help. But how could one help? (MB, 109)

And she reports the stories Stella told of Julia's earlier collapse:

All her gaiety, all her sociability left her. She was as unhappy as it is possible for anyone to be. ...Stella once told me that she used to lie upon his grave at Orchardleigh. As she was undemonstrative that seems a superlative expression of her grief. (MB, 104-5)

While Leslie's mourning was a complete expression of his personality (at the expense of the personalities of all those around him) Julia's was clearly the opposite. Her "gaiety" and "sociability" are gone, and she herself seeks only to continue the merging of herself with Herbert, in this case with his corpse. Both reactions are neurotic; Leslie's seems

more damaging to those around him while Julia's is completely destructive of her self.

But Julia's sufferings were far from over when she married Leslie Stephen. His inordinate demands for sympathy and care-taking helped to drive his wife to an early grave. These two marriages illustrate the double aspect of womanhood as traditionally perceived: woman as lover and beloved, who "surrenders" herself; and woman as mother, nurturer, caretaker, who once again surrenders herself to a life of continual self-sacrifice for her family. Virginia Woolf objected to both these perceptions, and refused, in her personal life, to be placed in either category. Throughout her novels the merging of self and other is the crucial existential question, and in most cases it is her female characters who live in the gravest danger of this type of surrender.

In The Voyage Out Rachel "escapes" from Terence through illness, but during her delirium she finds herself merged, not only with her lover, but with existential reality symbolized by the sea.

The heat was suffocating. At last the faces went further away; she fell into a deep pool of sticky water, which eventually closed over her head. While all her tormentors thought that she was dead, she was not dead, but curled up at the bottom of the sea. There she lay, sometimes seeing darkness, sometimes light, while every now and then someone turned her over at the bottom of the sea. (VO, 348)

The "deep pool of sticky water" has distinct sexual overtones, as does

the vaginal cavern with the damp walls through which she wandered earlier in her delirium. The sight had something inexplicably sinister about it"(VO,337) and "little deformed women" haunt these vaverns, playing cards (VO,338). Rachel is frightened and repulsed by these sexual images, but shortly before her death she surrenders to the deep pool to escape her tormentors. She will be completely passive, allowing others to turn her over, seeing whatever presents itself, never seeking on her own. This sexual imagery provides a link, on an emotional, though not on any rational level, between sex and death.

By contrast, Jinny, in The Waves, is able to enjoy the ecstasy of momentary sexual union without losing consciousness of her self:

'Now with a little jerk, like a limpet broken from a rock, I am broken off: I fall with him; I am carried off. We yield to this slow flood. We go in and out of this hesitating music. Rocks break the current of the dance; it jars, it shivers. In and out, we are swept now into this large figure; it holds us together; we cannot step outside its sinuous, its hesitating, its abrupt, its perfectly encircling walls. Our bodies, his hard, mine flowing, are pressed together within its body; it holds us together; and then lengthening out, in smooth, in sinuous folds, rolls us between it, on and on.(W,69)

Jinny is always aware of the "I" within the "we", perhaps because she is not constant in love. A pale man with dark hair brings her to this ecstasy, but "I also like fair-haired men with blue eyes"(W,70). Her yielding is not to him, but to the experience itself.-- "this slow flood". In a



similar manner Orlando is never so alive as when he/she is in love; and once again there is no sense of surrender, whether he is a man or she is a woman, but an overwhelming sense of communication:

Hot with skating and with love they would throw themselves down in some solitary reach, where the yellow osiers fringed the bank, and wrapped in a great fur cloak Orlando would take her in his arms, and know, for the first time, he murmured, the delights of love....And then, wrapped in their sables, they would talk of everything under the sun; of sights and travels; of Moor and Pagan; of this man's beard and that woman's skin; of a rat that fed from her hand at table; of the arras that moved always in the hall at home; of a face; of a feather. Nothing was too small for such converse, nothing was too great.(O,28-9)

The passage serves as a reminder that for Helen Ambrose "talk was the medicine she trusted to, talk that was free, unguarded, and as candid as a habit of talking with men made natural in her own case"(VO,123).

Nicholas, in The Years takes the point to its logical conclusion:

'I was saying we do not know ourselves, ordinary people; and if we do not know ourselves, how then can we make religions, laws, that...that fit, that fit.' (Y,215-16)

To be worthwhile, the sexual experience must be one of communication, which is the opposite of "merging". When we communicate we give of ourselves and receive from another. Both self and other are strengthened, educated, renewed. When we surrender and merge in a sexual experience we lose ourselves as well as our capacity to communicate. Ralph and

Katharine, the successful lovers in Night and Day, learn to love without surrender:

Moments, fragments, a second of vision, and then the flying waters, the winds dissipating and dissolving; then, too, the recollection from chaos, the return of security, the earth firm, superb and brilliant in the sun. From the heart of his darkness he spoke his thanksgiving; from a region as far, as hidden, she answered him. (ND, 459)

These lovers share Rupert Birkin's need in Lawrence's Women in Love for a recognition of individuality within unity:

Fusion, fusion, this horrible fusion of two beings, which every woman and most men insisted on, was it not nauseous and horrible anyhow, whether it was a fusion of the spirit or of the emotional body?... Why could they not remain individuals, limited by their own limits? Why this dreadful all-comprehensiveness, this hateful tyranny? Why not leave the other being free, why try to absorb, or melt, or merge? One might abandon oneself utterly to the moments, but not to any other being.

The narrator of Night and Day expresses (in more elegant terms) Rupert Birkin's solution to the problem of "merging": moments of surrender to a unity which leaves the personhood of the individuals involved free and "limited by their own limits".

It appears that Virginia Woolf herself was unable to attain such freedom in any kind of sexual relationship, with either a man or a woman. Julia Stephen's living (and dying) example was probably responsible, at least in part, for this state of affairs. But Virginia's sister Vanessa seems to have been minimally affected by her mother's "yielding" tendencies.

1. D.H. Lawrence, Women In Love (Harmondsworth: Penguin (1921) 1981) 348. The first emphasis is mine, the second Lawrence's.

On the subject of orgasm, she once wrote to her husband Clive that "I sympathized with such things if I didn't have them from the time I was 2."<sup>2</sup> Quentin Bell tells us that "Vanessa, Leonard and, I think, Virginia herself were inclined to blame George Duckworth" for Virginia's sexual coldness (QB II,6); but her diffuse mode of perception probably had as much to do with the problem as anything else, since bodily diffusion makes a concentrated orgasm impossible. Quentin Bell speaks of "a profound and perhaps congenital inhibition"(QB II,6) which could be equated with Virginia's diffuse perception and which she may have inherited from her mother, with whom Virginia was "obsessed":

To return to the particular instance which should be more definitive and more capable of description than for example the influence on me of the Cambridge Apostles or the influence of the Galsworthy, Bennett, Wells school of fiction, or the influence of the Vote, or of the War -- that is, the influence of my mother. It is perfectly true that she obsessed me, in spite of the fact that she died when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four. (MB,94)

What aspect of Julia Stephen so obsessed her daughter? To judge by the writing of that daughter, it was her mother's diffusion -- of an unhealthy kind -- which lay at the heart of the obsession. In one sense, Julia was "the Angel in the House" of "Professions for Women"; in another, she was the victim of an unequal sexual union. In both cases she was an unhealthy influence on her daughter's life and a fascinating and somewhat inscrutable one on her writing.

2. Spalding, 62.

In her biographical work, Virginia Woolf: Sources of Madness and Art, Jean O. Love paraphrases several letters exchanged between Leslie and Julia during their courtship. Julia's side of the correspondence reveals a neurotic and singularly self-depreciating individual who returns again and again to the theme of her own inferiority while expressing her deep-seated fear of commitment.

Julia spoke of her sadness many times, warning Leslie not to think of marriage because she could not even contemplate it. She said that she continued to feel that death would be the greatest boon that could be given to her, and that, therefore, it would be wrong for her to take up a new life. It was not, she said, that she was especially unhappy or to be pitied, but that she was tired and cowardly about the future. Still later, after she had said that she loved Leslie, she said that she had had so many different kinds of pain and was left with so many terrible memories, that she felt bruised all over as if from actual blows, so that every touch hurt her. Again, she explained that so many things were always happening to her that she never go to be 'anything to herself'. She felt sheltered and protected by him, she said, but even when he was nearest, she had no courage for life. Yes, she loved him with all her heart, but it was a 'poor, dead heart'. If she could be close to him and feel him holding her, she would be content to die. Julia said also at one point that she felt as if she had some disease for which there was no cure, and that Leslie wanted to marry her in spite of it.

A kind of morbid guilt showed through Julia's melancholia, expressed in references to her deserving unhappiness and her selfishness at being melancholy. Her guilt was also present in her beliefs that Leslie would dislike the 'real' Julia if he knew her, and that she could only hurt people.<sup>3</sup>

The passage quoted above is, in many instances, almost a direct transcription of Julia's letters, as the numerous notations in Love's text indicate. The woman revealed in the letters possesses the same diffuse perception of reality as her daughter would later use with such effect in her novels.

3. Love, *Madness and Art*, 82-3.

She feels the pain of life as actual bruises, for example. She longs for shelter and protection, as her daughter would later, but she cannot live or love because her heart is "poor" and "dead". She has a morbid guilt which seems to arise from her fear of attempting life while in a deadened condition. Stephen's categorising of his wife as a "saint" was perhaps not entirely off base, since the woman of these letters was most definitely not "of this world". The conclusion to this tug-of-war about marriage is most revealingly described by Leslie Stephen himself in his Mausoleum Book:

She was sitting in her armchair by the fireplace --  
I can see her now! -- when suddenly she looked up  
and said 'I will be your wife and will do my best to  
be a good wife to you.'

All doubts vanished like a dream. She writes me ten days later from Freshwater, where she had gone to see her uncle Thoby, 'My darling one, I feel most commonplace and quiet. The only thing I can't quite believe is that we are not married. Perhaps when I see you, you will go a little further off. Just now we seem part of each other and I feel as if it were all such an old thing that I need neither talk nor think about you!' She had yielded absolutely when she once felt yielding to be right. (MBK, 57)

Julia had indeed yielded absolutely! She had surrendered, merging herself in Leslie until she became a part of him, so that she wished a little wistfully that when they met again he might "go a little further off". Immediately after her acceptance she ran away from him in what was perhaps a last-ditch attempt to be herself. But it did not work. In every novel Virginia Woolf wrote she attempted to answer the question, "Why not?"

Why could one not love another completely and retain one's own individuality? Well, perhaps one could, if one were a man. Leslie could. But Julia could not, and it is with Julia that Virginia was, in her own words, "obsessed". For Julia love, sex, and death are equalities for which the covering phrase is "surrender and merge". And of course Julia Stephen was a "model" Victorian lady living in an age which considered orgasm a male prerogative. Although this particular Victorian myth has been exploded in the twentieth century, when we view orgasm through Virginia Woolf's bifocals, we can see that it lies in the masculine range of her spectrum, as Mrs. Dalloway demonstrates.

Clarissa Dalloway's "death of the soul" occurs when she denies her feelings for Sally Seton, feelings which she associates with the purity of one perfect kiss rather than complete consummation. It is the passionate experience of sex which she refuses when she refuses Peter and accepts Richard, who will demand less and allow "a little licence, a little independence" (MD, 9). The connection with Virginia's mother becomes clear when we consider her first marriage with Herbert Duckworth in which their sexual union was so complete that there was no room for "a little licence, a little independence". We have no way of knowing, of course, whether Virginia's mother ever experienced orgasm (although we do know it would have broken the Victorian code of ethics for her

to do so) and her general diffuseness of perception leads me to believe that she may have shared her daughter's problem with the physical act of sex. Here is the heart of the matter. According to Virginia Woolf's concept of reality as expressed in her novels, orgasm (Jinny and Orlando) is life-giving and does not result in the self-destructive "surrender and merge" syndrome which destroys Rachel and which Mrs. Dalloway fears will destroy her; it results in a moment of supreme communication with one's partner, and perhaps even with some Cosmic All, with a momentary loss of self-awareness but no more permanent surrender of personhood.

Clarissa, however, as a diffuse person, is incapable of the sexual passion which would make her relationship with Peter an equal one; therefore she prefers the less demanding but essentially dead relationship with Richard. If we look at the Duckworth marriage as an example, we can see what would have happened to Clarissa with Peter. She would have been completely overwhelmed by his passion for her without being able to make an adequate response, and would have been forced to "surrender and merge" without ever being an active partner in the relationship. She would have been like Rachel being rolled over at the bottom of the sea, and Clarissa prefers to find life elsewhere -- in her relationships with women and in her creative parties -- rather than to lose herself altogether in this way.

To The Lighthouse explores the other side of woman's role in Victorian society as nurturer, caretaker, conciliator. Although the author finds much to admire in this side of womanhood, she also sees its self-destructive side:

Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at -- that light for example. And it would lift up on it some little phrase or other which had been lying in her mind like that -- 'Children don't forget, children don't forget' -- which she would repeat and begin adding to it, It will end, it will come, when suddenly she added, We are in the hands of the Lord.

But instantly she was annoyed with herself for saying that. Who had said it? not she; she had been trapped into saying something she did not mean. She looked up over her knitting and met the third stroke and it seemed to her like her own eyes meeting her own eyes, searching as she alone could search into her mind and her heart, purifying out of existence that lie, any lie. She praised herself in praising the light, without vanity, for she was stern, she was searching, she was beautiful like that light. It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to things, inanimate things; trees; streams; flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself. There rose, and she looked and looked with her needles suspended, there curled up off the floor of the mind, rose from the lake of one's being, a mist, a bride to meet her lover. (TTL, 61-2)

The end result of Mrs. Ramsay's self-sacrifice is narcissism and a feeling of helplessness expressed by her unconscious mantra: "We are in the hands of the Lord." No wonder she is upset with herself! Her inability to truly share her inmost being with her husband or family results in a



kind of masturbatory fantasy in which she becomes her own lover.

Mrs. Ramsay looks inward so far that she becomes a "wedge-shaped core of darkness" unable to relate, except on a superficial level, with others. And in Virginia's memories her mother was just such a "generalized; dispersed, omnipresent" being (MB,98). This diffusion may be a trick of the author's memory, but more likely it truly reflects the way in which Julia Stephen made her presence felt to a whole houseful of individuals who rarely had the opportunity of being alone with this busy, self-sacrificing madonna. Mrs. Ramsay, who is the reincarnation of Julia, assumes that everyone -- Lily and Augustus Carmichael as well as herself -- has unfathomed depths which they share with no one. But she is wrong, for Lily shares through her painting, Augustus through his poetry, and it is only when she too can share -- through her boeuf en daube -- that she finally comes truly alive in a "moment of being".

Mrs. Ramsay is a diffuse character when she makes herself one with the lighthouse, and this diffuseness is shown to be destructive as it was for Septimus and will be for Rhoda. But it can also lead to a vision -- the ruby of meaning gleaming behind the cotton wool of life. Here is the essential paradox in the work of Virginia Woolf. The opposite poles, male and female, which are both destructive in themselves, must be reconciled for life to have meaning. When they are reconciled androgyny results and life becomes an integrated whole.

Most critics see both Jacob's Room and The Waves as elegies for Virginia's brother Thoby Stephen.<sup>4</sup> Both books adopt primarily a diffuse perspective in which the merging of subject and object is a frequent occurrence. Jacob is represented as much by his room as by his physical presence, so that when he dies something of him is left behind -- at least the narrator hints that it is -- moving the curtains and making the arm-chair creak "though no one sits there"(JR,172). The narrator's diffuse perceptions are used here as a kind of negation of the fact of death, as Bernard's vision of the waves is used to negate the fact of his own approaching death. But Rhoda is the most diffuse character in all Virginia Woolf's fiction. Significantly, she dies by suicide.

Of all Mrs. Woolf's characters, Rhoda is most diffuse and most completely confluent with her surroundings. She is hardly localized in the spatial sense; she is mythic consciousness itself, ephemerally situated in the objects of her sensation or in those of her dreams....Even the literally intangible anchor of self to body is relinquished when she dies by suicide, throwing her body into the sea. In that fashion she escapes both the body and the nothingness of empty space.<sup>5</sup>

Rhoda's only sexual relationship was that which she attempted with Louis, the other outcast in the group; but the affair was a failure, and shortly after its demise she follows the example set unwittingly by Percival, and seeks wholeness in death, the square which is set upon the oblong, the

4. See esp. Mark Spilka, Virginia Woolf's Quarrel With Grieving (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press) 1980.

5. Love, Worlds in Consciousness, 80-81.

only symbol of order she is ever able to find in a chaotic universe.

The problem with the diffuse mode of perception is that it results in a blurring of the boundaries of being. Septimus experiences this blurring when he feels himself becoming a part of the tree in Regent's Park (MD,62), Clarissa when she imagines herself remaining "in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there"(MD,10) after her death, and Mrs. Ramsay when she becomes one with the lighthouse (TTL,61). Such a blurring is normal in infancy and early childhood, but it is "normally" a phenomenon which we "grow out of". Virginia Woolf, in her public and private writings, links this phenomenon with the female side of her spectrum to make a series of equations as follows: female = merging = suicide. The male side of the spectrum equates separateness with life and motion as opposed to the "eternal feminine" which is still. Sexual surrender is a prototype of existential surrender, and for this reason it is connected with all the other life and death questions. When the surrender is to a moment of wholeness, as it is for Jinny and Orlando, it is life-giving, like a "moment of being", making the participants feel integrated and more completely themselves. But when the surrender is of one person to another, rather than an equal and momentary surrender to the experience itself, it is equated with a loss of being which is suicidal. It was this type of surrender which Julia Duckworth made to Herbert.

Eternity has an ambivalent position in the writings of Virginia Woolf, both public and private. It can be the source of a beautiful moment of understanding, as it was for Mrs. Ramsay; a means of evading death, as it was for Bernard; or terrifying vacuity, as it became for Rhoda. It seems to have been all of these for Virginia herself:

Often down here I have entered into a sanctuary; a nunnery; had a religious retreat; of great agony once; & always some terror: so afraid one is of loneliness: of seeing to the bottom of the vessel. That is one of the experiences I have had here in some Augusts; & got then to a consciousness of what I call 'reality': a thing I see before me; something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky; beside which nothing matters; in which I shall rest & continue to exist. Reality I call it. And I fancy sometimes this is the most necessary thing to me: that which I seek. But who knows -- once one takes a pen and writes? How difficult not to go making 'reality' this & that, whereas it is one thing. Now perhaps this is my gift; this perhaps is what distinguishes me from other people; I think it may be rare to have so acute a sense of something like that -- but again, who knows? (D.V.W. III, Mon., 10 Sept., 1928)

The answer seems to be that human beings cannot stand too much reality. The masculine side of our nature needs individuality and separateness from the rest of creation whereas the feminine side longs to "rest" in the eternal, symbolized here by the downs and sky. The solution to the dilemma of human existence is androgyny. Time and again, Virginia Woolf's most androgynous characters turn out to be her most successful characters -- successful, that is, in the art of living. Her least successful characters -- those who die or kill themselves -- almost

always (except for Thoby-Jacob-Percival, a special case) lean towards the feminine pole of reality, while those who save themselves without understanding or compassion for others lean more towards the masculine pole. These "leanings" apply equally to male and female characters; Septimus, for example, is a male who dies because he has leaned too far in the feminine direction. In a very real sense, too many "moments of being" overpowered his slender defences, and drove his essentially diffuse nature over the brink of sanity. He crosses the line which divides reality from our perception of it. Virginia Woolf herself crossed that line several times during her lifetime when she suffered breakdowns, but she came back -- like Lazarus from his grave -- to tell us about it.

Bradshaw, Septimus's doctor, is perhaps the ultimate expression of the masculine pole. His worship of the goddesses Proportion and Conversion arises from his own supreme egotism which needs to make over the world in his own image and likeness. His sense of individuality is so extreme that he kills to preserve it. The hyper-masculine male is, therefore, a murderer, while the hyper-feminine female is a self-murderer, a suicide victim. On a national level, Virginia Woolf equated the Bradshaw syndrome with the extreme of patriarchy -- the fascist state -- and declared that the syndrome would lead to the mass murder which is war. And of course she was right.

By the time she came to write her last two novels Virginia Woolf had completely developed her concept of reality. Although she continued to develop new artistic techniques to the very last, her perspective, which we must now describe as the androgynous perspective, remains constant. She had also completed her mourning for her parents and brother, which had been the impulse behind much of her earlier work. Now she was ready to celebrate instead the death of the Victorian age and the possible birth of a new age of understanding. Though Victoria herself had died with the nineteenth century, the end of that era did not seem to come until the death of her son in 1910, that amazing year of the first post-impressionist exhibition, when "human character changed":

In life, one can see the change, if I may use a homely illustration, in the character of one's cook. The Victorian cook lived like a leviathan in the lower depths, formidable, silent, obscure, inscrutable; the Georgian cook is a creature of sunshine and fresh air; in and out of the drawing-room, now to borrow the Daily Herald, now to ask advice about a hat....Or consider the married life of the Carlyles and bewail the waste, the futility, for him and for her, of the horrible domestic tradition which made it seemly for a woman of genius to spend her time chasing beetles, scouring saucepans, instead of writing books. All human relations have shifted -- those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about the year 1910. ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", CD, 92)

Virginia Woolf wrote those words in 1924, but it was not until she came to write The Years that she was able to trace the ways in which "human character changed", and then she found it necessary to trace its development from the dark days of the Victorian patriarchy to a point in the 1930's at which North decides that he will try to "live differently".

The book begins with a death -- the long overdue and unlamented death of Rose Pargiter Sr., who seems to have been exhausted by the pressure and trials of a Victorian marriage, to the point where she has lost awareness of self:

'Where am I?' she cried. She was frightened and bewildered, as she often was on waking. She raised her hand. She seemed to appeal for help. 'Where am I?' she repeated. For a moment Delia was bewildered too. Where was she? (Y,20)

Rose Sr.'s situation is sad, but we feel with Delia that her mother's death will provide a release by which her children will be able to live their own lives; all of them, that is, except Eleanor, who must await her father's death before she can attain true independence.

The death of Edward VII in The Years coincides with a discussion by Sara and Maggie of woman's place in patriarchal society, a discussion which is interrupted by the sounds of a drunk being tossed out of a pub and staggering home to his wife and children. Sara is disgusted:

'In time to come,' she said, looking at her sister, 'people, looking into this room -- this cave, this little antre, scooped out of mud and dung, will hold hold their fingers to their noses' -- she held her fingers to her nose -- 'and say "pah! They stink!"'

She fell down into her chair.

Maggie looked at her....It was true, she thought; They were nasty little creatures driven by uncontrollable lusts. The night was full of roaring and cursing; of violence and unrest, also of beauty and joy....Footsteps tapped on the pavement, for people were still walking in the street. Far off a voice was crying hoarsely. Maggie leant out. The night was windy and warm.

'What's he crying?' she said.

The voice came nearer and nearer.

'Death?' she said.

'Death?' said Sara. They leant out. But they could not hear the rest of the sentence. Then a man who was wheeling a barrow along the street shouted up to them:

'The King's dead!' (Y, 145-7)

In an unpublished typescript version of The Years Sara makes her point more clear:

Our civilization, Maggie, is but the thickness of one green leaf on the top of all Cleopatra's Needle; what's to come....Here we are, following the procession through the desert, with nothing but a clump of trees on the horizon, and the spears of savages and hyenas howling; and now we are come to this rock; this formidable and craggy mountain; and rubbing our eyes and taking a look round, we wave our hands to the assembled company, wave our swords in the air, blow them a kiss and make off on a track of our own.<sup>6</sup>

Sara has an androgynous vision of herself with a masculine sword escape from the desert of "woman's place" to "a track of her own" which is same track North will travel when he is able to "live differently".

6. Susan Squier, "A Track of Our Own: Typescript Drafts of The Years Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant, ed. Jane Marcus (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press) 1983, 203-4.



In The Years Virginia Woolf places the blame for the distortions and lies which society foists upon us squarely where it belongs -- with patriarchal values and conventions. In her rejected novel-essay portion of the work, recently edited by Mitchell A. Leaska, she explains, for example, why Rose's sight of the exhibitionist by the post box was so traumatic:

Her first instinct, when Eleanor came in, was to turn away and hide herself. She felt that what had happened was not merely "naughty" but somehow wrong. ...Love, then, whether of the drawing room or of the street variety, affected the lives of the Pargiter sisters profoundly, not merely because it restricted them to certain quarters of London, and was perpetually impeding their freedom of movement, but also because it affected their minds -- telling lies undoubtedly affects the mind and distorts the relationship between the liar and the lied to, even if the lie is justified; each of them acquired an attitude, according to her temperament, a conception of the right attitude to adopt toward sex and the wrong attitude toward love, which was not natural but highly artificial.<sup>7</sup>

The link between sex and death, which was to a certain extent forced upon the consciousnesses of women by the values and conventions of patriarchal society, must be broken. In Between the Acts, primarily in the Giles-Isa relationship, Virginia Woolf does just that.

Isa is trapped in a marriage in which she feels all the guilt while Giles has all the fun, as she explains to William Dodge. On the other hand, she admits to sexual passion for another man, something

7. The Pargiters by Virginia Woolf, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (London: The Hogarth Press) 1978, 50 & 52.

which Mrs. Ramsay could never do. She also seems to have a more equal sexual relationship with Giles himself, one in which she can fight with him and love him as his partner rather than his inferior:

Left alone for the first time that day, they were silent. Alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night. (BTA, 158)

Giles and Isa are distinctly modern, as opposed to Victorian. We are told that Isa was the age of the century, thirty-nine. She will probably have an affair with Rupert Haines and it is even possible to conceive of her eventually divorcing Giles, even though he is the father of her children. Life is undoubtedly still unfair, particularly for women, but the movement towards androgyny has begun, sexual death has been killed (or at least severely wounded) and the battle for true equality is about to begin.

## CONCLUSION

Virginia Woolf's concept of reality is certainly a nebulous one, arising from the psychology of the woman herself rather than any "hard" analytical thought on the subject. "Moments of being", her private term for a very private experience, defies empirical analysis, and can be all too easily dismissed as merely a "sensation" she had that life was fuller at some moments than at others. But because she used such moments to develop "what I might call a philosophy" (MB,84) which informs all her literary output, they become more significant to the scholars who seek to understand the lifework.

"Moments of being" provided Virginia Woolf a glimpse of order; of a pattern behind the "cotton wool" of life. The most intriguing aspect of this pattern is the painful nature of much of it. "That power which for convenience and brevity we may call God" (CR II,43) is seldom just, and often terrifying, in her work.

I only know that many of these exceptional moments brought with them a peculiar horror and a physical collapse; they seemed dominant; myself passive.(MB,83)

Thus we see her protagonists, from Rachel Vinrace (who felt like "a fish at the bottom of the sea") to Eleanor Pargiter (who felt as if she were standing on the edge of a precipice) enduring a painful

sense of unreality at the very moment when the contact with "reality" is made.

At other times the "moment of being" appears comforting to the character experiencing it, but such comfort turns out invariably to be the prelude to a death, as in the case of Clarissa Dalloway sewing her dress while "the whole world seems to be saying 'that is all' more and more ponderously"(MD,37). Even Mrs. Hilberry's comforting talk of love, which puts her daughter in mind of waves, has a death-like knell to it, although in this case nobody actually dies. But a disturbing proportion of her major characters do die, and for them the "moment of being" seems an introduction to whatever is "on the other side".

Virginia Woolf seems to have been in some sense a dualist, though not a platonic dualist who splits reality neatly between body and soul. She saw two realities which were "visible" as if were, to two different sides of the human mind, the rational "male" side which saw surface reality, and the intuitive "female" side, which saw something deeper, at "the bottom of the vessel", as she metaphorically locates this reality in a diary entry. It seems to be that place on the "other side" that mystics talk about and poets write about and psychologists claim to find in the human unconscious.

Virginia Woolf's notion of androgyny arises, like her "moments of being", from her direct experience of life. She had a mind which could work with "granite" and "rainbow" alternately, as her critical and fictional writings indicate. It occurred to her, therefore, that most traditional sexual "labels" were crude distortions of real sexual distinctions (of which she believed there were few.) The "active" and "passive" labels which had been applied to "male" and "female" operations respectively, were the ones which bothered Virginia Woolf the most. She saw women's role as a classic double bind situation in which the label had given rise to expectations of passivity in women which were, in turn, confirmed by a society which consistently gave women passive roles to play. By the time of the Victorian age, even an active role in the sexual act was considered unseemly and unladylike. For that reason, a concern with orgasm amounting almost to an obsession can be detected beneath the poetic obscurities of Virginia Woolf's prose. Her most successful characters -- successful in the art of living -- are invariably those who have an active, and often promiscuous, sex life. Her intimacy with such real-life cavaliers as Vita Sackville-West, whose personality and active libido formed a strong contrast to Virginia's, was undoubtedly an influence on her insistence that active and androgynous sexuality was the healthiest kind of sexuality. But as I have tried to show, her

familiarity with her mother's two marriages and their results formed a profound and disturbing influence on Virginia's perception of sex and sexuality from the time of her earliest childhood beside which the attentions of her Duckworth half-brothers were only a minimal disturbance. And her own diffuse perceptions, the "possibly congenital inhibition" to which Quentin Bell refers, helped to make the physical side of love-making difficult. All of these influences came directly from Virginia Woolf's experiences, and her perceptions of these experiences, of life itself; they combined, I believe, to form in her mind the link which is everywhere apparent in her writings between sexual surrender and death.

Because so much of Virginia Woolf's concept of reality arises from her own private, and often distorted, perceptions of life, it must be asked whether or not her novelistic perspective gives a "true" rendering of life, and if not, what is the point of the novels? The answer to this question seems to be both yes and no. No, it is not a true rendering of life as it is perceived by most people. Most of humanity, it must be confessed, are not diffuse. Most of humanity, both male and female, experience orgasms and see themselves as separate from rocks and trees and from each other. On the other hand, much of life is the way Virginia Woolf perceives it -- if only the rest of us could see it that way. To state the matter a little less tautologically, it has become

apparent, even to physicists, the most scientific and empirical of the scientists and empiricists, that reality is not the way it appears from our perspective on a tiny planet in the middle of nowhere, cosmically speaking. Our way of perceiving reality results, in fact, in a distortion of the very reality we seek to understand. Einstein's theory of relativity has now been "proven" by experiments in space travel, and it is beginning to seem as if "God does mathematics", as Bertrand Russell explained to Virginia Woolf in 1921 (DVW II, Sat., 3 Dec., 1921). And it was the more contemporary nuclear physicist Oppenheimer who declared, in a speech he made in 1966, that

these two groups of thinking, the way of time and history, the way of eternity and timelessness, are both parts of man's efforts to comprehend the world in which he lives. Neither is comprehended in the other nor reducible to it...each supplementing the other, neither telling the whole story.

Virginia Woolf's vision of a pattern beneath the "cotton wool" of life seems like a vision of "the most exalted form of art" which Russell's mathematical God was creating as her mystical perspective sounds like an echo of Oppenheimer. On another level, her link between patriarchal values and their most extreme expression in the totalitarian state does not seem as outrageous anymore as it did to most conventional gentlemen (and many conventional ladies) in the thirties.

As a writer of fiction Virginia Woolf was most successful when she was able to control her <sup>novelist's</sup> perspective; when, to borrow her own analogy, her work was androgynous, blending the rational and mystical ways of looking at life. When she swung too far in one direction, as she did in The Waves (for personal reasons, as I have attempted to show) the results were un-lifelike; and when the techniques she used for creating her perspective were not homogeneous, as in Jacob's Room with its inconsistent narrator, the results are disjointed. But in her masterpieces, "books that is, where the vision is clear and order has been achieved" ("Robinson Crusoe", CR II, 44), she "inflicts" her perspective on us so severely that we see, through her bifocals, a painful and beautiful vision of life which has in it the truth and integrity of a great and disturbingly original artist.



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