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DUALISM IN THE NOVELS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

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DUALISM IN THE NOVELS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

by

Theodore Harakas

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## ABSTRACT

### DUALISM IN THE NOVELS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

By

Theodore Harakas

The purpose of this dissertation is to discuss Virginia Woolf's efforts in her novels to explore and express the implications of her dualistic understanding of reality, a dualism that results from what she understood as a seemingly unresolvable conflict between "the stern and philosophical self" and the "eager and dissatisfied self." She expresses the problem that results from this dualism, and the problem that is at the center of all of her fiction, in a diary entry: "The problem is the usual one--how to adjust the two worlds." My dissertation identifies the nature of the "adjustments" she achieved in The Voyage Out, Night and Day, Jacob's Room, Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, and The Waves, and establishes a basis for understanding that the most profound adjustment of the two worlds she achieved was not in The Waves, which most critics believe to be her most successful novel, but rather in To the Lighthouse, in which she not only explores and expresses the conflict, but also resolves it. My discussion of the novels, particularly of To the Lighthouse and The Waves, extends upon ideas developed by Stephen Pepper in The Basis of Criticism in the Arts and World Hypotheses. I conclude that Woolf's success in To the Lighthouse results from the fact that it is only in that novel that she accepts the limitations of what Pepper defines as the "contextualistic world hypothesis," and does not, as she did in The Waves, reach beyond the limitations of that categorical approach to reality.

#### DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Marybeth, and my daughter,  
Vivian.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the Faculty of the English Department at Michigan State University for their guidance and patience.

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## CHAPTER I; RETREAT FROM VISION IN THE WAVES

The matter that detains us now may seem,  
To many, neither dignified enough  
Nor arduous, yet will not be scorned by them,  
Who, looking inward, have observed the ties  
That bind the perishable hours of life  
Each to the other, and the curious props  
By which the world of memory and thought  
Exists and is sustained.

William Wordsworth, The Prelude,  
Bk. VII, lines 458-465.

While writing The Waves (1931), Virginia Woolf copies this passage into her diary and noted it as something she wanted to remember.<sup>1</sup> Her readers will understand readily why the lines interested her, for she is surely one who looked inward for the singleness of identity that

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<sup>1</sup>The Diary of Virginia Woolf, ed. by Anne Oliver Bell (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1980), August 22, 1929, vol. III, p. 247. Because several future references to the diary are to entries not yet published by Ms. Bell, all future references will be to A Writer's Diary, selected and edited by Leonard Woolf. Some entries, such as this one, do not appear in A Writer's Diary, but do appear in the already published work of Ms. Bell.

I will refer to the diary frequently in this dissertation for establishing Woolf's personal understanding of her techniques and themes. Leonard Woolf's comments about the importance of the diary for understanding Woolf's work draw attention to its significance: "In A Writer's Diary I published extracts from Virginia's diary which show her engrossed in the day-to-day work of writing these books. She uses these pages as Beethoven used his Notebooks to jot down an idea or partially work a theme to be used months or years later in a novel or a symphony. While writing a book, in the diary she communes with herself about it and its meaning or object, its scenes and characters. She reveals, more nakedly perhaps than any other writer has done, the exquisite pleasures and pains, the splendors and miseries, of artistic creation, the relation of the creator both to his creation and his characters and also to his critics and his public." Downhill All the Way: An Autobiography of the Years 1919 to 1939 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), p. 148.

Wordsworth asserts. Bernard, in a soliloquy given while awaiting the arrival of Percival, who is the symbol of the unity of identity that each of the characters in The Waves was in search of, voices both the need and the novel's understanding of the human capacity to fulfill the need: "I conceive myself called upon to provide, some winter's night, a meaning for all my observations--a line that runs from one to another, a summing up that completes." But he concludes the soliloquy with an understanding that precludes such a summing up: "There is no stability in this world. Who is to say what meaning there is to anything? Who is to foretell the flight of a word? It is a balloon that sails over tree-tops. To speak of knowledge is futile. All is experiment and adventure. We are forever mixing ourselves with unknown quantities. What is to come? I know not."<sup>2</sup>

The Waves is Woolf's most radical exploration of this conflict. Abstractly stated, the struggle recorded in the novel opposes each character's sense of the fragmentation and meaninglessness of existence in general with the need to affirm the existence of a unified selfhood that transcends this general truth. Almost without deviation, the formal soliloquies which comprise the novel address this topic explicitly. Although significantly concerned with the flux of images and thoughts in the minds of the characters, The Waves is neither written in stream-of-consciousness style, nor is the subject matter of the formal soliloquies the stream-of-consciousness of the characters. Instead, the thoughts of the characters are carefully pared to include only material pertinent to the question the novel asks: "I am conscious

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<sup>2</sup>Virginia Woolf, The Waves (London: The Hogarth Press, 1963), pp. 83-84.

of flux, of disorder; or annihilation and despair. If this is all, this is worthless,"<sup>3</sup> says Louis at one point, and Neville, at another, in response to an entreaty from Bernard to confront their common enemy, says, "Oppose ourselves to this illimitable chaos. . .this formless imbesility."<sup>4</sup> Because of the consistency of this focus, The Waves is the most purely philosophical novel Virginia Woolf wrote, and perhaps the most purely philosophical novel in English.

The title is indicative of the conflict that the novel tries to resolve. The relationship of the individual wave to the sea in The Waves is symbolic of the relationship between the individual man to the whole of existence. A conflict within the novel about the meaning of this symbolism provides an expression of the central conflict of the novel. At times, the waves are seen as meaningful entities, in which the individual wave, symbolic of individual life, is a metonymy for the sea, which is eternal and whole; at other times, each wave is seen to be limited and temporal, subject to forces that destroy its integrity and render its existence meaningless. Interpreters of the novel characteristically see the resolution of the conflict as an affirmation of being in which man achieves redemption from the pathos and terror of nothingness by recognizing ". . .that life's flux is precisely its unity."<sup>5</sup> "The individual life is a wave, and life itself is the sea; to look at oneself as only one wave is to perish when that single wave breaks, but to see oneself as an indivisible part of the sea, composed

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<sup>3</sup>The Waves, p. 67.

<sup>4</sup>The Waves, p. 160.

<sup>5</sup>James Hafley, The Glass Roof: Virginia Woolf as Novelist (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1963), p. 108.

of innumerable drops of water--as part of wave after wave--is to gain immortality."<sup>6</sup> N. C. Thakur, reading the novel through categories derived from eastern mysticism, concludes that the conflict is resolved in the recognition of life as spirit: "Immune from change, it is deathless. It only changes its form, it never dies. Like the breaking wave that, changing its shape, turns into its original form, the spirit, casting away the body that it wears, attains its pristine form and glory--the still point of the revolving wheel."<sup>7</sup> For Jean Guiguet, too, the resolution of the struggle is affirmative, a ". . . victory of order over chaos, of truth over the unknown, of Being over Nothingness."<sup>8</sup>

These conceptions of the meaning of The Waves and, by extension, of Woolf's writings as a whole, are highlighted by the critics' discussions of the concluding soliloquy of the novel. After a long and pessimistic meditation about the unfulfillment of his own life and of the lives of his friends, Bernard rejects the nihilism of his thoughts and reawakens to life:

Curse you then. However beat and done with it all I am, I must haul myself up, and find the particular coat that belongs to me; must push my arms into the sleeves; must muffle myself up against the night air and be off. I, I, I, tired as I am, spent as I am, and almost worn out with all this rubbing of my nose along the surfaces of things, even I, an elderly man who is getting rather heavy and dislikes exertion must take myself off and catch some last train.

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<sup>6</sup>Hafley, p. 112.

<sup>7</sup>N. C. Thakur, The Symbolism of Virginia Woolf (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 123.

<sup>8</sup>Jean Guiguet, Virginia Woolf and Her Works, trans. by Jean Stewart (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1965), pp. 294-5.



Again I see before me the usual street. The canopy of civilisation is burnt out. The sky is dark as polished whale-bone. But there is a kindling in the sky whether of lamplight or of dawn. There is a stir of some sort-sparrows on plane trees somewhere chirping. There is a sense of the break of day. I will not call it dawn. What is dawn in the city to an elderly man standing in the street looking up rather dizzily at the sky? Dawn is some sort of whitening of the sky; some sort of renewal. Another day; another Friday; another twentieth of March, January, or September. Another general awakening. The stars crawl back and are extinguished. The bars deepen themselves between the waves. The film of mist thickens on the fields. A redness gathers on the roses, even on the pale rose that hangs by the bedroom window. A bird chirps. Cottagers light their early candles. Yes, this is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again.

And in me too the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back. I am aware once more of a new desire, something rising beneath me like the proud horse whole rider first spurs and then pulls him back. What enemy do we now perceive advancing against us, you whom I ride now, as we stand pawing this stretch of pavement? It is death. Death is the enemy. It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man's, like Percival's, when he galloped in India. I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!

The waves broke on the shore.<sup>9</sup>

Thakur concludes that, "With this vision Bernard is able to fling himself unvanquished and unyielding against Death. For him, 'Death is swallowed up; victory is won.' He can say with the Apostle Paul, 'O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting?'"<sup>10</sup> But Thakur, like most of Woolf's critics, is too quick to identify Bernard's final understanding as Woolf's own resolution of the conflict, and consequently to see the statement as an expression or embodiment of the theme of *The Waves*, and as the culmination of Woolf's lifelong effort

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<sup>9</sup>*The Waves*, pp. 210-1.

<sup>10</sup>Thakur, p. 124.

to grasp and express a redemptive vision of life based upon the unity and permanence of the self. Wordsworth's ". . .ties/That bind the perishable hours of life/Each to the other. . .," his ". . .curious props/By which the world of memory and thought/Exists and is sustained . . .," are observed by Thakur as ". . .a spirit that can see but is not seen, that can know everything without being told anything, that is 'unconfined and capable of being everywhere on the verge of things and here too,' and that 'can change no more.' Immune from change, it is deathless."<sup>11</sup>

Bernard, however, is not a spokesman for Woolf even though he shares much with the author in his role as a novelist and, more importantly, in his sensibility. Aesthetic distance exists between the author and her character in a way that is analogous to the distance between James Joyce and Stephen Dedalus in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Both novels end with rhapsodic affirmations of the future that affirm life and aspiration in the face of destructive and paralyzing realizations. But readers of Ulysses know that Stephen's final words are not Joyce's resolution of the conflict between private awareness and public allegiance that is the substance of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, but his own; we shall likewise discover that Bernard's soliloquy is by no means meant to be understood as the resolution of the thematic conflict of The Waves. Joyce the ironist hears the self-asserting words of his youthful self with the same sense of detachment that characterizes his relationship to all his works. Woolf voices symbolically her resignation to the failure Bernard must ultimately confront: "The waves broke on the shore."

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<sup>11</sup>Thakur, p. 123.

This concluding image coheres with the tone of pathos and unfulfillment that pervades the novel. All of its seemingly triumphant moments are dissipated and repudiated by ensuing experience. Repeatedly, we see that intuitions of the self's unity and permanence, of the singleness of identity that the six figures search for, are, if not illusory, too fragile for man to sustain. Bernard's is a single mind, one of the six that encompass collectively the scope of Woolf's vision in The Waves. To read him as her chosen perspective from among six alternatives offered by the novel is to forget too much that is profound and valid in the others' responses to existence and to neglect the fact that much in her own life and thought suggests that she identified variously with each of the characters.<sup>12</sup> Of Woolf's critics only David Daiches reminds us of the continuing significance of the understandings of the other characters at the end of the novel: "Yet Bernard's summing up is not really a summing up, for he is simply one of the six, not a figure who is built up to include the other five. His conclusions are his own, neither the author's nor the other characters', and Rhoda the timid, Jinny the sensuous, Susan the domestic lover of earth; Louis with his middle-class intelligence and Neville, poetic and dependent--they all disappear without the pattern of their lives being finally interpreted or integrated."<sup>13</sup>

Bernard's limited role in the novel can best be understood by identifying Woolf's unique intentions in The Waves. During the early

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<sup>12</sup>"This morning I could have said what Rhoda said. 'This proves that the book is alive; because it has not crushed the thing I wanted to say, but allowed me to slip it in, without any compression or alteration,'" A Writer's Diary, February 20, 1930, p. 151.

<sup>13</sup>David Daiches, Virginia Woolf (1st rev. ed.; New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 19.

stages of writing, Woolf described her novel as an "abstract, mystical, eyeless book."<sup>14</sup> Although she conceived of the novel as in some sense autobiographical ("Autobiography, it might be called."<sup>15</sup>), she struggled with the problem of distance between herself and her characters. "But who is she? I am very anxious that she should have no name. I don't want a Lavinia or a Penelope: I want 'she.' But that becomes arty."<sup>16</sup> Four months later, after several unsatisfactory beginnings, we find her still struggling with the problem of distance: ". . .several problems cry out still to be solved. Who thinks it? And am I outside the thinker? One wants some device that is not a trick."<sup>17</sup> To resolve this problem Woolf eliminated the single mind who "thinks" the novel and developed instead a series of characters who collectively represent a single mind: "The Waves is, I think, resolving itself (I am at page 100) into a series of dramatic soliloquies. The thing is to keep them running homogeneously in and out, in the rhythm of the waves."<sup>18</sup> This structure is the reason she conceived of The Waves as "the most complex and difficult of all my books,"<sup>19</sup> for it presented her with the problem of depicting the totality of a single mind by representing all of its aspects as six characters who seem to have lives of their own. The Waves is autobiographical in the sense that none of the six characters

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<sup>14</sup> A Writer's Diary (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), Nov. 7, 1929, p. 134.

<sup>15</sup> A Writer's Diary, May 28, 1930, p. 139.

<sup>16</sup> A Writer's Diary, May 28, 1930, p. 139.

<sup>17</sup> A Writer's Diary, Sept. 25, 1930, p. 142.

<sup>18</sup> A Writer's Diary, Aug. 20, 1930, p. 153.

<sup>19</sup> A Writer's Diary, Feb. 20, 1930, p. 151.

have meaning except as they embody a distinct and significant aspect of the author's own dialogue with mutability and fragmentation. To the Lighthouse (1927), published four years before The Waves, had been Woolf's attempt to resolve the question of identity in relationship to the overpowering presences of her parents: The Waves asks the question of identity of the universe itself. The unique structure she devised to ask this question was the reason she was perplexed by the London Times reviewer who praised her characterizations in The Waves: "Odd that they (the Times) should praise my characters when I meant to have none."<sup>20</sup>

Ralph Freedman, in his seminal study of Woolf's narrative technique, draws our attention to the existence of a collective identity among the characters: "Through such a network of interlocking qualities, which branch out into the minutest details, a picture is created that portrays the six characters not as a social group but as a single organism--one symbol of a common humanity."<sup>21</sup> Later, in identifying this symbol of humanity as a single person, he implies the existence of a romantic microcosmic-macrocosmic relationship: ". . . memories overlap until a network, sometimes expressed as a composition of alternating soliloquies, emerge like the inner life of a single person."<sup>22</sup> We are reminded again of Woolf's interest in The Prelude, for implicit in the idea that the six characters can represent both the inner life of a single person and the whole of humanity is the fundamental romantic aspiration to obliterate the distinction between the particular and the universal.

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<sup>20</sup> A Writer's Diary, Oct. 5, 1931, p. 167.

<sup>21</sup> Ralph Freedman, The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Hermann Hesse, Andre Gide, and Virginia Woolf (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 252.

<sup>22</sup> Freedman, p. 253.

"To see the world in a grain of sand" was Blake's formula for redemption from Urizen's nightmare. Translated into the question of identity, redemption required the assertion of a transcendental ego that would encompass and give meaning to the labyrinth of detail that comprises the empirical ego. Percival serves as a symbol of this transcendental ego in The Waves. The moment of awareness that he centers is the only moment when the characters see themselves in command of time and change. The unity of their collective identity stands for them as a synecdoche for a unity in the universe that withstands the influence of changing circumstance, while at the same time enveloping all circumstance within itself:

'Now once more,' said Louis, 'as we are about to part, having paid our bill, the circle in our blood, broken so often, so sharply, for we are so different, closes in a ring. Something is made. Yes, as we rise and fidget, a little nervously, we pray, holding in our hands this common feeling, 'Do not move, do not let the swing-door cut to pieces the thing that we have made, that globe itself here, among these lights, these feelings, this litter of bread crumbs and people passing. Do not move, do not go. Hold it for ever.'

'Let us hold it for one moment,' said Jinny; 'love, hatred, by whatever name we call it, this globe whose walls are made of Percival, of youth and beauty, and something so deep sunk within us that we shall perhaps never make this moment out of one man again.'

'Forests and far countries on the other side of the world,' said Rhoda, 'are in it; seas and jungles; the howlings of jackals and moonlight falling upon some high peak where the eagle soars.'

'Happiness is in it,' said Neville, 'and the quiet of ordinary things. A table, a chair, a book with a paper-knife stuck between the pages. And the petal falling from the rose, and the light flickering as we sit silent, or, perhaps, bethinking us of some trifle, suddenly speak.'

'Week-days are in it,' said Susan, 'Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday; the horses going up to the fields, and the horses returning; the rooks rising and falling, and catching the elm-trees in their net, whether it is April, whether it is November.'

'What is to come is in it,' said Bernard. 'That is the last drop and the brightest that we let fall like

Some supernal quicksilver into the swelling and splendid moment created by us from Percival. What is to come? I ask, brushing the crumbs from my waistcoat, what is outside? We have proved, sitting eating, sitting talking, that we can add to the treasury of moments. We are not slaves bound to suffer incessantly unrecorded petty blows on our bent backs. We are not sheep either, following a master. We are creators. We too have made something that will join the innumerable congregations of past time. We too, as we put on our hats and push open the door, stride not into chaos, but into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illumined and everlasting road.<sup>23</sup>

The question that the characters in The Waves ask about this moment of collective awareness is quintessentially romantic: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream?"

Nothing less than the verification of this moment as a vision of an unchanging and all encompassing principle of existence could provide a basis for the unity of identity for which each character searches. Bernard, while awaiting the others' arrival at the restaurant, is explicit in defining this function for Percival: "He rides on; the multitude cluster round him, regarding him as if he were--what indeed he is--a God."<sup>24</sup> But "the line that runs from one to another," the "summing up that completes" which each of the characters believed he experienced at the restaurant is erased by experience. The sense of a unified identity is destroyed. The six aspects of the novel's collective mind which for a moment seemed to cohere separate again and are never reassembled: "The flower," said Bernard, "the red carnation that stood in the vase on the table of the restaurant when we dined together with

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<sup>23</sup>The Waves, pp. 104-5.

<sup>24</sup>The Waves, p. 92.

Percival is become a six-sided flower; made up of six lives."<sup>25</sup> The ephemeralness of their momentary triumph over fragmentation and mutability is what Woolf emphasizes in The Waves rather than the enduring and redemptive value of what they achieved at the restaurant. The one question on all of their minds in the last half of the novel is the question asked by Frost's oven bird: "what to make of a diminished thing?" No positive answer is achieved.

The importance of this failure to sustain the sense of unified identity achieved at the restaurant does not seem to be recognized by critics who see the final meaning of The Waves as affirmative. As noted earlier, the standard interpretation of the novel is that it finally affirms a process philosophy instead of a philosophy based upon an unchanging absolute. Hafley states this understanding most explicitly: "This uniformity of style in the soliloquies has several functions, one of the most important of which is that it emphasizes and extends the book's statement that the very unity found beneath the diversity is the essence of diversity itself--that life's flux is precisely its unity."<sup>26</sup> That such is the substance of Bernard's final awareness is not disputed; but that it provides or was intended to provide a redemptive resolution to the dilemma probed by the novel cannot be accepted. Hafley and those in agreement with him ask us to see the answer to the question the novel asks as being, ironically, the question itself. But the conclusion that "Life's flux is precisely its unity," can be easily paraphrased into a rather commonplace wisdom without altering its meaning: "The only

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<sup>25</sup> The Waves, p. 162.

<sup>26</sup> Hafley, p. 101.



permanence in life is change itself." For Virginia Woolf, such an awareness is not the end of inquiry into life's meaning, but the beginning.

In "Street Haunting: A London Adventure," an impressionistic essay written within the year that Woolf finished The Waves, Woolf provides a clear statement of the theme of this novel; and of the basic problem that she encounters in all of her work.

Yet it is Nature's folly, not ours. When she set about her chief masterpiece, the making of man, she should have thought of one thing only. Instead, turning her head, looking over her shoulder, into each one of us she let creep instincts and desires which are utterly at variance with his main being, so that we are streaked, variegated, all of a mixture; the colours have run. Is the true self this which stands on the pavement in January, or that which bends over the balcony in June? Am I here, or am I there? Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves. Circumstances compel unity; for convenience sake a man must be whole.<sup>27</sup>

This dilemma is the dilemma of The Waves. Man cannot finally place himself in his universe; he cannot know the truth about his own existence. Yet something in that state of being that he cannot know demands no less than this final knowledge. When she began The Waves Woolf wrote in her diary: "So the days pass and I search for an unwavering certitude: ask myself sometimes whether one is not hypnotized, as a child by a silver globe, by life; and whether this is living. . . .I should like to take the globe in my hands and feel it quietly, smooth, heavy, and so hold it, day after day."<sup>28</sup> This is the "globe whose walls are made of Percival,"

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<sup>27</sup> Collected Essays (4 vols; New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), II, 161.

<sup>28</sup> A Writer's Diary, Nov. 28, 1928, p. 135.

that Jinny speaks of at the restaurant. It symbolizes a reality that is "One thing," immutable and unchanging, and that is "something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky,"<sup>29</sup> and, by extension, in human identity. Bernard's rhapsodic assertion at the end of The Waves is Woolf's acknowledgment of the persistence of this need, rather than an indication that it can be fulfilled. His battle with death will take him again on the search for an unwavering identity, "Which having been must ever be."<sup>30</sup> Implicit in that imperative, and in the failure he must again encounter, is the theme of The Waves.

The theme of The Waves, then, is that man cannot know what he needs to know, and that he cannot accept this limitation. "Our need mocks our gear."<sup>31</sup> Reality is too complex to be resolved into a stilled awareness of an absolute that gives redemptive meaning to life. We will not find the "still point in the revolving wheel" for which our nature compels us to seek because our modes of knowing, which lead us to an

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<sup>29</sup>"Often down here I have entered a sanctuary; a nunnery; had a religious retreat; of great agony once, and 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 August; and 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 and continue to exist. Reality I call it. 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 and 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? I would like to express it, too." A Writer's Diary, Sept. 10, 1928, p. 132.

<sup>30</sup>William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," line 184.

<sup>31</sup>Adrienne Rich, "Double Monologue," Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1956), p. 34.

unacceptable conclusion, are inadequate to the task: we are "Nature's folly." At times, Woolf resigned herself to this reality:

But, I thought, there is always some sediment of irritation when the moment is as beautiful as it is now. The psychologists must explain; one looks up, one is overcome by beauty extravagantly greater than one could expect--there are now pink clouds over Battle; the fields are mottled, marbled--one's perceptions blow out rapidly like air balls expended by some rush of air, and then, when all seems blown to its fullest and truest, with beauty and beauty and beauty, a pin pricks; it collapses. But what is the pin? So far as I could tell, the pin had something to do with one's own impotency. I cannot hold this--I cannot express this--I am overcome by it--I am mastered. Somewhere in that region one's discontent lay; and it was allied with the idea that one's nature demands mastery over all that it receives; and mastery here meant the power to convey what one saw now over Sussex so that another person could share it. And further, there was another prick in the pin: one was wasting one's chance; for beauty spread out at one's own right hand, at one's left; at one's back too; it was escaping all the time; one could only offer a thimble to a torrent that could fill baths, lakes.

But relinquish, I said (it is well known how, in circumstances like these the self splits up and one self is eager and dissatisfied and the other stern and philosophical), relinquish these impossible aspirations; be content with the view in front of us, and believe me when I tell you that it is best to sit and soak; to be passive; to accept; and do not bother because nature has given you six little pocket knives with which to carve up the body of a whale.<sup>32</sup>

But the resignation she advises in this passage is not the final advice implicit in her writings: "One's nature demands mastery over all that it receives." The "eager and dissatisfied" self cannot finally accept the conclusions of the "stern and philosophical" self. While speculating in her diary about the conclusion of The Waves, Woolf

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<sup>32</sup>"Evening Over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car," Collected Essays, II, 290-91.

tells us unequivocally that the conflict itself is the novel's theme: "It occurred to me last night while listening to a Beethoven quartet that I would merge all of the interjected passages into Bernard's final speech and end with the words O solitude: thus making him absorb all those scenes and having no further break. This is to show that the theme effort, effort, dominates: not the waves: and personality: and defiance: [my italics]." <sup>33</sup> Thus, Bernard's self-assertion does not represent as Professor Guiget says, a "triumph of Being over Nothingness." Rather, it is for Woolf only the affirmation of the will to being in the face of the nothingness indicated by evidence of experience.

This sense of meaninglessness is grounded in a skepticism that is evidenced throughout Woolf's career: ". . .my temperament, I think, is to be very little persuaded of the truth of anything." <sup>34</sup> Her "stern, philosophical" self characteristically rejects all redemptive understandings of existence: "I shall make myself face the fact that there is nothing--nothing for any of us. Work, reading, writing are all disguises; and relations with people. Yes, even having children would be useless." <sup>35</sup> Such nihilistic statements occur too frequently in her diaries and novels to be neglected in the effort to understand her vision of life. They, together with the recurrent moments of vision

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<sup>33</sup> A Writer's Diary, Dec. 22, 1930, p. 156. The understanding of the symbolic meaning of the waves suggested by this statement and many others in the diary belies the likelihood of the waves functioning as affirmative symbols at the end of the novel as is suggested by Thakur and Hafley.

<sup>34</sup> A Writer's Diary, Nov. 7, 1928, p. 134.

<sup>35</sup> A Writer's Diary, June 23, 1929, p. 140.

that are the products of her "eager and dissatisfied self" are for her the verities of existence, verities which point to a duality in existence that man must understand and confront. "The problem," she says in a diary entry that defines the central problem in all of her novels, "is the usual one: how to adjust the two worlds. It is no good getting violently excited: one must combine."<sup>36</sup>

My purpose will be to discuss Virginia Woolf's efforts to achieve an "adjustment" of these worlds that does, unlike The Waves, provide a redemptive vision of human existence. My contention is that, in The Waves, Woolf retreats from the more adequate solution she had already achieved in To the Lighthouse, a novel which offers a redemptive vision that incorporates the persistent verities of her understanding of life. What distinguishes the "adjustment" expressed in The Waves, from the "adjustment" expressed in To the Lighthouse is what distinguishes fruitless but necessary effort from accomplishment. To the Lighthouse, I believe, is the only novel Woolf wrote in which the conflict between the "eager and dissatisfied self" and the "stern and philosophical self" is not only acknowledged, but transcended. Since this need to achieve a redemptive vision of life is the principal motivation of all of her central characters, and her own stated motivation for her efforts as a novelist, I believe that To the Lighthouse and not The Waves should be considered to be the triumph of her art. My discussion will focus on three issues: why she fails, in The Waves, to extend upon the redemptive vision achieved in To the Lighthouse, how her vision develops through the four novels that

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<sup>36</sup> A Writer's Diary, February 18, 1934, p. 202.

precede To the Lighthouse, and what the nature of the redemptive vision expressed in To the Lighthouse is. The discussion of the first of these issues will conclude this chapter, for understanding the reasons for her retreat from vision in The Waves provides us with essential categories for understanding Woolf's efforts and accomplishments in the early novels and in To the Lighthouse.

Shortly after completing To the Lighthouse, Woolf remarks in her diary about what she considered to be the success of the novel and then points ahead, beyond Orlando (1928), to what she will attempt in

The Waves:

My present opinion is that it is easily the best of my books: fuller than J's R and less spasmodic, occupied with more things than Mrs. D. and not complicated with all the desperate accompaniment of madness. It is freer and subtler, I think. Yet I have no idea of any other to follow it: which may mean that I have made my method perfect and it will now stay like this and serve whatever use I wish to put it to. Before, some development of method brought fresh subjects to view, because I saw a chance of being able to say them. Yet I am now and then haunted by some semi-mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall be told on one occasion; and time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of past. One incident--say the fall of a flower shall contain it. My theory being that the actual event practically does not exist--nor time either. But I don't want to force this. . . .<sup>37</sup>

The method she finally adopts for The Waves is, of course, more different than like the method of To the Lighthouse. With the exception of the "Time Passes" interlude, To the Lighthouse is written in the stream-of-consciousness style that dominated the experimental fiction of the early twentieth century, a style that had its first remarkable success in the works of Marcel Proust and its principal development in

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<sup>37</sup>A Writer's Diary, November 23, 1926, pp. 103-4.

English in the works of Joyce, Faulkner, Wolfe, Dos Passos, and Virginia Woolf. It was a style admirably suited for what we can define retrospectively as a common understanding of the human condition shared by these writers, namely, that if an answer to the dispiriting implications of the mechanistic theories of the Enlightenment was to be found, it would be found within the individual consciousness of man through the verification of the belief that in the experience of life as a mental quality man can discover something in the human condition that is exempt from the laws of the empirically observed world. Proust, for example, guided by the writings of Henri Bergson, tells us in A Remembrance of Things Past that "A single minute released from the chronological order of time has recreated in us a human being similarly released."<sup>38</sup> Freedman acknowledges the prevalence of this understanding among the experimental writers of the early twentieth century, and also the relationship between these writers and the writers of the romantic movement, when he tells us that "The prevailing view in the romantic and symbolist traditions usually presupposed that experience was primarily a mental quality and that the 'mind' reflects a reality which is obscured by the physical world."<sup>39</sup>

Freedman's linking of romanticism and symbolism, though valid in terms of the issue he is discussing, is to some extent misleading, and it is in understanding a major philosophical difference between the two traditions that we can come to an understanding of the difference

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<sup>38</sup> Marcel Proust, Remembrance of Things Past (New York: Random House, 1934), vol. II, p. 996.

<sup>39</sup> Freedman, p. 267.

between Woolf's vision in To the Lighthouse and her vision in The Waves. My contention is that Woolf, in The Waves, did not continue with the method that had served to capture and express the vision of life she had been working towards in all of her earlier novels because she could no longer be satisfied with the limitations of that vision. The vision in The Waves represents a retreat from the satisfactory resolution of the conflict between the "two worlds" that she achieved in To the Lighthouse, a resolution grounded in the ideas behind the symbolist movement, and sought instead to express the resolution in romantic terms. The key to understanding this retreat is her first comment, quoted above, about what she hoped to achieve in The Waves--the "obliteration" of time.

To understand the pertinent difference between the two traditions, we must identify the philosophical hypotheses that lie behind them; hypotheses that are most markedly different in regards to the subject of time. Stephen Pepper, in World Hypotheses and in The Basis of Criticism in the Arts, provides us with categorical understandings that are useful in identifying these differences. Pepper identifies four major "world hypotheses" in the history of philosophy which he labels as "formism," "mechanism," "contextualism," and "organicism." His discussions of the differences between organicism and contextualism will be useful in discussing the differences between the vision of To the Lighthouse and The Waves for it is my contention that Woolf, by nature a contextualist and a symbolist, retreated from the adequate expression of a redemptive vision based on the ideas of contextualism in To the Lighthouse, and sought in The Waves to tie the human search for redemptive meaning to organicism, and therefore, romantic ideas.



Contextualism and organicism, says Pepper, though related to each other in that both oppose the analytical epistemology of formism and mechanism in their common assertion that a synthetic truth, verifiable only through subjective experience rather than through logic or empirical observation, differ from each other in their respective understandings of the implications of this truth.<sup>40</sup> For the organicist, says Pepper, ". . . Since the absolute is implicit in all fragments, and in the absolute all contradictions and evidences of fragmentariness are transcended, and in the very nature of the absolute no facts whatever are left out, then in absolute fact there are no fragments."<sup>41</sup> He continues by saying that "The issue (between the contextualist and the organicist) comes to a head in the doctrine of time."<sup>42</sup> Time, for the organicist, is finally understood to be unreal: ". . . we may be assured that in the absolute there is no problem of time, and that all things are organic, and that all things are saved and in their proper places. Since the absolute is the absolute truth, and time and change cannot in the absolute be true, time and change are not true, not real, not facts."<sup>43</sup> It is certainly the need to affirm a similar understanding of the unreality of time that led Woolf to anticipate writing a novel in which "time shall be utterly obliterated" and when we look again at

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<sup>40</sup>" . . . it is tempting to regard these two theories as species of the same theory, one being dispersive and the other integrative. . . . But the insistence on integration which is characteristic of organicism makes so great a difference that it is wiser to consider them as two theories." World Hypotheses, p. 280.

<sup>41</sup>World Hypotheses, pp. 307-8.

<sup>42</sup>World Hypotheses, p. 308.

<sup>43</sup>World Hypotheses, p. 313.

the claims made by the characters at the restaurant about the nature of the vision they are experiencing together, we see that this need is what governed the actual composition of the novel. Their moment of vision is characterized by the assertion that all "fragments" are included in the absolute truth they are experiencing; the inability to sustain belief in the redemptive power of this vision is the focus of the last half of the novel. The resolution of the conflict between the two selves offered and later denied in The Waves is achieved by momentarily denying the reality of the world as seen and understood by the "stern and philosophical self," and in so doing, achieving a vision of ultimate reality in which time is obliterated. It is in man's need to affirm the validity of such a truth, and his inability to sustain the belief, that we find the theme of The Waves.

Contextualism, says Pepper, differs from organicism and the other world hypotheses in that it does not depend upon the assertion of an all-encompassing absolute which gives meaning to the particulars of existence. Its ontology is "horizontal" rather than "vertical" in that the experience of truth is the experience of a truth implicit in the immediate context of experience rather than the experience of a truth that reveals an all-encompassing absolute;

Contextualism is accordingly sometimes said to have a horizontal cosmology in contrast to the other views, which have a vertical cosmology. There is no top or bottom to the contextualistic world. In formism or mechanism or organicism one has only to analyze in certain specific ways and one is bound, so it is believed, ultimately to get to the bottom or the top of things. Contextualism justifies no such faith. There is no cosmological mode of analysis that guarantees the whole truth or the arrival at the ultimate nature of things. On the other hand, one does not need to hunt for a distant cosmological truth, since every present event gives it as fully

as it can be given. All one has to do to get at the sort of thing the world is, is to realize, intuit, get the quality of whatever happens to be going on.<sup>44</sup>

Time, for the contextualist, exists in two modes, schematic and "actual," or what Bergson calls "duration." To experience the "quality" of any context, we must experience it within "duration," but the truth that results from this experience does not repudiate the reality of schematic time. Schematic time is simply irrelevant to that truth. "The great function of schematic time," says the contextualist, "is to order. . . nonactual events. But actual time is the forward-and-backward spread of the quality of event."<sup>45</sup> In my discussion of To the Lighthouse, I will show that Woolf's treatment of time in that novel differs from the treatment of time in The Waves in that it reflects the understanding of contextualism rather than of organicism. It is my contention that the dualism of the contextualistic world hypothesis is in accord with the persistent verities of her own understanding of life, and that because of this, the redemptive vision that she expressed in To the Lighthouse, a vision that acknowledged these verities, was the climactic event in her lifelong struggle to "adjust the two worlds." Woolf had "perfected her method" in To the Lighthouse because she had perfected her vision. The radical technical innovations of The Waves, I believe, are the result of her need to affirm a vision of life that she was by intellectual predisposition unable to affirm.

Why Woolf moved in this direction in the writing of The Waves is

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<sup>44</sup> World Hypotheses, p. 238.

<sup>45</sup> World Hypotheses, p. 242.



difficult to understand, for in doing so she resigned herself to acknowledging the inadequacy of her visions of synthetic truth to provide redemptive meaning to life, for the later novels reveal that she never again restates the vision that characterizes To the Lighthouse. Pepper notes that the contextualist philosopher tends to try to reach beyond the defined limitations of his understanding of life and that this tendency often undermines the integrity of the vision he has achieved; "It (contextualism) is constantly on the verge of falling back upon underlying mechanistic structures, or of resolving into the overarching implicit integrations of organicism."<sup>46</sup> Perhaps something in accord with this tendency is what led Woolf to want to write a novel in which time was "obliterated," and in so doing, she left behind the achievement of a redemptive vision that acknowledges the dualistic world view that is essential to contextualism and consistently central to her own perception of life.

That this dualism is a constant in her perception of life will become clear in my discussions of the five novels that precede the writing of The Waves, but I would like to conclude this introduction by recalling a comment that Woolf made about the function of the novelist in the twentieth century, a function that she believed the novelist would assume from the writers of lyric poetry:

. . .our age is rich in lyric poetry; no age perhaps has been richer. But for our generation and the generation that is coming the lyric cry of ecstasy or despair, which is so intense, and limited, is not enough. The mind is full of monstrous, hybrid, unmanageable emotions. The age of the earth is 3,000,000,000 years; that human life lasts but a

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<sup>46</sup>World Hypotheses, p. 234.

second; that the capacity of the human mind is nevertheless boundless; that life is infinitely beautiful yet repulsive; that one's fellow creatures are adorable yet disgusting; that science and religion have between them destroyed belief; that all bonds of union seem broken, yet some control must exist--it is in this atmosphere of doubt and conflict that writers now have to create, and the fine fabric of a lyric is no more fitted to contain this point of view than a rose leaf to envelop the rugged immensity of a rock.<sup>47</sup>

There can be no clearer statement of the necessity that the twentieth-century artist acknowledge and accept the dispiriting and recalcitrant facts of existence in his effort to achieve a redemptive vision of life. To say, as Woolf did in stating her intentions for The Waves, that time can be "obliterated" is to say that the knowledge that the earth is 3,000,000,000 years old is finally irrelevant to our understanding of the human condition. It is the need to achieve a vision that incorporates such truths, rather than one that denies their reality, that is the real soul of Woolf's art, for, as she says later in the same essay, "In the modern mind, beauty is accompanied not by its shadow (as in a Keats Ode) but by its opposite."<sup>48</sup> Woolf's intentions in writing The Waves are a digression from this understanding, while her intentions and achievement in To the Lighthouse are based directly upon it.

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<sup>47</sup>"The Narrow Bridge of Art," Collected Essays, vol. II, pp. 218-9.

<sup>48</sup>"The Narrow Bridge of Art," p. 219.



## CHAPTER II: THE EARLY NOVELS; DUALISM DEFINED

The Voyage Out (1915) and Night and Day (1919) are usually discussed only as preludes to Virginia Woolf's important work since they are written in the realistic mode which she repudiated after their publication. One early critic went so far as to suggest that these early novels were written to demonstrate her ability to write conventionally before she turned to the innovative writing that characterizes her later fiction.<sup>1</sup> Bernard Blackstone's comments about Woolf's abrupt shift in technique to the stream-of-consciousness, or what Ralph Freedman calls the "lyrical" novel, serve to define the standard view of the significance of The Voyage Out and Night and Day in Woolf's canon of writings:

She is trying [in the later novels] to find a form and a style adequate to convey her individual vision of life; and not only of life on the objective plane, but also that 'taste of eternity' which keeps breaking through at odd moments and seems to give her vision all its value. To convey that taste certain barriers of prose fiction have to be broken down; that is now obvious to her. The current form of the novel, in which she has been working up to now, will not do. She was hampered by the convention of an intricate continuous plot; by set descriptions of people and scenes from without; by the necessity to provide link passages. But when she examined the technique of poetry, she found that these mechanical devices were not essential; verse could achieve an economy and a directness which were lacking in prose. Moreover, by rapid transitions, by allusions and imagery, poetry could give precisely that complexity of impressions, that sense of the eternal glowing through the momentary,

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<sup>1</sup> Winifred Holtby, Virginia Woolf (London: Wisehart, 1932), pp. 60-61, passim.



which was the essence of her experience. She was interested more in the life of the mind--in sensations, thoughts, feelings, intuitions--than in the life of surface action,<sup>2</sup>

Blackstone is right in explaining that Woolf's preoccupation with achieving a 'taste of eternity' led her away from the depiction of social interaction to the depiction of the "semi-transparent envelope" of private consciousness. But he, like other critics, is mistaken in assuming that no remarkable change in vision and theme accompanied and perhaps precipitated this change.

These early novels reflect a distinct and important stage in the evolution of Woolf's vision of life. Like the later novels, they presuppose a duality between the phenomenal world and the world of the spirit, and this duality is the major concern of all of her central characters. For Woolf, the phenomenal world, which includes individual personality, social life, history, and nature itself, is constantly at odds with the need to discover an infinite and eternal spirit which resides in all things and which subsumes all distinct and temporal phenomena within its coherence and infinitude. In the later novels, this struggle for spiritual redemption is invariably a private affair, remote from contact with others, secluded in the recesses of consciousness. The principal characters in The Voyage Out and Night and Day differ from the characters in the later novels in that they do not keep to themselves their struggles to achieve redemption; both novels explore the possibility of redemption through shared awareness in romantic love. Never again after these works will Woolf ask her central characters to share their most profound awarenesses

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard Blackstone, Virginia Woolf: A Commentary (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949), pp. 47-8.



with another, nor will the primary value of awareness be contingent upon the possibility of this sharing. In the later novels, Woolf retreats from this attempt, and in retreating, repudiates its meaningfulness,

The shift in technique and form which begins in the writing of Jacob's Room and culminates in The Waves corresponds with this fundamental change in Woolf's vision. The movement inward in the later novels reflects not only Woolf's growing sense that our deepest perceptions cannot be shared, but that the worlds of action and thought are apparently irreconcilable. Even in To the Lighthouse, where her two focal characters each experience in epiphanic moments a synthesis of action and thought that resolves the conflict between the "two worlds," the only communication implied is unspoken and figurative: for example, when Lily "communicates" with Mr. Ramsey in her moment of vision, he is across the bay and she has said nothing. The depiction of surface reality in the two early novels is, then, consistent with the need to make manifest the awarenesses of private vision in the world of action. Woolf's later entreaty to the novelist that there should be "no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style,"<sup>3</sup> reflects not only a change in her theory of fiction, but also a change in her vision of life. In The Voyage Out and Night and Day, surface action is not a dispensable frame for an essential meaning which manifests itself solely as a private state of mind. Rather, it is implicated in the meaning of these novels in that they concern the attempts of individuals to use

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<sup>3</sup>Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," Collected Essays, II, 106.

their achieved awarenesses to influence the courses of their lives. Understanding this stage in Woolf's development is important because in it we can see the first of a series of steps which led her to the writing of a novel in which no one exists but the single individual in search of personal integration, and in which the relationships depicted are the intrapersonal relationships among the dominant aspects of that individual's identity.

### The Voyage Out

A synopsis of the main action in The Voyage Out reveals that inquiry into the relationship between love and death is the source of the novel's theme. Ridley Ambrose, a scholar, and his wife, Helen, are embarking on a sea voyage to an unnamed seacoast town in Brazil where they have been offered the use of his villa by Helen's wealthy brother. At the outset, it is Helen who engages our interest because Woolf is quick to identify her as one of those dissatisfied selves who are always at the center of his fiction. The trip is anticipated as a working vacation by Ridley; for Helen, the voyage, the relief from the normal patterns of life, will serve as an opportunity for self-analysis and self-discovery. On board already is Rachel Vinrace, Helen's niece, who at twenty-four is still living a sheltered life under the direction of her father, the ship's captain. Rachel is characterized as a naive, but sensitive and inquisitive girl, who because of these qualities is able to establish rapport with Helen. It is Rachel who will be the participant in the main events of the novel, and the attempt to understand the nature and value of the love she finds, and the implications of her early death will be the basis

of the novel's meaning. As the novel proceeds, Helen will become less and less a part of the depicted action, but her presence will be felt throughout in that the needs and beliefs which characterize her early speculations will be the context for understanding the events which occur.

The first overtly significant action of the voyage occurs when Richard and Clarissa Dalloway come aboard for passage between two European ports, Richard, domineering and self-asserting, fascinates the innocent Rachel when he surrounds her with attention. Helen, disturbed by Rachel's susceptibility to Richard's performance, counsels her and later invites her to stay with her at the villa while her father continues his business voyage up the Amazon River. While with the Ambroses, Rachel meets two friends, Terence Hewett, a would-be novelist, and St. John Hirst, a brilliant young man who is undecided between a future as an Oxford don or as a member of Parliament. A triangle begins to develop that is quickly resolved in favor of the aesthetically-oriented Terence. The couple decide to marry. From this point until Rachel's death a short time later, the couple establish a contrast between the elevating love they share and what they, and presumably Woolf, consider to be the meaningless surface of ordinary existence. They see their love as a participation in a spiritual reality that redeems their lives, and it is clear that despite her occasional patronizing of their unguarded innocence, Woolf takes them seriously.

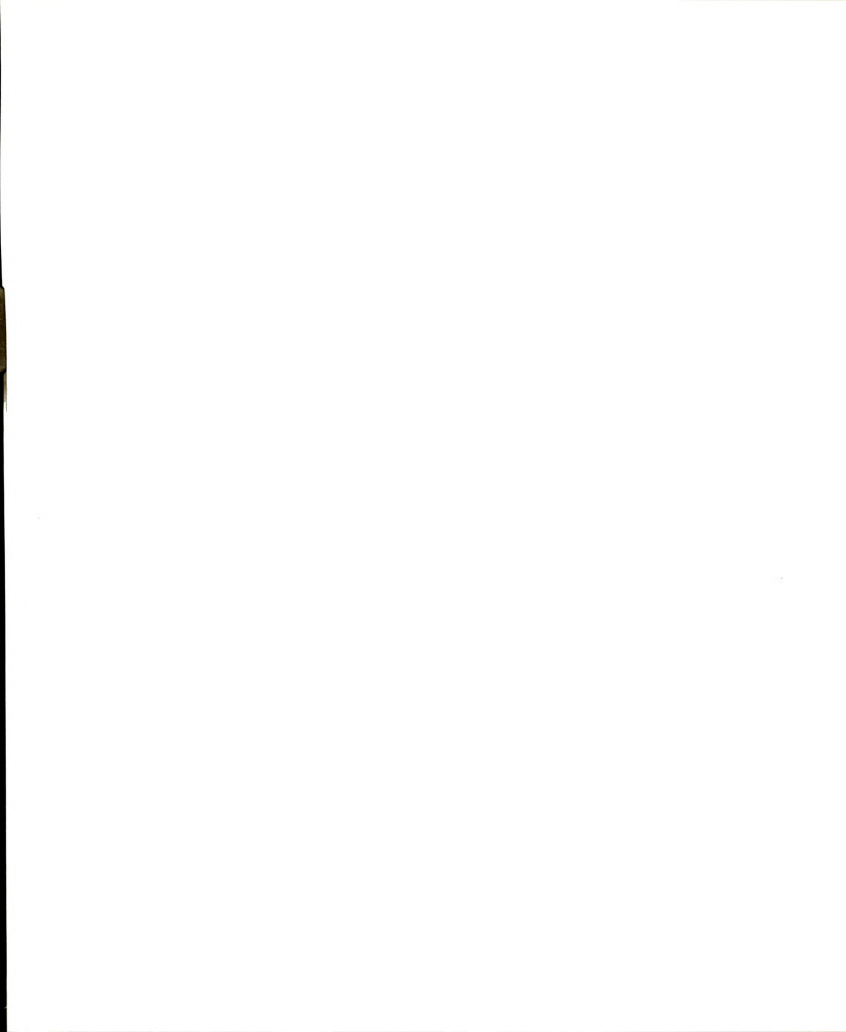
Throughout the early sections of the novel, Woolf counterpoints their developing relationship with clearly unacceptable alternatives to their understanding of life and to the redemption which they seek.



The cynical St. John, although certainly likeable, is consistently perplexed by the inadequacy of his rationalism for coping with the varieties of human experience. Readers of To the Lighthouse will recognize him as a more sympathetic prototype of the graceless and bitter Charles Tansley, and a less self-pitying prototype of Mr. Ramsey, both of whom are defined by their rationalism. Two other guests at the hotel at which they are all staying, Susan Warrington and Arthur Venning, who become engaged on the day that Rachel and Terence begin to recognize their love for each other, are pleasant, but vapid. The ease with which they adapt to the ordinary conditions of social life eliminates the possibility of seeing their relationship in the same way that we see the love between Rachel and Terence. For Susan and Arthur, marriage is a way to slide comfortably into ordained places in the ordinary world of human affairs; for Rachel and Terence, marriage and the love it objectifies is a means of altering the terms of life lived in that world,

Thus, when the novel ends with Rachel's death from a tropical disease, we are asked to consider the implications of her death in relationship to the novel's themes: Does anything ultimately satisfy in human experience? Or is all fulfillment illusory? Is human experience redeemable through the creation and awareness of a state of being that denies the ultimate reality of particularity and change, of separateness and death? Is love mankind's means for achieving that redemption?

When Rachel dies, Terence momentarily at least responds to her death as a liebestod;





So much the better--this was death. It was nothing; it was to cease to breathe. It was happiness, it was perfect happiness. They had now what they had always wanted to have, the union that had been impossible while they lived. . . . It seemed to him that their complete union and happiness filled the room with rings eddying more and more widely. He had no wish in the world left unfulfilled. They possessed what could never be taken from them.<sup>4</sup>

The statement is unequivocal; the phenomenal world--the world of impermanence--is "nothing." Reality is of the spirit, and the fulfillment and redemption of human existence is in the manifestation of this spirit in life. A love which transcends the temporal world is captured by death at a moment which leaves "no wish. . . unfulfilled." Such love is not destroyed by death, but like the spirit of the figures on Keats' urn, is placed forever in relief against the temporality of the phenomenal world.

We are reminded of the extremes of romantic thought about the relationship between love and death; of Werther's suicide, of Keats' lovers, "All breathing human passion far above," of Shelley in Adonais when he tells us to "Die,/If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!", of Verdi's Aida and Wagner's Isolde and Brunnhilde, and perhaps even of the pathetic Aschenbach in Death in Venice. For behind Terence's affirmation is the belief in romantic love as a singular manifestation of the "apocalyptic marriage" between earth and heaven which Meyer Abrams has shown to be at the center of the Romantics' need to redeem the phenomenal world.<sup>5</sup> The liebestod in The Voyage Out,

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<sup>4</sup>Virginia Woolf, The Voyage Out (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1948), p. 353.

<sup>5</sup>Meyer Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1971), pp. 37-46, passim.



then, as it is in the Romantic tradition, is used to suggest the possibility of achieving a reconciliation of the worlds of action and thought, a reconciliation achieved despite the recalcitrance of lived experience. The vision that Woolf has her characters try to affirm is, then, essentially a romantic vision based upon a vertical cosmology, and it is a question about the meaningfulness of what Terence says at this point that is the central question of the novel.

Terence, himself, sets the problem when his response to Rachel's death shifts abruptly from this affirmation of meaning to an anguished crying out for his lost love (Rachel! Rachel!). His retraction, momentary or permanent we cannot know since these are his last thoughts or words in the novel, prepares us for the denouement which is primarily a collection of the varied responses to Rachel's death of a variety of characters who think or express a range of conflicting understandings on the subject of death. These final chapters end the novel with a restatement of the sense of ambiguity which has predominated throughout. But this ambiguity does not lie in Woolf's inability to clarify her theme, but in her understanding of the human condition which she describes. The theme which will prevail in Woolf's novels until the end of her career is established here; we are compelled by our nature to seek to reconcile the life of action with the standards established by the life of thought and meditation, despite the insistent evidence that such a reconciliation is impossible. "The question is the usual one--how to adjust the two worlds."

Throughout the novel, there is a consistent rejection of all values, personal or cultural, that are not based on this need to

redeem the self from the impermanence and meaninglessness that seems to be the inevitable fate of phenomenal life. Like Camus' Caligula, Woolf narrows the field of meaningful human inquiry to two facts: "Men die. And they are unhappy." All values rooted in the temporal world are seen as ultimately unsatisfying in that they only distract us from the truths which will insist themselves upon us. In short, Memento Mori: nothing of the earth can ultimately satisfy.

The characters in the novel whom Woolf admires and endorses are those who are preoccupied with the attempt to discover and live according to spiritual reality. Woolf establishes this dualism between spiritual and material values early in the novel through the characterizations of Richard and Clarissa Dalloway. The Dalloways are used as foils, in that their only role is to provide a contrast to Helen and Rachel that establishes the hierarchy of values that will prevail in the novel. The Dalloways are associated with those whose lives are defined by the social conventions and philosophical predispositions of upper middle-class English life. Although they are among the most important characters at the beginning of the novel, they disappear at the first port of call and are not heard of again. Woolf is not interested in what happens to them, but in what they represent. What their presence in the novel is meant to tell us is that positivistic humanitarianism, the dominant intellectual position of the era, cannot satisfy man's need for spiritual fulfillment, and that a life centered around these values is distorted and perhaps even grotesquely ironic. Those who give up their dialogue with the questions provoked by death, implies Woolf, give up their real lives for a life of unreality,



The Dalloways are characterized by several values which they hold in common; they are both chauvinistic about sexual roles--he by self assertion and she by acceptance; they are jingoists in their belief in British superiority and the Pax Britannia that it entails; they see the arts as minor and perhaps destructive aspects of human lives when they are afforded "undue" importance or when the commitment to the world of art is too extreme; and they are believers in the idea of salvation through social progress--in the positivistic idea of a world in a constant process of evolution towards a moral and social utopia.

Of these values, the first two are used to establish the Dalloways as unsympathetic characters. Such ideas in Woolf's works are always the object of contempt, and sometimes of ridicule. The second set of values serves a more profound function in the novel in that they establish a philosophical position about the sources of human redemption that is antithetical to the values endorsed by the sympathetic characters in the novel and by the author herself. The Dalloways' understanding of the role of art in the spiritual life of humanity, and their belief in evolutionary social progress, are both aspects of the earthbound positivism which Woolf rejects. A brief analysis of each of several scenes will establish that this rhetorical role is the sole purpose for the appearance of the Dalloways in The Voyage Out, and will provide an understanding of why Woolf eliminated the Dalloways from the novel after concentrating on them in the early chapters (Chap. III-VI, pp. 38-86),

Their attitude about art and aesthetic fulfillment and their understanding of proper purpose in life are explicit in the first conversation they have with the other passengers. At dinner, on their



first night on board, Helen Ambrose, at a loss even for interesting small talk, casually asks Richard if he doesn't find the life of a politician boring. First he, then his wife, use the question as an opportunity for moral self-puffery which centers around their beliefs in the maturity of their own world view in contrast with the irresponsibility of the artist;

"Don't you ever find it rather dull?" she asked, not knowing exactly what to say.

Richard spread his hands before him, as if inscriptions bearing on what she asked him were to be read in the palms of them,

"If you ask me whether I ever find it rather dull," he said, "I am bound to say yes: on the other hand, if you ask me what career do you consider on the whole, taking the good with the bad, the most enjoyable and enviable, not to speak of its more serious side, of all careers, for a man, I am bound to say, 'The Politician's,'"

"The Bar or politics. I agree," said Willoughby. "You get more run for your money."

"All one's faculties have their play," said Richard. "I may be treading on dangerous ground; but what I feel about poets and artists in general is this: on your own lines, you can't be beaten--granted; but off your own lines--puff--one has to make allowances. Now, I shouldn't like to think that any one had to make allowances for me,"

"I don't quite agree, Richard," said Mrs. Dalloway. "Think of Shelley. I feel that there's almost everything one wants in 'Adonais.'"

"Read 'Adonais' by all means," Richard conceded. "But whenever I hear of Shelley I repeat to myself the words of Matthew Arnold. 'What a set! What a set!'"

This roused Ridley's attention. "Matthew Arnold? A detestable prig!" he snapped.

"A prig--granted," said Richard; "but, I think, a man of the world. That's where my point comes in. We politicians doubtless seem to you" (he had grasped somehow that Helen was the representative of the arts) "a gross commonplace set of people; but we see both sides; we may be clumsy, but we do our best to get a grasp of things. Now your artists find things in a mess, shrug their shoulders, turn aside to their visions--which I grant may be very beautiful--and leave things in a mess. Now that seems to me evading one's responsibilities. Besides, we aren't all born with the artistic faculty."



"It's dreadful," said Mrs. Dalloway, who, while her husband spoke, had been thinking, "When I'm with artists I feel so intensely the delights of shutting oneself up in a little world of one's own, with pictures and music and everything beautiful, and then I go out into the streets and the first child I meet with its poor, hungry, dirty little face makes me turn round and say, 'No, I can't shut myself up--I won't live in a world of my own. I should like to stop all the paintings and writing and music until this kind of thing exists no longer.' Don't you feel," she wound up, addressing Helen, "that life's a perpetual conflict?"

Helen considered for a moment. "No," she said, "I don't think I do."<sup>6</sup>

From the depiction of Richard's pompous sense of his own sagacity suggested by his physical movements before he answers Helen's question to Clarissa's common-place profundities at the end, the scene is obviously an exercise in satire for Woolf. The humor of the scene is grounded in the contrast between the Dalloways' self-assuredness and the limitations of their understanding and imagination. Richard's patronizing comments about art, which relegate it to a minor place in human affairs, thinly veil a hostility toward art and the artist. For Richard, the real problems of mankind have to do with the social world and for him a commitment to social melioration is the key to personal salvation: "Well, when I consider my life, there is one fact I admit I'm proud of; owing to me some thousands of girls in Lancashire--and many thousands to come after them--can spend an hour every day in the open air which their mothers had to spend over their looms. I'm prouder of that, I own, than I should be of writing Keats and Shelley into the bargain!"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>The Voyage Out, pp. 44-5.

<sup>7</sup>The Voyage Out, p. 65. Woolf's admiration for Shelley's most extreme poetry is voiced in her review of Walter Edwin Peck's, Shelley: His Life and Works when she praises Prometheus Unbound and Epipsychidion. She speaks of him as "'a being,' 'not one of us,' but better and higher and aloof and apart." "'Not One of Us,'" Collected Essays, IV, 26.

Thus, the nineteenth century's ideal of progress toward a just society is the soul of Richard's view of the world. His ideal is, "In one word--Unity. Unity of aim, of dominion, of progress. The dispersion of the best ideas over the greatest area,"<sup>8</sup> For Richard, the world is a "complicated machine"; ". . .if the meanest screw fails in its task, the proper working of the whole is imperiled."<sup>9</sup> Rachel's incredulous responses to Richard's profundities are unspoken, but devastating in their rejection of such notions of progress and unity in the world of human affairs:

It was impossible to combine the image of a lean black widow, gazing out of her window, and longing for someone to talk to, with the image of a vast machine, such as one sees at South Kensington, thumping, thumping, thumping. The attempt at communication had been a failure.<sup>10</sup>

She was haunted by absurd jumbled ideas--how, if one went back far enough, everything perhaps was intelligible; everything was in common; for the mammoths who pastured in the fields of Richard High Street had turned into paying stones and boxes full of ribbon, and her aunts.<sup>11</sup>

Rachel, although at times clearly intrigued by his self-asserting masculinity, is never closer to Woolf's own understanding of the man and what he represents than she is in thoughts such as these. Such ideas of unity and progress are improbable to Woolf and to all of her sympathetic characters of whom Rachel and Helen are the first. The incoherence of the phenomenal world and the permanence of life's injustices are constants in Woolf's world view; reason will never find

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<sup>8</sup>The Voyage Out, p. 64.

<sup>9</sup>The Voyage Out, p. 66.

<sup>10</sup>The Voyage Out, p. 66.

<sup>11</sup>The Voyage Out, p. 67.

a way to organize meaningfully social existence and make it just for all. "The lift man in the Tube is an eternal necessity," Mr. Ramsey will conclude in a moment of illumination, although, "the thought was distasteful to him," and he will decide that the only way to avoid acknowledging this truth is "to find some way of snubbing the predominance of the arts."<sup>12</sup> If unity does exist, it is a unity that exists apart from and perhaps despite our social existence.

This understanding gives meaning to the references made to Shelley, Keats, and Wagner throughout the novel and to the Dalloways' condescension to these artists and to those who are intrigued by them. The Dalloways voice accepted attitudes--nothing too extreme--nothing too immature--and in doing so serve as embodiments of superficiality. Richard's, "Read 'Adonais' by all means," is echoed by Clarissa's comments to Rachel and Helen about music and Wagner in particular:

. . . "You know, she said, turning to Helen a little mysteriously, "I don't think music's altogether good for people--I'm afraid not."

"Too great a strain?" asked Helen.

"Too emotional," said Clarissa. "One notices it at once when a boy or girl takes up music as a profession. Sir William Broadley told me just the same thing. Don't you hate the kind of attitudes people go into over Wagner--like this--." She cast her eyes to the ceiling, clasped her hands, and assumed a look of intensity. "It really doesn't mean that they appreciate him; in fact, I always think it's the other way round. The people who really care about an art are always the least affected. D'you know Henry Philips, the painter?" she asked.

"I have seen him," said Helen.

"To look at, one might think he was a successful stockbroker, and not one of the greatest painters of the age. That's what I like,"<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 67.

<sup>13</sup>The Voyage Out, p. 67.

For the Dalloways, art is a thing to be kept in its place; for Woolf and her sympathetic characters it is a subsuming facet of existence since it is mankind's primary means of exploring the most important problem of being human. What the Dalloways think of as reality is what, for Woolf, as for Shelley, "stains the white radiance of eternity." If redemption is possible for the human being, it is not through progress in the social world, but in the dimensionless world of imagination.

It is in relationship to this need, then, that we must understand the liebestod which climaxes *The Voyage Out*. Love and art are correlates in the novel in that both require the participant to enter a world which can be fully affirmed only in the act of experiencing that world. The fullest manifestations of both arouse incredulity when experienced from without. Love and art are restrained, but not contained by the known, by the fact. The seminal force in both is, in fact, the need to overcome restraint. Both Rachel and Terence are would-be artists who are preoccupied with the potentiality of art for transcending facticity. Rachel, in her music, is absorbed by "an invisible line [which] seemed to string the notes together, from which rose a shape, a building."<sup>14</sup> Terence "want[s] to write a novel about Silence, the things people don't say."<sup>15</sup> These are the needs which they bring to each other, rather than keep to themselves. Love is for them a means of authenticating the spiritual world by making it the seminal force in their temporal lives. It is, in short, the means of

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<sup>14</sup>The Voyage Out, p. 57.

<sup>15</sup>The Voyage Out, p. 216.

redeeming life from the fact of death in that it defines existence in terms of a deathless spirit,

It is the question of the final value of this sense of redemption that concludes the novel, and which is finally left unanswered. For Jean Guiget,

Terence and Rachel live a few perfect moments, islets amid waste spaces of uncertainty and yearning. Their union is sealed in death, for nothing can disturb it any more: it escapes the dissolving factors of time and space, . . . True, this peace is only a fleeting visitation, a moment in the life of the soul, experienced through a kind of prolonged anticipation. When the mind becomes once again aware of its body and its existence, the revolt and loneliness burst forth in a vain, heart-rending cry: "Rachel! Rachel!" We may wonder what is the meaning of this victory which is a defeat. Is it not that Rachel has accomplished her voyage out alone, has reached the haven of unity and peace while the others remain tossed in the division of multiplicity, of uncertainty and suffering?<sup>16</sup>

The answer to Guiget's rhetorical question should not be the "yes" which it implies, nor should it be "no." Among the varied responses to Rachel's death in the novel's denouement, Mrs. Thornbury's is the most explicit in giving the answer Guiget seeks:

The stunned feeling, which had been making it difficult for her to think, gradually gave way to a feeling of the opposite nature; she thought very quickly and very clearly, and looking back over all her experiences, tried to fit them together into a kind of order. There was undoubtedly much suffering, much struggling, but, on the whole, surely there was a balance of happiness--surely order did prevail. Nor were the deaths of young people really the saddest things in life--they were saved so much; they kept so much. The dead--she called to mind those who had died early, accidentally--were beautiful; she often dreamt of the dead. And in time Terence himself would come to feel--She got up and began to wander restlessly around the room.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jean Guiget, p. 203.

<sup>17</sup> The Voyage Out, p. 360.

Her conclusion is an opiate to soothe her need for order, a product of the human propensity to resolve its dilemmas at the expense of reality. Such a response makes a virtue of death, instead of teaching us how to find meaning in spite of it. Certainly, there occurs in Woolf's writings evidence of her being at times "half in love with easeful death" for its relief from the "worry strain and fret" of existence. Her diary, particularly in the sections Leonard Woolf chose not to publish, often reflects this nihilism.

But in her fiction, death is never a friend to man; it is a symbol of the world of spatial and temporal finiteness that breeds despair. Her characteristic response is the frustration and anger which we find in another character's reaction to Rachel's death:

When she was alone by herself she clenched her fists together, and began beating the back of the chair with them. She was like a wounded animal. She hated death; she was furious, outraged, indignant with death, as if it were a living creature. She refused to relinquish her friends to death. She would not submit to dark and nothingness.<sup>18</sup>

Death cannot be affirmed as a value in itself; we can only reconcile ourselves to it by discovering a way to deny its importance. It is this that distinguishes the liebestod from nihilism. Our goal in life is to discover and identify with something eternal. Death is unimportant because it is not a part of this eternal world. It is not because it fortunately and fortuitously ends life before the dissolving factors of time destroy the value of awareness and identity achieved that we are reconciled of it; rather, the state of being achieved is itself timeless, and death is irrelevant to it. For those who have

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<sup>18</sup>The Voyage Out, p. 359.

achieved participation in the eternal world through love, death, as Terence said, "is nothing,"

Woolf neither denies nor affirms the final truth of this stance in The Voyage Out. Here, as in all her fiction, "The difficulty is the usual one--how to adjust the two worlds." The imaginative affirmation achieved by the "eager dissatisfied self" appears in relief against the intellectual negation concluded by the "stern and philosophical self."

At the end of the novel, St. John Hirst is the principal spokesman for the stern, philosophical self. His pessimism dominates the final pages, acting as a partial coda to the novel's themes. For St. John, Rachel takes her place among the shifting, incoherent events of phenomenal existence: "Across his eyes passed a procession of objects, black and indistinct, the figures of people picking up their books, their cards, their balls of wool, their work-baskets, and passing him one after another on their way to bed."<sup>19</sup> And, we are to understand, like Rachel, who acted and died, and whose existence signified nothing. He sees no redemption from impermanence and meaninglessness; he is, in fact, complacent in his sense of pathos. Death and change signify to him the futility of all activity, all aspiration.

But St. John's response must be read in the context of values established throughout the novel, a context which Woolf, through Helen's perceptions, establishes at the beginning of the voyage;

The people in ships, however, took an equally singular view of England. Not only did it appear to them to be an island, and a very small island, but it was a shrinking island in which people were imprisoned. One figured them first swarming about like aimless ants, and almost pressing each other over the edge; and then, as the ship withdrew, one figured them making a vain

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<sup>19</sup>The Voyage Out, p. 375.

clamour, which, being unheard, either ceased, or rose into a brawl. Finally, when the ship was out of sight of land, it became plain that the people of England were completely mute. The disease attacked other parts of the earth; Europe shrank, Asia shrank, Africa and America shrank, until it seemed doubtful whether the ship would ever run against any of those wrinkled little rocks again. But, on the other hand, an immense dignity had descended upon her; she was an inhabitant of the great world, which has so few inhabitants, travelling all day across an empty universe, with veils drawn before her and behind. She was more lonely than the caravan crossing the desert; she was infinitely more mysterious, moving by her own power and sustained by her own resources. The sea might give her death or some unexampled joy, and none would know of it. 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, worshipped and felt as a symbol.<sup>20</sup>

St. John's concluding pessimism is only one pole of the author's own understanding of the events of the novel. Helen's sense of herself as "a bride going forth to meet her husband" is symbolic of the human need to reconcile the worlds of action and thought and her experience is offered as evidence of the possibility of achieving such a reconciliation. The "voyage out," then, is a voyage toward those experienced intimations of meaning that spur the "eager and dissatisfied self" to action, and it is this voyage that St. John has never taken. As a symbol, it is as valid and invalid as the possibility of unity represented by Percival in The Waves, and as real and unreal as the spiritual world in which the love between Rachel and Terence exists. It is a state of mind, an attitude about existence, a will to being despite the evidence of the phenomenal world.

Thus, it is significant that the denouement of the novel is comprised of the conclusions reached by relatively minor characters who

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<sup>20</sup>The Voyage Out, p. 32.



express a range of conflicting attitudes about the death they have heard about, for uncertainty is what the novel leaves us with. Neither the affirmation achieved by the "eager and dissatisfied self" nor the pessimism that is the inevitable conclusions of the "stern and philosophical self" finally prevails in The Voyage Out. Helen's silence is, perhaps, the most meaningful comment of all on the events that have transpired. It is the unheard music of Terence's proposed "novel about silence, the things people don't say," and as such enforces the sense of mystery in ambiguity which is the novel's final statement about the human condition. Terence, in his abrupt shift from affirmation to negation, has felt the polarities of the human condition, neither of which prevail over the other in man's search for meaning. The conflict between man's sense of the disorder, fragmentation, and meaninglessness of phenomenal existence and his sense of a Spiritus Mundi that can somehow transfigure that existence is, according to Woolf in The Voyage Out, finally unresolvable. Mankind's need to "adjust the two worlds" by achieving a synthesis of life and thought is for Woolf in The Voyage Out what Shelley described as "the desire of the moth for the star" in that it is as insistent as it is apparently futile.

#### Night and Day

If this golden rim were quenched, if life were no longer circled by an illusion (but is it an illusion after all?) then it would be too dismal an affair to carry to an end.<sup>21</sup>

This statement of the principal theme of Night and Day is consistent with what we have understood about the significance of the liebestod in

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<sup>21</sup>Virginia Woolf, Night and Day (London: The Hogarth Press, 1919), pp. 515-16.

The Voyage Out and can serve as a distillation of the meaning of both novels. Like The Voyage Out, Night and Day is a philosophical love story. But the second novel differs from the first in that instead of emphasizing the characteristics and implications of an achieved state of union, it emphasizes the conflicting characteristics and needs of each individual that seem to preclude the possibility of such an achievement, yet which compel the fully aware person to search for it. The Voyage Out establishes a relationship and ends it before it is asked to weather the dissolving elements of time; Night and Day ends with an anticipation of a love that will be lived out in time, and which will be asked to recreate its tentative, spiritually redeeming center in spite of the forces of dissolution which are the stuff of personality and, therefore, the stuff of daily life. But in both novels, romantic love is the mode of approach to the necessary, though perhaps illusory, "golden rim," and the possibility of love represents the possibility of making manifest the life of the spirit in human action. In the novels which follow these first two, romantic love will never again be asked to serve as an important means of achieving spiritual redemption. But the need to discover enduring meaning despite the apparent incoherence of the phenomenal world and its reflection in the individual personality will remain the same, and paradigmatically, the assertion and equivocation found in the passage which begins this paragraph expresses the problem that is dealt with in all of her novels.

A full discussion of Night and Day would require explorations of several supporting themes, the most notable of which concerns the Woman's Suffrage Movement and the larger question of the limitations imposed on women by English society. But the problem of women's rights,

although a consistent motif in Woolf's writings, is peripheral to her need to encounter in her fiction the sexless realities of time, change, and death. Therefore, this discussion will be limited to an analysis of the relationship between Katherine Hilberry and Ralph Denham which is the central focus of the book and the key to understanding its philosophical, rather than sociological, meaning,

Woolf's intention in creating this relationship is clear. The public selves of the two characters are established early in the novel as antipathetic, even hostile to each other. But the importance of this conflict of personalities is tempered as the novel progresses by both characters' rejection of the importance of personality as the definitive factor of identity. Privately, both characters define identity as a sense of selfhood which derives from imaginative participation in a Spiritus Mundi; both are dubious about the significance of personality because it is a manifestation of the incoherent, temporal world. What drives each of the characters against the life defined by social circumstance and public personality is what brings them together. They share the belief that the struggle to live authentically entails a perpetual conflict between the spiritual self and the distracting influence of personality and circumstance. Their decision to marry at the end of the novel is made both because and in spite of their uncertainty about their capacity for fulfilling their needs to live and identify themselves in terms of their spiritual selves. On the one hand, they recognize marriage as a risk in that it magnifies the consequences of failure because it requires each of them to give up the relative safety of private struggle; on the other hand, they see it as a means of

manifesting their sense of spiritual selfhood in the life of action rather than accepting the conflict between action and thought as permanently unresolvable and thereby accepting the doubleness of existence as its necessary condition. Thus, in Night and Day, as in The Voyage Out, love is asked to serve as a means of reconciling the phenomenal and spiritual identities of the characters.

The sense of the disunity between public and private identity is the most distinguishing characteristic of both Katherine and Ralph. Katherine is a socially poised, intellectually competent young woman whose principal identity to the people in her life derives from her being a member of a well-known literary family, and from her being single at an age when she should be thinking of marriage. As the daughter of the editor of an important legal journal, and as the granddaughter of Richard Alardyce, the novel's fictional version of whoever the principal Victorian Age poet was, Katherine lives in the midst of the English intellectual and literary world. We find her from the beginning of the novel comfortable and satisfied with this world as daily activity, but privately dubious about its ability to provide her with meaning. In her private thoughts, she is attracted to the study of mathematics and astronomy because of their precision and impersonality:

Perhaps the unwomanly nature of science made her instinctively wish to conceal her love for it. But the more profound reason was that in her mind mathematics were directly opposed to literature. She would not have cared to confess how infinitely she preferred the exactitude, the star-like impersonality of the figures to the confusion, agitation, and vagueness of the finest prose.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Night and Day, p. 40.

As the granddaughter of Richard Alardyce, living as she does in an ambiance that is dominated by the memories of his greatness, Katherine has come to equate literature with the vaguaries of social life rather than with the search for truth which it represented in The Voyage Out. For Katherine, the impersonality and precision of mathematics is an alternative to a view of existence dominated by the Victorian preoccupation with personality. But she reserves such judgments for her private thoughts; in the world of surfaces she continues to do what is expected of her--serving tea to her father's friends and proteges, working with her mother on the biography of Richard Alardyce, and conducting tours among the artifacts in the house for visitors who come to do homage to the memory of the poet. It is this public person who meets Ralph Denham, who has been invited to tea because of an article he wrote for her father's legal journal. Ralph is uncomfortable and hostile during the visit, responding to Katherine's accomplished social ministrations with only slightly veiled contempt for the family, and particularly for Richard Alardyce and what he represents. Ralph responds to Katherine's elegy upon the greatness of the past and the inadequacy of the present with an indictment of the fascination with personality that is the source of his hostility toward Katherine and her family: "'No, we haven't any great men,' Denham replied. 'I'm very glad that we haven't. I hate great men. The worship of greatness in the nineteenth century seems to me to explain the worthlessness of that generation.'"<sup>23</sup> Katherine is perplexed and irritated by Ralph's incivility; she is unused to

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<sup>23</sup>Night and Day, p. 13.

encountering her own real values in her social world and does not recognize them. But the shared values behind this challenge to the public values of England will become the foundation for the attraction between Ralph and Katherine as she gradually becomes less willing to live out the disunity between her public life and private awareness.

Although Katherine shares with Ralph the belief that personality and society are the disguises of life rather than manifestations of its reality, she is at first unwilling or unable to act on the knowledge. She resigns herself to marriage with William Rodney, a character whose sense of existence is bounded by the very values which Katherine privately rejects. When speaking to Henry Otway, a black-sheep cousin with whom she is sympathetic, she explains that she has accepted William's proposal even though she anticipates that the life she will lead with him will be in conflict with her growing sense of reality:

I don't care much whether I ever get to know anything--but I want to work out something in figures--something that hasn't got to do with human beings. I don't want people particularly. In some ways, Henry, I'm a humbug--I mean I'm not what you all take me for. I'm not domestic, or very practical or sensible, really. And if I could calculate things, and use a telescope, and have to work out figures, and know to a fraction where I was wrong, I should be perfectly happy,<sup>24</sup> and I believe I should give William what he wants.

This resignation to the world of unreality is consistent with her values at this point in the novel in that it derives from her sense of the impossibility of reconciling the life of action with the life of thought. On the surface she will be all she is expected to be; within, she will search for that awareness that gives meaning to existence. But she cannot sustain this resolve; we see operating in her the same

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<sup>24</sup>Night and Day, p. 203.

need which in To the Lighthouse will temper Lily's resignation to the necessity of living life on two levels: "a man must be whole."

Thus, it is no surprise to the reader when Katherine finally rejects the certainties of a future life with William in favor of the unknowns of a life with her fellow seeker, Ralph Denham. For despite their shared sense of futility about the possibility of reconciling phenomenal life with spiritual awareness--"He [Ralph] felt a mixture of disgust and pity at the figure cut by human beings when they try to carry out, in practice, what they have the power to conceive"<sup>25</sup>--Katherine and Ralph will marry: "That may be what we have to face," he said. "There may be nothing else. Nothing but what we imagine."<sup>26</sup>

"What we imagine," for Ralph, is a reality which lies beneath the surface of experience which ought to be capable of dominating the conflicting evidences of the phenomenal world. We see in a lengthy self-examination both Ralph's sense of the clash between the two worlds, and his sense of the impossibility of reconciling them:

It is likely that Ralph would not have recognized his own dream of a future in the forecasts which disturbed his sister's peace of mind. Certainly, if any one of them had been put before him he would have rejected it with a laugh, as the sort of life that held no attractions for him. He could not have said how it was that he had put these absurd notions into his sister's head. Indeed, he prided himself upon being well broken into a life of hard work, about which he had no sort of illusions. His vision of his own future, unlike many such forecasts, could have been made public at any moment without a blush; he attributed to himself a strong brain, and conferred on himself a seat in the House of Commons at the age of fifty, a moderate fortune, and, with luck, an unimportant office in a Liberal

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<sup>25</sup>Night and Day, p. 319.

<sup>26</sup>Night and Day, p. 319.





Government. There was nothing extravagant in a forecast of that kind, and certainly nothing dishonourable. Nevertheless, as his sister guessed, it needed all Ralph's strength of will, together with the pressure of circumstances, to keep his feet moving in the path which led that way. It needed, in particular, a constant repetition of a phrase to the effect that he shared the common fate, found it best of all, and wished for no other; and by repeating such phrases he acquired punctuality and habits of work, and could very plausibly demonstrate that to be a clerk in a solicitor's office was the best of all possible lives, and that other ambitions were vain.

But, like all beliefs not genuinely held, this one depended very much upon the amount of acceptance it received from other people, and in private, when the pressure of public opinion was removed, Ralph let himself swing very rapidly away from his actual circumstances upon strange voyages which, indeed, he would have been ashamed to describe. In these dreams, of course, he figured in noble and romantic parts, but self-glorification was not the only motive of them. They gave outlet to some spirit which found no work to do in real life, for, with the pessimism which his lot forced upon him, Ralph had made up his mind that there was no use for what, contemptuously enough, he called dreams, in the world which we inhabit. It sometimes seemed to him that this spirit was the most valuable possession he had; he thought that by means of it he could set flowering waste tracts of the earth, cure many ills, or raise up beauty where none now existed; it was, too, a fierce and potent spirit which would devour the dusty books and parchments on the office wall with one lick of its tongue, and leave him in a minute standing in nakedness, if he gave way to it. His endeavor, for many years, had been to control the spirit, and at the age of twenty-nine he thought he could pride himself upon a life rigidly divided into the hours of work and those of dreams; the two lived side by side without harming each other. As a matter of fact, this effort at discipline had been helped by the interest of a difficult profession, but the old conclusion to which Ralph had come when he left college still held sway in his mind, and tinged his views with the melancholy belief that life for most people compels the exercise of the lower gifts and wastes the precious ones, until it forces us to agree that there is little virtue, as well as little profit, in what once seemed to us the noblest part of our inheritance.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Night and Day, pp. 128-130.

Ralph, like Katherine, sees the roots of this world to be in something ahuman and impersonal, perhaps even anti-human. It is not insignificant that both characters, when they come individually to the conclusion that they can no longer continue to live lives so much at variance with their profoundest awarenesses, see their choices as being either isolation and work or a life with each other based to whatever extent possible upon their shared awareness. We see again Virginia Woolf's skepticism about the nineteenth century's belief that man, the intelligence of nature, is also the fruition of its most seminal urges toward perfection and completeness. The answer which we find repeatedly to Tennysonian optimism about human perfectability and about the centrality of humanity in the universal scheme invariably takes its basic form from Rachel Vinrace's unspoken rebukes of Richard Dalloway's positivism.<sup>28</sup>

Man's origins and his evolution define him only in the sense that they are a constant reminder of his frailty and insignificance. Woolf envisions no Adamic state to be returned to, as did the Romantics, nor a Utopia to be achieved, as did both the Romantics and the Positivists: "And yet, after gazing for another second, the stars did their usual work upon the mind, froze to cinders the whole of our short human history, and reduced the human body to an ape-like, furry form, crouching amid the brushwood of a barbarous clod of mud,"<sup>29</sup> Thus, the recurrent rejection of the dominant nineteenth-century views of man in Woolf's writings is here based upon the rejection of the centrality of humanity in the universal scheme. The worship of greatness in the nineteenth

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<sup>28</sup> See quotations in my discussion of The Voyage Out, pp. 13-4.

<sup>29</sup> Night and Day, p. 30.

century, and the Titanism that resulted from the sense that man is the reason d'etre of the universe, are consistently measured against the sense that the development of his powers of consciousness and achievement were fortuitous rather than teleological. For Woolf and her two principal spokesmen in Night and Day, the Spiritus Mundi does not reach its apotheosis in man; man discovers his relationship to it to be divorced from his humanness. In their differing ways, both the Romantics and the Positivists tended to believe that the principle of universal existence was made in the image of human potentiality. Woolf rejected the sense of the importance of the human condition in establishing her terms for redemption through consciousness.

Thus, the extent to which man partakes in the Spiritus Mundi is not contingent upon his identity as man. The factors of his personality are otiose, and the publicly observable life which results from their manifestation is a disguise of existence rather than existence itself. It is such a realization that marks the turning point in Katherine's understanding of her relationship with Ralph. While walking with Ralph in Kew Gardens, she is impressed with his ardent commitment to the nature around him:

To her they were variously shaped and coloured petals, poised, at different seasons of the year, upon very similar green stalks, but to him they were in the first instance, bulbs or seeds, and later, living things endowed with sex, and pores, and susceptibilities which adapted themselves by all manner of ingenious devices to live and beget life, and could be fashioned squat or tapering, flame-coloured, or pale, pure or spotted, by processes which might reveal the secrets of human existence. . . . It wakened echoes in all those remote fastnesses of her being where loneliness had brooded so long undisturbed.

. . . A law that might be inscrutable but was certainly omnipotent appealed to her at the moment, because she could find nothing like it in possession of

human lives. Circumstances had long forced her; as the force most women in the flower of their youth, to consider all that part of life which is conspicuously without order; she had had to consider moods and wishes, degrees of liking or disliking, and their effect upon the people dear to her; she had been forced to deny herself any contemplation of that other part of life where thought constructs a destiny independent of human beings.<sup>30</sup>

The shared awareness that is the result of their morning together in Kew Gardens leads them to agree to establish a friendship which will be free of the obfuscations of emotion: "At least, on both sides it must be understood that if either chooses to fall in love, he or she does so entirely at his own risk, Neither is under any obligation to the other."<sup>31</sup> Katherine accepts Ralph's offer and sees in the acceptance no reason to end her engagement to William Rodney. That engagement belongs to the "other world"; the friendship with Ralph is a tentative step toward reconciling at least part of her external life with the awareness of her private being:

Why, she reflected, should there be this perpetual disparity between thought and action, between the life of solitude and the life of society, this astonishing precipice on one side of which the soul is 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? Was this not the chance he offered her--the rare and wonderful chance of friendship?<sup>32</sup>

But her decision to accept the challenge of this partial attempt to reconcile the two worlds in which she lives initiates an insistent movement towards total unity. Ralph and Katherine will marry; their intention will be to make manifest their vision of reality in the world

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<sup>30</sup> Night and Day, pp. 349-50.

<sup>31</sup> Night and Day, p. 357.

<sup>32</sup> Night and Day, pp. 358-9.

which has seemed to both of them to be so necessarily alien to that vision. They will marry despite their enduring skepticism about the possibility of achieving such a unity; a man must be whole.

Night and Day ends with the lovers in this state of uncertain anticipation. Unlike Rachel and Terence of The Voyage Out, they understand precisely what Woolf understands: their love and what they demand from it is very likely based upon illusion, yet this likely illusion is the golden rim without which life would not be worth living. As in The Waves, "effort" predominates; the words Katherine used to reconcile herself to the indeterminate striving of her private world of reflection earlier in the novel serve to reconcile us to the ambiguity which these characters are compelled to live out: "It's life that matters, nothing but life--the process of discovering--the everlasting and eternal process, not the discovery itself at all."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Night and Day, p. 132.

### CHAPTER III; ACCEPTANCE OF DUALISM IN

#### JACOB'S ROOM AND MRS. DALLOWAY

While living in London, shortly before his journey through Europe to Greece and his climactic epiphany at the Parthenon, Jacob reads Plato's Phaedrus. I believe that the meanings of both Jacob's Room and Mrs. Dalloway are implicit in the Phaedrus, and that attention paid to the distinction that Socrates makes between man's life in time and the soul's consciousness of and participation in eternity will enable us to understand these very different novels as contrasting expressions of a single vision which represents a distinct stage in Virginia Woolf's understanding of reality. Jacob's thoughts after finishing his reading direct us to the aspect of the Phaedrus that is pertinent to our understanding of these novels:

The Phaedrus is very difficult. And so, when at length one reads straight ahead, falling into step, marching on, becoming (so it seems) momentarily part of this rolling, imperturbable energy, which has driven darkness before it since Plato walked the Acropolis, it is impossible to see to the fire.

The dialogue draws to its close. Plato's argument is stowed away in Jacob's mind, and for five minutes, Jacob's mind continues on alone, into the darkness. Then, getting up, he parted the curtains, and saw, with astonishing clearness, how the Springetts opposite had gone to bed: how it rained: how the Jews and the foreign woman, at the end of the street, stood by the pillar box, arguing.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Virginia Woolf, Jacob's Room (London: Hogarth Press Ltd., 1971), pp. 108-9.

Jacob is startled by the mundane world of human affairs that he sees when he returns from his reverie. He sees it "with astonishing clearness," and what he sees is a world of isolated, inexplicable events--a field of activity that has for him neither coherence nor meaning in that what he sees has no connection with the world of meaning that Plato has posited and defined.

Jacob's perceptions confirm the dualism upon which Socrates bases his replies to Phaedrus. Socrates distinguishes between "true being," and the phenomenal state of human identity. He defines mundane existence as a state in which man loses "the memory of holy things, . . .the colorless and formless and intangible essence [that] is visible to the mind, which is the only lord of the soul." This supernal reality, says Socrates, is not contingent upon mundane life for its existence, but is, rather, ". . .enshrined in that living tomb which we carry about, now that we are imprisoned in the body, as in an oyster-shell,"<sup>2</sup>

Socrates' distinction in Phaedrus between the supernal and the mundane, particularly his melancholy acceptance of the irreconcilability of the two worlds, is a useful starting point for exploring the thematic implications of Jacob's Room and Mrs. Dalloway. The two novels, despite the remarkable differences between the personalities and overt values of their protagonists, are related thematically. Together, the novels represent a stage in Woolf's lifelong effort to define adequately the relationship between the "stern and philosophical self" and the "eager and dissatisfied self," with Jacob as the overt

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<sup>2</sup>"Phaedrus," Works of Plato, trans. and ed. by B. Jowett (New York: Dial Press), pp. 401-409 passim.

spokesman for the former, and Clarissa for the later. Both novels contrast what the characters perceive as the unity, permanence, and meaningfulness of the supernal world with the fragmentation, disorder, and meaninglessness of mundane existence. Further, these novels, unlike the novels which precede and follow them, depict protagonists who accept this dualism and seek only to adjust their own lives to the reality they perceive. This acceptance contrasts with the strivings toward unity we saw as central to the meanings of The Voyage Out and Night and Day and which recur in To the Lighthouse and The Waves. If, as I have said in my first chapter, the central problem behind all of Virginia Woolf's novels was the problem of "how to adjust the two worlds," then it is clear that Jacob's Room and Mrs. Dalloway are products of a period in her life when she had adjusted the worlds by accepting their irreconcilability and refusing the struggle for wholeness of identity that beset her at other times in her life,

The two novels ought to be studied together because their title characters represent alternative, but compatible adjustments of the conflict between the "stern and philosophical self" and the "eager and dissatisfied self." The central questions which result from this understanding of reality are clear: if the world of meaning is unrelated to the world of action, how can human existence be valued? What legitimate motivations can exist for man if he accepts this belief in the meaninglessness of his actions? Taken alone, each novel is potentially misleading about the answers Woolf offers. Although it is clear that the author empathizes with both Jacob and Clarissa and that readers are expected to value them as people and as thinkers, their values seem contradictory. Jacob seems to renounce the life of



action, while Clarissa seems to celebrate it. When we are told at the end of the novel that Jacob "tore his ticket to pieces, and walked away,"<sup>3</sup> we assume that he has fully renounced any further concern for life, and our assumption is supported, if not confirmed, by the fact that the author tells us nothing more about him but for the cryptic announcement of his death. But Mrs. Dalloway ends differently. The party that has been anticipated throughout the novel goes on, its spirit only momentarily deflected by the news of Septimus' suicide. Clarissa, though "She felt very much like him--the young man who had killed himself," and though she "felt glad he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living,"<sup>4</sup> continues to believe in the value and importance of her party, and we are asked to believe in it, too.

Her thoughts about Septimus, particularly the empathy she expresses, are indications of links that exist not only between her and Septimus, but also between her conception of the world and Jacob's, whose renunciation of life is motivated by perceptions similar to those that drive Septimus to suicide. The supernal and mundane worlds exist side-by-side in Clarissa's consciousness, as they do in Jacob's, and the irreconcilability of the two worlds is as fundamental to her understanding of the human situation as it is for Jacob. What appear to be contradictions between their responses to the questions they seek to answer are really the result of different emphases in their temperaments and personalities.

Jacob is associated principally with the mind; Clarissa with the

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<sup>3</sup>Jacob's Room, p. 173.

<sup>4</sup>Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway (London: Hogarth Press, 1968), p. 204.



heart, Jacob's negation signifies the power of the mind to repudiate the illusory meanings of human action and consequently to paralyze the will to act; Clarissa's affirmation signifies the power of the heart to sustain a belief in the value of experience in the face of these perceptions of meaninglessness. Something in each of them shares the perceptions of the other. Clarissa's empathy with the nihilism which she assumes was the motivation of the young man who had "thrown it all away" is paralleled by Jacob's fascination and empathy with the sensuality of the prostitutes he encounters and of the peasants he observes. Jacob and Clarissa represent alternative responses to questions that man can answer only with equivocation. Thus, when Sally Seton asks, near the end of Mrs. Dalloway, "What does the brain matter, compared with the heart?"<sup>5</sup> we should not assume that the question is, from Virginia Woolf's perspective, entirely rhetorical. The heart, indeed, is the source of the will to overcome the negation and paralysis dictated by the intellect. But feeling no more repudiates the understandings that derive from a dispassionate appraisal of life than does Yeats' "Self" repudiate his "Soul's" belief that, "Only the dead can be forgiven," in his "Dialogue of Self and Soul." In Jacob's Room and Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia Woolf offers her readers an image of man that shows him caught in the tension between feeling and thought, action and contemplation, will and paralysis.

The structure of ideas which unifies the themes of these novels also helps to explain the remarkable technical differences between the two novels, particularly the different methods of characterization

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<sup>5</sup>Mrs. Dalloway, p. 213.



used to portray Jacob and Clarissa. Where Jacob is ethereal, Clarissa is concrete. Readers tend to remember Clarissa as a distinct and vivid personality, whereas the details of Jacob's personality seem fleeting, even ephemeral. Jacob is rendered in such a way that he strikes the reader as a character virtually without personality who seems to be present at his experiences only as a perceiving eye. Clarissa by contrast is very much an individual, tangibly present in the events enacted and recalled. In Jacob, we see a foreshadowing of the "characterless" characterization that Woolf was later to claim was her intention while writing The Waves; in Clarissa we see the engaging fullness of personality that we will encounter again in Mrs. Ramsey in To the Lighthouse.

The different methods are perhaps best indicated by the relative density of characterization: Jacob's Room, the shorter of the two novels, records events from the whole of Jacob's twenty-six-year life, while Mrs. Dalloway is devoted to the thoughts and actions of one day. It is possible to account for this difference by understanding it as the result of an evolution in Mrs. Woolf's fictional technique. Certainly, Mrs. Woolf's lifelong preoccupation with finding an adequate fictional form tends to confirm this position as do many of her comments about the writing of Mrs. Dalloway. But settling for this key to the differences between the two novels does not take into account that The Waves and Between the Acts, both written after Mrs. Dalloway, are much more like Jacob's Room in method than they are like Mrs. Dalloway, thus suggesting that the remarkable differences between the two novels are less the result of an evolution in her fictional technique than is usually assumed. I believe that the

differences are better explained by seeing them as reflections of Woolf's thematic intentions.

I do not mean to suggest that Woolf conceived of these novels as complements to each other. Rather, I believe that their remarkable differences derive quite naturally from the dualism she accepted at this time in her life. In her earlier and later novels, we find her protagonists struggling against the implications of this dualism in their attempts to achieve redemption through personal integration. But that characteristic struggle, or "effort" as she calls it in discussing The Waves, is suspended in Jacob's Room and Mrs. Dalloway. Jacob and Clarissa share the belief that the valid claims of both aspects of man's divided nature are irreconcilable. Clarissa, who loves life so fully, who conceives of her activities as "an offering" to life, is capable of empathizing with a suicidal young man whom she does not even know because she understands that human experience is enveloped by a shadow that denies it meaning. When Clarissa tells us, "There was an emptiness about the heart of life, an attic room,"<sup>6</sup> we understand why Woolf considered ending the novel with her suicide instead of with her triumphant fulfillment at the party that was so important to her.<sup>7</sup> Like Jacob and Septimus, Clarissa has within her both the inclination and the capacity to renounce life. And as for them, this inclination derives from the belief that the human desire for integrated selfhood, for wholeness of identity, is a desire that man is incapable of satisfying.

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<sup>6</sup> Mrs. Dalloway, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Mrs. Woolf asserts in the "Introduction" to the 1925 edition ". . . that Mrs. Dalloway was originally to kill herself, or perhaps merely die at the end of the party."

In her essay, "On Not Knowing Greek," published in The Common Reader shortly before the publication of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf gives us her clearest statement of her understanding of reality during this period of her life. Speaking of her admiration for the characters in Greek literature, she says,

There is a sadness at the back of life which they do not attempt to mitigate. Entirely aware of their standing in the shadow, and yet alive to every tremor and gleam of existence, there they endure, and it is to the Greeks that we turn when we are sick of the vagueness, of the confusion, of the Christianity and its consolations, of our own age.

The "vagueness, confusion, and consolation" that Woolf here attributes to Christianity certainly refers to the Christian commitment to a belief in the ultimate wholeness of the fabric of existence, a wholeness in which, as St. Paul says, "we live, and move, and have our being." In more general terms, Woolf's words here also indict not only Christianity, but all synthetic understandings of human existence, and by implication, even the struggles for wholeness of identity that motivate the central characters of her earlier novels. Although the aspirations for synthesis of life and thought that motivate Rachel and Terence, and Katherine and Ralph, can hardly be understood as "Christian," they are certainly romantic in their implications, as the frequent references to Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth and Wagner suggest. How far is romanticism from Christianity in regard to this issue? When we recall that Wordsworth, in A Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, reminds us of Paul's words when he speaks of "the grand elementary principal of pleasure, by which [man] knows, and feels,

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<sup>8</sup>Virginia Woolf, Collected Essays (4 vols; New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), I; 13.

and lives, and moves" in his own attempt to define the incarnational relationship between spirit and action, we understand how closely related they are.

Christianity and romanticism are similar in that they both posit the existence of a wholeness that denies the finality of the dualism of life and thought that Woolf believed the Greeks perceived and accepted. In Jacob and Clarissa, we see what Woolf offers as conflicting but what she understands to be equally legitimate responses to this dualism. Through Jacob, who represents the "stern and philosophical self," we explore the "sadness at the back of life"; through Clarissa, who represents the "eager and dissatisfied self," we explore that aspect of man that is "alive to every tremor and gleam of existence." In short, Jacob is the human mind; Clarissa, the human heart.

#### Jacob's Room

The themes of this novel derive from Woolf's continuing preoccupation with understanding the relationship between human identity and what she intuited as eternal reality. The novel is single-minded in this respect, and the effect of this preoccupation upon the substance of the novel is the almost total omission of character depiction and social commentary that do not expand upon or clarify its philosophical themes. Jacob is an abstract creation, made tangible by a few carefully selected details. His individuality is of little importance to the aims of the novel. Rather, he represents what Socrates called ". . . the mind of the philosopher [which] alone



has wings"<sup>9</sup> in its evolution from cradle to grave. It is for this reason that we do not come to know Jacob as fully as we come to know the typical intellectual hero of the stream-of-consciousness novel, or even as we come to know Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsey in the novels written immediately after Jacob's Room.

As in The Waves, Woolf intended no characterization, because The Waves and Jacob's Room are her most direct attempts to explore reality unhindered by what she elsewhere called ", . .the cramp and confinement of personality." Her method in Jacob's Room was to create a protagonist who had the emotionless purity of vision that she sometimes sought for herself. She sought to eliminate the ulterior claims of personality from the human search for truth by striving to eliminate personality itself from the make-up of the protagonist. Thus, I believe that Woolf's stated intention to write The Waves as ". . .an abstract, mystical, eyeless book" is also pertinent to understanding Jacob's Room. Jacob's Room is among the most ethereal of her novels because she intended that Jacob should represent the contemplative mind, freed from the confusions of personality and emotion.

This discussion of Jacob's Room, then, will attempt both to demonstrate the validity of this understanding of Virginia Woolf's intentions for Jacob, and to explain the relationships between these intentions and the other thematic aspects of the novel, Jacob's Room is in large part a commentary on Western intellectual history. It is intended as a repudiation of those Christian and Post-Christian understandings of man, particularly Romanticism and Positivism, which

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<sup>9</sup>"Phaedrus," p, 408.

emphasize the interconnectedness between corporeal life and spiritual fulfillment.<sup>10</sup> The dualism that Jacob comes to understand is Virginia Woolf's answer to these assertions of interconnectedness. What is ultimately real to Jacob is what Socrates defined in the Phaedrus as the eternal, undifferentiated soul. Physical existence, while not personally odious to him, is an obstacle in his search for identification with that spirit. Such a conclusion is directly at odds with the Christian, Romantic, and Positivistic world-views which assert in their own ways a necessary contingency between corporeal life and spiritual fulfillment. For Jacob, as for Socrates in Phaedrus, "The whole object of life is to free this divine element from its temporary union with a body,"<sup>11</sup>

Establishing the novel's commentary on Western intellectual history will provide essential background for understanding the special nature of Jacob's role, so it is with that discussion that I will begin. Woolf is both explorative and assertive in Jacob's Room. Very early in the novel we discover what she is sure of: modern man values himself too highly. The ideas and myths from which he derives his self-conceptions and values are too intent upon establishing a flattering role for mankind in the enactment of a universal history.

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<sup>10</sup> See Christianity and Classical Culture, by Charles Norris Cochrane, and, Creation: the Impact of an Idea, edited by Daniel O'Connor and Francis Oakley, particularly the essays by Michael Foster, "The Christian Doctrine of Creation and the Rise of Modern Natural Science," and by Hans Jonas, "Jewish and Christian Elements in the Western Philosophical Tradition," for good discussions of the relationships between Christianity and Positivism, and Meyer Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism, for a good discussion of the Christian roots of English Romanticism,

<sup>11</sup> Daniel O'Connor, "Introduction: Two Philosophies of Nature," Creation: the Impact of an Idea, p. 18.

The novel establishes parameters for man's relationship to the universe unequivocally, both through Jacob's responses to the world around him and through essay-like interpolations by the author which often merge with Jacob's thoughts in such a way as to make the author's perceptions indistinguishable from her character's. The persistent suggestions of the ephemerality of man and the insignificance of his activities and accomplishments are consistently derived from perceptions which measure the brevity of human history against the boundlessness of time, the human sense of self-importance and superiority against the leveling realization that what is enduring in and therefore ultimately important in the phenomenal universe exists as fully in a crab as in a human being.<sup>12</sup> The only traditional metaphysical value which endures the novel's assault on modern man's self-definition is the value of human consciousness, and even this evaluation is to some extent diminished by the pointed rebuttal of the romantic understanding of the creative role of consciousness in the actualization of reality. The rhetorical question with which Shelley concludes "Mont Blanc," ("And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,/ If to the human mind's imaginings/ Silence and solitude were vacancy") is answered implicitly as Jacob reflects on the realities suggested by the Parthenon: "The extreme definiteness with which they stand, now a brilliant white, again yellow, and in some lights red, imposes ideas of durability, of the emergence through the earth of some spiritual energy elsewhere

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<sup>12</sup>"...each insect carries the globe of the world in its head." Jacob's Room, p. 162.

dissipated in trifles. But this durability exists quite independently of our admiration."<sup>13</sup>

As I noted in my earlier discussion of The Waves, the "spiritual energy" that Jacob intuits in this scene is defined elsewhere by Woolf as ". . .the thing that exists when we aren't there." I understand the "we" in this passage to signify both the individual personality and human nature--that which distinguishes one human being from another and humanity from the other phenomena of nature. Woolf, in Jacob's Room and elsewhere in her writing, is always vague about expressing what this thing is--certainly she never defines it as a Platonic world of eternal forms--but she is consistent in her understanding that it has nothing to do with individual personality or with human nature. To confirm this, we have only to recall Katherine's fascination with mathematics and her meditation on Kew Gardens, or to look ahead to Mrs. Ramsey's "losing personality" to become a "wedge-shaped core of darkness," or to Bernard's question, in The Waves, "How to describe the world seen without a self?" James Naremore, in The World Without a Self, points out that "Mrs. Woolf's novels are full of the desire to merge with the 'hosts opposed to the ego.'"<sup>14</sup> But that such an understanding of man's relationship to eternal reality is in accord with both Plato and the dualism that dominates Greek thought, and that it contradicts fundamental ontological premises of Christianity, Romanticism, and Positivism is

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<sup>13</sup> Jacob's Room, p. 147.

<sup>14</sup> James Naremore, The World Without a Self (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1973), p. 104.

clear. The Christian doctrines of creation, incarnation, and resurrection, the Romantic beliefs in "Natural Supernaturalism" and the creative-consciousness of the individual, and the Christian-inspired humanism of the Positivists are ideas which firmly tie human spiritual fulfillment to the earth, thus asserting a necessary contingency between the separate realities of Greek dualism.<sup>15</sup> Such ideas imbue corporeal life with a spiritual potentiality that is absent in Greek thought.

For the Greeks, the phenomenal world is accidental and inexplicable, the consequence of separation from the purity of spiritual existence. Socrates' concluding metaphor in the following passage expresses his understanding of the irreconcilability of the world of human action and the world of eternal reality:

For as has been already said, every soul of man has in the way of nature beheld true being; this was the condition of her passing into the form of man. But all men do not easily recall the things of the other world; they may have seen them for a short time only, or they may have been unfortunate when they fell to earth, and may have lost the memory of the holy things which they saw there through some evil and corrupting association. Few there are who retain the remembrance of them sufficiently; and they, when they behold any image of that other world, are rapt in amazement; but they are ignorant of what this means, because they have no clear perceptions. For there is no light in the earthly copies of justice or temperance or any of the higher qualities which are precious to souls: they are seen but through a glass dimly; and there are few who, going to the images, behold in them the realities, and they only with difficulty. They might have seen beauty shining in brightness, when, with the happy band following in the train of Zeus, as we philosophers did, or with other gods as others did, they saw a vision and were initiated into most blessed mysteries, which we celebrated in our state of innocence; and having no feeling of evils as yet to come; beholding apparitions

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<sup>15</sup>Comte in System of Positive Polity and Feurbach in The Essence of Christianity expressed the belief that something like the harmony and comfort that Christians believe will characterize the Millennium can be achieved through the worship of the spiritual instincts in man, though they deny any supernatural basis for these instincts.

innocent and simple and calm and happy as in a mystery;  
 shining in pure light, pure ourselves and not yet  
 enshrined in that living tomb which we carry about, now  
 that we are imprisoned in the body, as in an oyster-shell.  
 Let me linger thus long over the memory of scenes which  
 have passed away.<sup>16</sup>

Jacob's acceptance of these ideas puts him at odds with the values of his society. His reading of the Phaedrus and the epiphany experienced at the Parthenon focus the impressions of his youth into a sweeping repudiation of the values of modern man. The homocentric myth of Christianity, the progress myth of Positivism, and the aforementioned creative-consciousness myth of Romanticism are each seen as products of an unrealizable human need to unify the worlds of action and thought. The homocentric universal plan of Christianity, a myth of human meaning deriving from creationist metaphysics and the belief in a sentient, personal God, is discredited by Jacob's recurrent perceptions of the boundlessness of time and the insignificance of human activity in the workings of the universe. Ideas of human primacy and progress that characterize the response of Positivism to the theories of Lyell and Darwin are discredited by Jacob's recurrent perceptions of the unchanging, unevolving, eternal recurrence of true being and by the related rejection of the reality of time. What Jacob found in Greek thought was an explanation and a confirmation of feelings and perceptions which had always characterized his responses to the values of his society. He tells his friend, Bonomy, that he hopes to visit Greece every year of his life, and when asked why, he replies, "There's none of this European mysticism."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>"Phaedrus," pp. 408-9.

<sup>17</sup>Jacob's Room, p. 164.

Jacob's statement to Bonomy helps us to understand why Woolf tells us very little about Jacob's personality or social life. She characterizes him only to the extent necessary to establish the intrinsic separation of physical life and spiritual reality. We are told of only one lasting relationship that he forms with another human being, and even that seems to have very little significance to him in that the other party, Bonomy, is depicted as a sounding board for his ideas rather than as an intimate friend. Jacob's relationship with his family is barely alluded to in the novel, surfacing only in his childhood and upon the news of his death. Twice in the novel his brother cried out for Jacob in a way that suggests that his anguish derives from the sense in which Jacob is incomprehensible to him. But the import of this distance between Jacob and his family is not to be found in an analysis of particular familial relationships. We have, in fact, little idea what Jacob's attitude toward his family was. Rather, his brother's anguished cries remind us that what Jacob chiefly signifies in this novel has nothing whatever to do with interpersonal relationships.

Even the several descriptions of Jacob's attempts to develop relationships with women emphasize this detachment of his spiritual self from the experiences of life. It is of course significant that he is most attracted to and most comfortable with women who are uncomplicatedly sensual. Laurette, Fanny, and Florinda are attractive to him precisely because they in no way engage his spiritual selfhood, but rather simply accept life without explanation. He says of Florinda, "If she had had a mind, she might have read with clearer eyes than we can. She and her sort have solved the question by turning it to a trifle of washing the hands nightly before going to bed, the only

difficulty being whether you prefer your water hot or cold, which being settled, the mind can go about its business unassailed,"<sup>18</sup> Florinda ". . . had called him Jacob without asking his leave. She had sat upon his knee. Thus did all good women in the days of the Greeks."<sup>19</sup>

Such relationships reflect, for Jacob, the truth about interpersonal relationships and corporeal life in its totality. The events of life have no spiritual meaning. Experience is accidental and inexplicable, and as a consequence its value is determined only by the satisfactions it produces. By contrast, his relationships with Clara and Sarah are entirely unfulfilling because these relationships are complicated by spiritual demands. The life of the spirit is fully contemplative and has nothing to do with corporeal existence, and as a consequence, has nothing to do with personality, interpersonal relationships, or social obligation.

We are first alerted to the need to understand Jacob as an archetype of the contemplative mind rather than as an individual personality in the cryptic descriptions of his childhood that comprise the first two chapters. He communicates with no one, and no one responds to him. Woolf limits her depiction of his responses to the world to those that are inchoate intimations of the understandings he will achieve later in life. Bernard Blackstone's suggestion that Jacob's Room can be read as a commentary on Wordsworth's Ode directs our attention to the archetypal significance of the events recorded in these chapters.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Jacob's Room, p. 78.

<sup>19</sup> Jacob's Room, p. 75.

<sup>20</sup> "The novel is developing into a commentary on Wordsworth's Ode." Virginia Woolf: a Commentary (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), p. 63.



Woolf, like Wordsworth, is not concerned with the individuality of the child, but rather with the purity of innocent perception. The inchoate realizations of the child are elevated above the evolved, collective wisdom of society. A salient point for establishing this connection between Woolf's and Wordsworth's intentions is the similar role played by Wordsworth's "Homely Nurse," who in the Ode unconsciously tries to induce the child to "Forget the Glories he hath known," and by Jacob's Nanny, who together with his mother is a "conspirator plotting the eternal conspiracy of hush and clean bottles."<sup>21</sup> The nurses, like Blake's "woman old" in "The Mental Traveller," attempt to distract the child from his spiritual awareness by comfort and seduction. Later in the novel, Mrs. Woolf will again suggest an archetypal conflict between spiritual awareness and the acceptance of corporeal life when she concludes a description of several of Jacob's professors by noting that, "A woman, divining the priest, would invariably despise."<sup>22</sup>

This is not to say that Wordsworth's Ode and Jacob's Room finally have much in common in their understandings of the human condition, for they do not. Professor Blackstone has suggested that Jacob's Room is a commentary on the Ode. I assume that what he meant by this is that the novel can be read as an acceptance of Wordsworth's belief in the value of the spontaneous intuitions of youth, but as a repudiation of Wordsworth's sense of a providential spirit of earthly rebirth that leads him to conclude that "To me and the meanest flower that blows can give/ Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears." The tone of

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<sup>21</sup>Jacob's Room, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup>Jacob's Room, p. 39.

Jacob's Room is more consistently somber than is the Ode's; the intimations of eternal reality that the novel explores are expressed not in observations and recollections of the zestful happiness of children at play in nature, but in rocks, crabs, stark chimneys over Cornish hills, the "enormous mind" of the British Museum, and the spiritual energy embodied in the Parthenon that makes it "likely to outlast the entire world."<sup>23</sup> And, while Wordsworth's Ode concludes in an affirmation that attests to the existence of a redemptive power that finally transfigures human existence and synthesizes man's spirit with the life he lives, Jacob's Room ends with a melancholy and fearful cry of uncertainty which serves as an appropriate denouement for a novel that sees no connection between the two worlds in which man lives,

That Jacob is to be understood as an archetype of the contemplative mind rather than as an individual personality is also suggested by Woolf's including so little description, other than what I noted above, about his relationship with his family. Jacob is isolated from his family, but we cannot really say that he is alienated from them for we are given no indication that he thinks about them at all. His consciousness seems suspended above the experiences of daily life, acknowledging only those details of existence which suggest the nature of the human relationship to spiritual reality. Woolf's use of this extreme method in describing Jacob's childhood anticipates the emphases in the ensuing description of his life. Thus, when his brother, early in the novel, calls out "Ja--cob! Ja--cob!" Woolf notes that, "The voice had an extraordinary sadness, pure from all body, pure from all

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<sup>23</sup> Jacob's Room, p. 148.



passion," going out into the world, solitary, unanswered, breaking against the rocks -- so it sounded."<sup>24</sup> What Jacob represents for Woolf is a state of being "pure from all body, pure from all passion," and as a consequence free of individuality, of personality, and of any significant involvement with the corporeal world.

Virginia Woolf consistently tells us, in this novel and in other writings, that we can never really know anyone else. We see that the reason for this is not only that the human personality, because it is in a process of constant change, is inexplicable, but that the archetypal human consciousness--that aspect of being that is not personality--is essentially inexpressible. Thus, the isolation of Jacob's childhood anticipates the isolation of his twenty-six-year life. Despite the fact that we assume that he leads an active life comprised of the normal experiences of a young man, we come to know only that aspect of his being that transcends these experiences. He lives and dies a hermit of the intellect, unknown by all who come in contact with him. He says for Woolf, as Manfred said for Byron, that "The Tree of Knowledge is not the Tree of Life," and like Byron, whose "complete works in one volume"<sup>25</sup> he chose when offered as a parting gift any object from his Latin tutor's study, he will come to see an essential dualism between the spiritual and the corporeal worlds.

Much of the thematic structure of Jacob's Room is suggested in the first important glimpse we are given of the workings of Jacob's mind. The scene captures what appears to be an inchoate first consciousness of the implications of death;

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<sup>24</sup>Jacob's Room, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup>Jacob's Room, p. 19.



The rock was one of those tremendously solid brown, or rather black, rocks which emerge from the sand like something primitive. Rough with crinkled limpet shells and sparsely strewn with locks of dry seaweed, a small boy has to stretch his legs far apart, and indeed to feel rather heroic, before he gets to the top.

But there, on the very top, is a hollow full of water, with a sandy bottom; with a blob of jelly stuck to the side, and some mussels. A fish darts across. The fringe of yellow-brown seaweed flutters, and out pushes an opal-shelled crab----

"Oh, a huge crab," Jacob murmured---- and begins his journey on weakly legs on the sandy bottom. Now! Jacob plunged his hand. The crab was cool and very light. But the water was thick with sand, and so, scrambling down, Jacob was about to jump, holding his bucket in front of him, when he saw, stretched entirely rigid, side by side, their faces very red, an enormous man and woman,

An enormous man and woman (it was early-closing day) were stretched motionless, with their heads on pocket-handkerchiefs, side by side, within a few feet of the sea, while two or three gulls gracefully skirted the incoming waves, and settled near their boots.

The large red faces lying on the bandanna handkerchiefs stared up at Jacob. Jacob stared down at them. Holding his bucket very carefully, Jacob then jumped deliberately and trotted away very nonchalantly at first, but faster and faster as the waves came creaming up to him and he had to swerve to avoid them, and the gulls rose in front of him and floated out and settled again a little farther on. A large black woman was sitting on the sand. He ran towards her.

"Nanny! Nanny!" he cried, sobbing the words out on the crest of each gasping breath.

The waves came round her. She was a rock. She was covered with the seaweed which pops when it is pressed. He was lost.

There he stood. His face composed itself. He was about to roar when, lying among the black sticks and straw under the cliff, he saw a whole skull--perhaps a cow's skull, a skull, perhaps, with the teeth in it. Sobbing, but absent-mindedly, he ran farther and farther away until he held the skull in his arms.<sup>26</sup>

The full significance of this scene does not become clear until we experience the fullness of the novel, but in retrospect, despite the

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<sup>26</sup> Jacob's Room, pp. 7-8.

cryptic rendering of perception in the scene, its meaning seems clear, Why does Jacob respond so curiously and passionately to these objects? Bernard Blackstone's belief that this scene "does not harden into symbol"<sup>27</sup> is perhaps true, and is consistent with Woolf's stated attitudes toward univocal symbolism in literature, but does not seem to take into account that the events convey an explicable meaning that is thematically coherent with the substance of the novel as a whole.

Both Jacob's recoil from his Nanny and his embrace of the skull signify his rejection of the corporeal world of change and death as aspects of true being. The trauma he has experienced is resolved by his embrace of the skull, an embrace that does not signify a morbid love of death, but rather a reconciliation with the fact of death as the denominator of corporeal life. Socrates' explanation of the soul's relationship to beginnings and ends in time goes far, it seems to me, in explaining Woolf's symbolic intentions:

The soul is immortal, for that is immortal which is ever in motion; but that which moves and is moved by another, in ceasing to move ceases also to live. Therefore, only that which is self-moving, never failing of self, never ceases to move, and is the fountain and beginning of motion to all that moves besides. Now, the beginning is unbegotten, for that which is begotten has a beginning; but the beginning has no beginning, for if a beginning were begotten of something, that would have no beginning. But that, which is unbegotten must also be indestructible; for if beginning were destroyed, there could be no beginning out of anything, nor anything out of a beginning; and all things must have a beginning. And therefore the self-moving is the beginning of motion; and this can neither be destroyed nor begotten, for in that case the whole heavens and all generation would collapse and stand still, and never again have

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<sup>27</sup>Blackstone, p. 57.

motion or birth. But if the self-moving is immortal, he who affirms that self-motion is the very idea and essence of the soul will not be put to confusion. For the body which is moved from without is soulless; but that which is moved from within has a soul, and this is involved in the nature of the soul. But if the soul be truly affirmed to be the self-moving, then must she also be without beginning, and immortal. Enough of the soul's immortality.<sup>28</sup>

Jacob is no longer "put to confusion" when he intuits that true being is immortal. Death can be accepted without fear because it is no aspect of his ultimate sense of reality.

Certainly this understanding of Jacob's childhood epiphany helps us to understand why Woolf describes his death so abruptly and matter-of-factly at the end of the novel. The death is an event in time, and as a consequence, no real event in the spiritual life that Jacob has pursued and embodied. Jacob's death does not affect the understanding reader as it did his brother, who seems to have had no awareness of what was most important about Jacob, and as a consequence responded to the death with the confusion that Socrates describes.

The other events in Jacob's childhood reverie are also symbolic when they are read in the light of the foregoing discussion. The rock, which is "tremendously solid" and "like something primitive" suggests the permanence of the supernal reality that Jacob will seek to comprehend. In the rock, but no permanent or necessary part of it, is the hollow of water with its assortment of life. The crab, which we will later see ". . . trying with its weakly legs to climb the steep side of the bucket; trying again and falling back, and trying again,"<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>"Phaedrus," p. 403.

<sup>29</sup>Jacob's Room, p. 12.



serves as an obvious symbol of the denominator of corporeal life and of the futile struggle to achieve fulfillment in that life. The red-faced couple, stretched in the posture of death within a few feet of the subsuming sea are symbols of death, and as such, the cause of Jacob's momentary terror. The Nanny, to whom he first turns, represents the alternative that Jacob rejects in that she seeks to seduce him through earthly comfort into accepting the ultimacy of life's pathos. The skull which he embraces, although a symbol of death, is also like the rock in that it symbolizes the immutability of true being. We are pointedly reminded of this symbolism later in the novel when Professor Huxtable is said to lie "triumphant. . . on a pillow of stone."<sup>30</sup>

Woolf establishes a context for this interpretation of Jacob's childhood experience in several meditations which reveal her belief that human actions and values usually suppress the truth that Jacob experiences. One such meditation concerns a visit to an Aquarium:

So that was a reason for going down into the Aquarium, where the sallow blinds, the stale smell of spirits of salt, the bamboo chairs, the tables with ash-trays, the revolving fish, the attendant knitting behind six or seven chocolate boxes (often she was quite alone with the fish for hours at a time) remained in the mind as part of the monster shark, he himself being only a flabby yellow receptacle, like an empty Gladstone bag in a tank. No one had ever been cheered by the Aquarium; but the faces of those emerging quickly lost their dim, chilled expression when they perceived that it was only by standing in a queue that one could be admitted to the pier. Once through the turnstiles, every one walked for a yard or two very briskly; some flagged at this stall; others at that. But it was the band that drew them all to it finally; even the fishermen on the lower pier taking up their pitch within its range.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Jacob's Room, p. 38.

<sup>31</sup> Jacob's Room, p. 16.

The spectators are quickly reassured by the signs of order and purpose which permit them to suppress the discomfiting identification of the attendant with the shark. Here, as elsewhere in the novel, we see human self-conception measured against images which suggest the ephemerality and insignificance of man. Mrs. Jarvis, the clergyman's wife, is caught in such a moment and becomes the subject of another meditation which further confirms this understanding:

Mrs. Jarvis walked on the moor when she was unhappy, going as far as a certain saucer-shaped hollow, though she always meant to go to a more distant ridge; and there she sat down, and took out the little book hidden beneath her cloak and read a few lines of poetry, and looked about her. She was not very unhappy, and, seeing that she was forty-five, never perhaps would be very unhappy, desperately unhappy that is, and leave her husband, and ruin a good man's career, as she sometimes threatened.

Still there is no need to say what risks a clergyman's wife runs when she walks on the moor. Short, dark, with kindling eyes, a pheasant's feather in her hat, Mrs. Jarvis was just the sort of woman to lose her faith upon the moors--to confound her God with the universal that is--but she did not lose her faith, did not leave her husband, never read her poem through, and went on walking the moors, looking at the moon behind the elm trees, and feeling as she sat on the grass high above Scarborough. . . Yes, yes, when the lark soars; when the sheep, moving a step or two onwards, crop the turf, and at the same time set their bells tinkling; when the breeze first blows, then dies down, leaving the cheek kissed; when the ships on the sea below seem to cross each other and pass on as if drawn by an invisible hand; when there are distant concussions in the air and phantom horsemen galloping, ceasing; when the horizon swims blue, green, emotional--then Mrs. Jarvis, heaving a sigh, thinks to herself, "If only some one could give me. . . if I could give some one. . ." But she does not know what she wants to give, nor who could give it her.<sup>32</sup>

In each of these meditations, the response to glimpses of the truth about man's place in the universe is fear. Experience provides man

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<sup>32</sup> Jacob's Room, pp. 25-6.

with evidence that denies his culturally derived beliefs about the significance of his existence, but he cannot accept the truth without dismissing the comforting beliefs which imbue human action with meaning. The response of mankind to the legitimate evidence of truth is typified by Jacob's mother, who looks ". . . with uneasy emotion at the world displayed so luridly, with sudden sparks of yellow and black mutability, against this blazing sunset, this astonishing agitation of vitality and colour, which stirred Betty Flanders and made her think of responsibility and danger."<sup>33</sup>

The pattern in these meditations reflects back upon Jacob's fear of the crab and the sun-bathing couple. Jacob overcomes this fear by unconsciously renouncing the demands of his corporeal identity. He intuits as a child what he will come to understand later in his life: "The problem [of integrating life and thought, body and soul] is insoluble. The body is harnessed to a brain. Beauty goes hand in hand with stupidity."<sup>34</sup> But his childhood acceptance of this truth will be hard-earned in later life. His journey to the Parthenon, where he will again come to terms with the truth he experienced as a child, will be characterized not by fear of the truth, but by resentment. Like the Byron whom Woolf associates him with, Jacob will be ". . . ready to turn with wrath upon whoever had fashioned life thus."<sup>35</sup>

Jacob's experiences at Cambridge University crystalize his childhood intuitions into concepts. Cambridge is scrutinized as a symbol

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<sup>33</sup> Jacob's Room, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Jacob's Room, p. 81.

<sup>35</sup> Jacob's Room, p. 81.

of Western man's will and capacity to seek the truth. Woolf meditates on Cambridge and what it symbolizes when Jacob first arrives there. The meditation introduces the ambivalence that will characterize Jacob's response to Cambridge in that it ends with a question that will be answered equivocally:

They say the sky is the same everywhere. Travelers, the shipwrecked, exiles, and the dying draw comfort from the thought, and no doubt if you are of a mystical tendency, consolation, even explanation, shower down from the unbroken surface. But above Cambridge--anyhow above the roof of King's College Chapel--there is a difference. Out at sea a great city will cast a great brightness into the night. Is it fanciful to suppose the sky, washed into the crevices of King's College Chapel, lighter, thinner, more sparkling than the sky elsewhere? Does Cambridge burn not only into the night, but into the day?<sup>36</sup>

Jacob experiences a conflict of impressions about Cambridge that are the basis for his own answer to this question. In one respect, he understands Cambridge to be a significant part of the conspiracy of distraction by which humanity protects itself from the implications of the truth.

Professor Plumer, who hosts traditional Sunday luncheons for the undergraduates, is perhaps the most obvious symbol of this aspect of Cambridge. His values seem to be entirely grounded in the social and political world, and because of this, he takes his place in the long line of self-assured men who are satirized in Woolf's fiction for the certainty with which they hold their circumscribed views: "There can be no excuse for this outrage upon one hour of human life, save the reflection which occurred to Mr. Plumer as he carved the mutton, that if no don ever gave a luncheon party, if Sunday after Sunday passed, if

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<sup>36</sup>Jacob's Room, p. 29.

men went down, became lawyers, doctors, members of Parliament, business men--if no don ever gave a luncheon party--,"<sup>37</sup> We can complete the rhetorical question for Jacob" What would happen to the order of life, the sense of established rightness created and endorsed by the accepted patterns of social existence? Woolf, of course, is not only mocking Professor Plumer's sense of his own importance to the perpetuation of human values, but also the social and political values that he is spokesman for; "He could talk about Persia and the Trade winds, the Reform Bill and the cycle of harvests. Books were on his shelves by Wells and Shaw; on the tables serious six-penny weeklies written by pale men in muddy boots--the weekly creek and screech of brains rinsed in cold water and wrung dry--melancholy papers."<sup>38</sup>

It is not the Professor's interests in the affairs of the world that disturb Jacob and Mrs. Woolf, but rather the implied centrality of these interests to human self-conception and the formation of human values. The papers are melancholy because they are distractions from man's real intellectual need which is the discovery of his relationship to eternal reality. The references to Shaw and Wells remind us again of Richard Dalloway in The Voyage Out, and of the Positivists' attempt to reconcile traditional spiritual values with the empirical bias of post-Enlightenment science and philosophy. For Virginia Woolf and for Jacob, such concerns are peripheral to the spiritual needs of mankind. "Such a thing to believe in," thinks Jacob, "--Shaw and Wells and the serious six-penny weeklies."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Jacob's Room, p. 32,

<sup>38</sup> Jacob's Room, p. 34.

<sup>39</sup> Jacob's Room, p. 33,

Jacob rejects this aspect of the light of Cambridge, understanding it to be an obstacle to the fulfillment of his real needs:

Anyhow, whether undergraduate or shop boy, man or woman, it must come as a shock about the age of twenty--the world of the elderly--thrown in such dark outline against what we are; upon the reality; the moors and Byron; the sea and the lighthouse; the sheep's jaw with the yellow teeth in it; upon the obstinate irrepressible conviction which makes youth so intolerably disagreeable--"I am what I am, and intend to be it," for which there will be no form in the world unless Jacob makes one for himself. The Plumers will try to prevent him from making it. Wells and Shaw and the serious sixpenny weeklies will sit on its head.<sup>40</sup>

We see that the estrangement from society which budded in his childhood has grown, by age twenty, into a sweeping repudiation of the dominant ideas of post-Enlightenment intellectual history: "What were they after, scrubbing and demolishing, these elderly people? Had they never read Homer, Shakespeare, the Elizabethans? He saw it clearly outlined against the feelings he drew from youth and natural inclination."<sup>41</sup> Thus when we are told the name of an essay lying on his work table, "Does History Consist of the Biographies of Great Men?"<sup>42</sup> we assume that his thesis was in accord with Ralph Denham's proclamation to Katherine Hilburry that "The worship of greatness in the nineteenth century seems to me to explain the worthlessness of that generation." Jacob's alienation from the values of his society will grow in intensity as he grows older, culminating in his acceptance of what he understands to be the values of the Greeks, whose skepticism about individual

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<sup>40</sup> Jacob's Room, p. 34.

<sup>41</sup> Jacob's Room, p. 33.

<sup>42</sup> Jacob's Room, p. 37.

significance is the probable reason that there exist few biographies and no autobiographies among their extant writings.<sup>43</sup>

But the impressions made by such as Professor Plumer are mitigated by the impressions made by Professors Huxtable, Sopwith, and Cowan: "If any light burns above Cambridge, it must be from three such rooms; Greek burns here; science there; philosophy on the ground floor."<sup>44</sup> Woolf sees these men as priests of the intellect ("how priestly they look")<sup>45</sup> who somehow transcend their human limitations to become agents of the world of ideas. What she emphasizes is the irrelevance of their personalities to the primary function of this agency: "Strange paralysis and constriction--marvelous illumination. Serene over it all rides the great thick brow, and sometimes asleep or in the quiet spaces of the night you might fancy that on a pillow of stone he lay triumphant,"<sup>46</sup> she says of Professor Huxtable in a description that certainly echoes Socrates' statement that "the mind of the philosopher alone has wings." Professor Huxtable's pillow of stone recalls for us the rock and skull in Jacob's childhood reverie, and we understand that the serenity he is experiencing is the result of his coming to terms with the universal truth which the rock and skull suggested to the child. Woolf furthers the connection between this achieved knowledge

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<sup>43</sup>"It is a suggestive truth that, in more than a thousand years of literary history, the Graeco-Roman world had failed to produce anything that might be called a personal record; in this sense, Augustine was perhaps anticipated only by the emperor Marcus Aurelius." Charles Norris Cochrane, Christianity and Classical Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 386.

<sup>44</sup>Jacob's Room, p. 38.

<sup>45</sup>Jacob's Room, p. 38.

<sup>46</sup>Jacob's Room, p. 38.

of the Cambridge professors and Jacob's childhood intimations when she concludes her meditation on Professor Cowan by abruptly noting: "A woman, divining the priest, would, involuntarily, despise." We are reminded of "the conspiracy of hush and clean bottles," and of the novel's persistent assertion of a fundamental antipathy between the values of the corporeal and spiritual worlds.

Cambridge was an intellectual watershed for Jacob in that the awareness of this antipathy dominates his consciousness until his death. His Byronic rejection of a society too certain of its own value and values will lead him to write an essay entitled, "The Ethics of Indecency,"<sup>47</sup> and to lead for a time a life that reflects what we must assume to have been the values of that essay. But the kind of life that he leads is not of central importance to the novel. Insofar as it is described, it serves primarily as a framework for the spiritual aspirations which lead him away from mankind and even selfhood to participation in a non-human spiritual reality. He comes to understand his own humanness as a limitation that must be overcome before consciousness can fully discover its relationship to true being: "To gallop intemperately; fall on the sand tired out; to feel the earth spin; to have--positively--a rush of friendship for stones and grass, as if humanity were over, and as for men and women, let them go hang--there is no getting over the fact that this desire seizes us pretty often."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Jacob's Room, p. 77.

<sup>48</sup> Jacob's Room, p. 140.





This description of Jacob's spiritual triumph brings into focus the novel's general rejection of Christian and Post-Christian humanisms. The belief in the contingency between human action and spiritual fulfillment that characterizes post-classical Western thought is contradicted by the suggestion that spiritual fulfillment is achieved only at the cost of one's humanness rather than because of it. The Christian attempt to unify divine will and human will in the concept of love, and to unify supernal and mundane being through the doctrine of Incarnation; the Romantic belief that "All deities reside in the human breast," and that "Eternity is in love with the productions of time";<sup>49</sup> the Positivists' belief in the evolution of mankind's spiritual capacity in his search for the selfless utopia--these characteristically Western ideas are challenged by the belief that the body is "a living tomb. . .that we are imprisoned in. . . ." True being was for Jacob, as for Plato, "bare of flesh."<sup>50</sup>

Jacob's rejection of humanness as an aspect of spiritual fulfillment should not, however, be understood to result from a contempt for physical life. He is neither a Gnostic nor a Manichean, but rather a committed dualist who seeks only to discover and live by the separate terms of temporal and eternal reality. When he "tears up his ticket and walks away" it does not seem to me that he is expressing contempt for life, but rather for the society in which he lives. We note that although he ". . .seldom thought of Plato or Socrates in the flesh. . .

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<sup>49</sup>William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.

<sup>50</sup>"But who, save the nerve worn and sleepless, or thinkers standing with hands to the eyes on some crag above the multitude, see things thus in skeleton outline, bare of flesh." Jacob's Room, p. 162.

he was beginning to think of the problems of civilization, which were resolved, of course, so remarkably by the ancient Greeks, though their solution is of no help to us."<sup>51</sup> Greek society, free from incarnational ideas, was a society with the capacity and will to live by the truth.<sup>52</sup> But as for why Jacob is described as having said that their solution is of no use to us, I can only suggest that he had in mind something similar to Jung's rejection of Eastern solutions for modern European problems; ". . . it is sad indeed when the European departs from his own nature and imitates the East or 'affects' it in any way. The possibilities open to him would be so much greater if he would remain true to himself and evolve out of his own nature all that the East has brought forth in the course of the millenia."<sup>53</sup>

But the hopeful note in Jung's statement is absent from Jacob's Room. The novel offers no suggestions of a possible evolution of wisdom that will alter the self-conceptions of Western man. Further, even the value of Jacob's climactic intuition at the Acropolis is obscured at the end: "As for reaching the Acropolis who can say that we ever do it, or that when Jacob awoke the next morning he found anything hard and durable to keep for ever?"<sup>54</sup> Perhaps this ending is an indication

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<sup>51</sup>Jacob's Room, p. 149.

<sup>52</sup>"Against the background of nothingness from which it is called forth, individual being assumes a rank of primacy [in Christian thought] which all ancient philosophy denied it," Hans Jonas, "Jewish and Christian Elements in Western Tradition," Creation: the Impact of an Idea (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), p. 252.

<sup>53</sup>The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, 17 vols., (New York: Pantheon Books), edited by H. Read, M. Fordham, and G. Adler, vol. 13, (Alchemical Studies, 1967), pp. 9-10.

<sup>54</sup>Jacob's Room, p. 160.



that despite Woolf's apparent commitment to the dualism implicit in Jacob's Room, she continued to be swayed by the need for wholeness of identity that motivates the earlier and later novels. Such a conjecture, however, goes against the sharply focused line of meaning that underlies the novel as a whole. Thus when Sarah compares Jacob to "that man in Moliere,"<sup>55</sup> we believe that the comparison to Alceste is appropriate. Jacob walks away from society because society seems incapable of becoming what it can and ought to be.

### Mrs. Dalloway

I suggested at the beginning of this chapter that Mrs. Dalloway can be read as a technical and thematic complement to Jacob's Room. If we understand the intent of the earlier novel to be the depiction of Jacob as an archetype of the contemplative mind, then we can better understand why Woolf chose to focus her attention on someone as overtly mindless as Clarissa Dalloway in her next novel, for Mrs. Dalloway is, in contrast to Jacob's Room, an apologia for someone who seems on the surface to live by frivolous and superficial values. Woolf's intention is to clarify and justify Clarissa's visceral and emotional approach to life by relating it to the same dualistic understanding of reality that underlies Jacob's Room.

One of Woolf's comments about Tolstoy, her favorite Russian novelist, gives us a way to state this intention more simply:

Life dominates Tolstoi as the soul dominates Dostoevsky.  
There is always at the center of all the brilliant  
and flashing petals of the flower this scorpion, 'Why

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<sup>55</sup>Jacob's Room, p. 169.

live?' There is always at the centre of the book some Olenin, or Pierre, or Levin who gathers into himself all experience, turns the world round between his fingers, and never ceases to ask, even as he enjoys it, what is the meaning of it, and what should be our aims. It is not the priest who shatters our dreams most effectively; it is the man who has known them, and loved them himself. When he derides them, the world indeed turns to dust and ashes beneath our feet.<sup>56</sup>

What is emphasized in *Jacob* is that aspect of ourselves that turns the world to dust and ashes beneath our feet; Clarissa, the symbol of the human heart, is Mrs. Woolf's affirmative answer to the question, "Why live?" Clarissa, although certainly a more complex character, is Virginia Woolf's Natasha Rostov, for like her, Clarissa is a symbol of an inexplicable vitality that man can repudiate only by first refusing to allow himself to respond to the spell it casts. In *Jacob's Room* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, mind and heart are irreconcilable adversaries, and the tension that is generated by their conflicting claims is the condition that man must include in his understanding of the nature, value, and meaning of human existence.

Early in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the author speaks of the ". . . waves of the divine vitality which Clarissa loved."<sup>57</sup> The passage directs us to the

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<sup>56</sup>"The Russian Point of View," *Collected Essays*, I; 245-6. Compare this perception with her comment on Plato to see the relationship between her understanding of Tolstoy and the Greek thought that lies behind *Jacob's Room*: "All this flows over the arguments of Plato--laughter and movement; people getting up and going out; the hour changing; tempers being lost; jokes cracked; the dawn rising. Truth, it seems, is various; Truth is to be pursued with all our faculties. Are we to rule out the amusements, the tendernesses, the frivolities of friendship because we love truth? Will truth be quicker found because we stop our ears to music and drink no wine, and sleep instead of talking through the long winter's night? It is not to the cloistered disciplinarian mortifying himself in solitude that we are to turn, but to the well-sunned nature, the man who practices the art of living to the best advantage, so that nothing is stunted but some things are permanently more valuable than others. "On Not Knowing Greek," p. 9,

<sup>57</sup>*Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 9,



most important aspect of her character, her love of life and her capacity to find joy and satisfaction in experience. It is important, then, that it is her anticipation of the evening's party and the party itself that provide the structural framework for the novel, for in our understanding of the value of the event that Clarissa is so fully linked with we find the central theme of Mrs. Dalloway.

For Clarissa, the party which she will give that evening is a way to "kindle and illuminate,"<sup>58</sup> The party is significant to her because it is her way not only of making her offering to life but of justifying herself to the others in her life, and its success is, for her and for others, a confirmation of the value of human experience in a universe which offers no ultimate meaning to that experience. "What she liked was simply life, 'That's what I do it for,' she said, speaking aloud, to life. . . . But suppose Peter said to her, 'Yes, yes, but your parties?' all she could say was (and nobody could be expected to understand): They're an offering; which sounded horribly vague."<sup>59</sup>

But to others in her life these parties were evidence of shallowness, of chances missed, of a life gone wrong. Peter Walsh, whose thoughts about Clarissa continually vacillate between fascination with the vitality he sees in her and admonishment of what he understands to be the wasted potentiality of her life, criticizes her because ". . . she needed people, always people, to bring it out, with the inevitable result that she frittered her time away, lunching, dining, giving those incessant parties of hers, talking nonsense, saying things she didn't

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<sup>58</sup>Mrs. Dalloway, p. 7.

<sup>59</sup>Mrs. Dalloway, p. 134.



mean, blunting the edge of her life, losing her discrimination,"<sup>60</sup> Such thoughts are characteristic of the ways that others in the novel view Clarissa. Lady Bruton, who ". . . had the reputation of caring more about politics than people"<sup>61</sup> thought of Clarissa as one of those ". . . women that got in their husband's way, preventing them from taking posts abroad,"<sup>62</sup> and indicated this evaluation of her by inviting only Clarissa's husband to her lunchtime discussions of politics and society. "It might have been better if Richard had married a woman with less charm," she thought, "who would have helped him more with his work."<sup>63</sup> And Miss Kilman, whose bitterness about the life she believed she was forced to lead drove her to the consolations of religion, "bitter and burning, . . . two years three months ago,"<sup>64</sup> thinks of Clarissa as "Fool! Simpleton! You who have known neither sorrow nor pleasure; who have trifled your life away."<sup>65</sup>

Much of Clarissa's self-understanding tends to confirm these evaluations: "She knew nothing; no language, no history; she scarcely read a book now, except memoirs in bed,"<sup>66</sup> When she thinks again of her party: "Nothing else had she of any importance; she could not think, write, even play the piano. She muddled Armenians and Turks; loved

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<sup>60</sup> Mrs. Dalloway, p. 87.

<sup>61</sup> Mrs. Dalloway, p. 117.

<sup>62</sup> Mrs. Dalloway, p. 117.

<sup>63</sup> Mrs. Dalloway, p. 120.

<sup>64</sup> Mrs. Dalloway, p. 137.

<sup>65</sup> Mrs. Dalloway, p. 138.

<sup>66</sup> Mrs. Dalloway, p. 11.

success; hated discomfort, must be liked, talked oceans of nonsense; and to this day, ask her where the Equator was, and she did not know."<sup>67</sup> Yet, it is this seemingly frivolous woman who is asked to carry the weight of meaning in this novel. The orchestrated effect of all the attention paid to judging Clarissa is to focus the reader's attention upon the attempted apologia. For Clarissa, for Peter Walsh, the Marlowe-like "observer" of her actions in the novel, and, if the novel is successful, for the reader, somewhere within the experience of the party that is the extension and manifestation of the values for which Clarissa is indicated by others throughout the novel is the human reply to the nihilistic contempt for human experience that is the logical outgrowth of the understanding of reality that permeates this novel and Jacob's Room. And just as we discovered that Jacob, "pure from all body, pure from all flesh," was an archetype of and spokesman for "that bodiless spirit likely to outlast the entire world" that Socrates defined in Phaedrus, we will come to acknowledge Clarissa as the fully manifested embodiment of the "waves of divine vitality" that are the sustaining and perpetuating substance of the temporal world.

Virginia Woolf uses several methods to effect this apologia. The most obvious, but perhaps the least important, is the devotion of some effort to establishing the inadequacies of the values of the several minor characters who find Clarissa wanting. Far more important are the characterizations of Septimus and Peter. Septimus, who functions as Clarissa's alter ego, establishes the intellectual nihilism that provides the context for the novel's celebration of human emotion.

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<sup>67</sup> Mrs. Dalloway, p. 135,

Peter is the novel's enquiring mind, a figure whose fascination with and need to understand Clarissa focuses the reader's attention upon Clarissa as a necessary object of the human search to understand the value of experience. These minor and major figures, more fully and vividly drawn than any found in Woolf's more abstract novels such as Jacob's Room, The Waves, and Between the Acts, enrich not only the substance of the novel, but also its meaning, for this general richness of characterization, together with the descriptions of London which capture the exciting texture and movement of life in the city, cohere with the novel's thematic intentions just as the more ethereal and abstract texture of Jacob's Room was seen to cohere with its themes.

Finally, and certainly the most important method used to effect the apologia, is the depth and density of the characterization of Clarissa herself. Although she strikes the people who know her differently, Clarissa thinks deeply and often about the values that direct the choices she has made for her life. We find her at a point of crisis in her life, facing ahead to old age, and looking back at a near-fatal illness from which she has just recovered. Although we are led to believe by her recollections that she has never believed that human experience has meaning--her persistent, life-long antipathy to all teleologies attest to this--we do know that she has always valued experience. It is this sense of life's value that is challenged by the spectres of death that confront her. Thus, the novel seeks to achieve its apologia not merely by contrasting Clarissa's values with those held by others in the novel, but most importantly, by testing her values against all that tends to discredit them from within. Her triumph at the end of the novel, manifested externally in the

acknowledgments expressed by Peter and others at the party, is not simply a triumph of communication, but also of actualization. She succeeds in convincing others when she becomes again in action what she has always needed to be, and through the same process, she succeeds in convincing herself.

In her essay on Montaigne, Virginia Woolf poses the problem that Clarissa resolves: "For beyond the difficulty of communicating oneself, there is the supreme difficulty of being oneself."<sup>68</sup> The solution for Clarissa is achieved only by her overcoming both difficulties in a single moment of self-actualization. It is not surprising, then, that the Peter who throughout the novel has been so articulate in expressing his thoughts and feelings is, at that moment, at a loss for words. When he is stunned by his experience of the moment into his series of Keatsian questions, ("What is this terror? what is this ecstasy? . . . What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?"),<sup>69</sup> he finds that the "what" that he seeks is a "who," "'It is Clarissa,' he said, 'For there she was.'"<sup>70</sup>

The use of minor characters as foils, the more complex uses of characters such as Septimus and Peter, the general subordination of technique to theme, and the characterization of Clarissa herself, are, then, Woolf's methods for effecting the intended apologia in Mrs. Dalloway.

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<sup>68</sup>"Montaigne," Collected Essays, III: 19.

<sup>69</sup>Mrs. Dalloway, p. 213.

<sup>70</sup>Mrs. Dalloway, p. 213.

Throughout her fiction Virginia Woolf uses the foil as a principal means of both defining and justifying the values of her sympathetic protagonists. We have only to recall her depictions of characters such as the Dalloways in The Voyage Out, Professor Plumer in Jacob's Room, and Charles Tansley in To the Lighthouse to see a pattern in her fiction that includes the depictions in this novel of Lady Bruton, Doctors Bradshawe and Holmes, Hugh Whitbread and Doris Kilman. The technique is openly didactic in that the characters are invariably indicted for the values they hold or represent, values which usually are in direct conflict with those held by the sympathetic protagonist. These foils tend to clarify, by contrast, the values of the protagonist, and further, to justify those values by discrediting objections to them. Usually, the characters are made to appear preposterous, and the characteristic attitude expressed when the author comments about them from her own perspective is outrage over the fact that society seems to take them as seriously as they take themselves. Further, they serve to relate the ideas of the protagonist to the prevailing climate of ideas in England during the early twentieth century, and consequently enrich the novels' commentary on the history of Western thought, a subject that seems always to be at the center of Woolf's interest. Never are the values these characters represent offered to the reader as even potentially viable alternatives to the values of the protagonist; there exist no overtly rendered dialectical struggles in Virginia Woolf's novels such as those found in the novels of Conrad, Dostoevsky or Thomas Mann. We find no French Lieutenant, no Ivan, no Settembrini, nor even a Chester, a Smerdiakov, or a Dr. Hofrat to offer compelling alternatives to the

world-view held by the protagonist and espoused by the author.<sup>71</sup> Woolf's foils, although invariably offered as representatives of ideas, are always wrong in the eyes of the author, and presumably, of the sympathetic reader. Thus, the clarity of the author's attitude toward these characters, while perhaps unfortunate when viewed from perspectives other than her own, serves to help the reader to overcome the difficulties in understanding the nature and implications of the more suggestively rendered world-view of the protagonist.

Understanding the general function of foil characters in the novel provides a sure framework for understanding the role of the individual characters. Lady Rossiter's single-minded pursuit of progress through political activism, Hugh Whitbread's need to define himself through social status, Doris Kilman's compulsive and self-righteous Christianity, and the Doctors Bradshawe and Holmes' upper-middle-class smugness are each in their own ways antithetical to the elan vital that Clarissa represents and pursues. We know, for example, that Doctor Bradshawe's entreaty to the deranged Septimus that "life was good" has no meaning in common with the celebration of life that the novel attempts to achieve.<sup>72</sup> His shallowness discredits him; we sense that he is incapable of understanding or experiencing the factors of life that even put the notion of life's "goodness" into doubt, and as a consequence we hear his words with the same indifference that is Septimus' response. These foils are too preposterous, too close to caricatures, to be taken seriously. Given as an image of the society

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<sup>71</sup> Characters in Lord Jim, The Brothers Karamazov, and The Magic Mountain, respectively.

<sup>72</sup> Mrs. Dalloway, p. 112.

in which Clarissa lives, they serve to highlight the urgency of Clarissa's struggle, for they offer a spectrum of the bankruptcies of the human values that might be entertained as alternatives to the values Clarissa is attempting to reaffirm. We can judge Woolf on the effectiveness and honesty of these techniques, but we need not ponder long to understand her meaning.

It is otherwise that we approach the more important characters, for the meanings of their roles in the novel are far less obvious. There is a sense in which we cannot understand these characters without seeing them in a light cast by Clarissa, just as we cannot fully understand Clarissa without recourse to our knowledge of them. During one of his reveries, Peter recalls a theory of personality that Clarissa once expressed to him while they were walking together in London:

"She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out all the people who completed them; even the places,"<sup>73</sup> Two men and one woman are the people who most clearly complete Clarissa: Sally, her childhood friend, confidante, and near lover, whose rejection through marriage to a rich landowner and industrialist of their youthful search for meaning in life parallels Clarissa's choice of the placid and undemanding Richard for her husband, whom she is glad she married instead of Peter because ". . . in marriage a little license, a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house. . ."; Peter, with whom by contrast, ", , , every thing had to be shared, everything gone into, , , " and with whom marriage would have resulted

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<sup>73</sup> Mrs. Dalloway, p. 168.

in "ruin" and "destruction,"<sup>74</sup> but who is still the object of as much of her thought as she is of his; and finally, Septimus, whom she does not even know, but who represents a suppressed aspect of her understanding of life. The personalities of each of these characters interconnect with Clarissa's in many diversely definitive ways, but perhaps it is enough to discuss Septimus and Peter, who of the three are the most fully characterized and the most clearly pertinent to the themes I am seeking to explain.

Septimus' role as Clarissa's alter ego is usually discussed by critics of the novel, but I do not believe that anyone has adequately explained the significance of their relationship. To say, as does Jean Guiget, that they are interconnected through their simultaneous experiencing of the key events of the London day is to my mind insufficient.<sup>75</sup> A more adequate explanation is achieved by understanding Septimus' role in relationship to the thematic implications of Jacob's Room. What needs to be understood is why Woolf created a character who "could not feel," who renounces life happily, who is clearly insane, as the alter ego of a character who celebrates feeling, whose primary preoccupation is her struggle to reaffirm her will to live, and who must finally strike the reader as being among the sanest characters Virginia Woolf ever created if we define sanity in terms of adjustment to reality. How is it that characters so different in temperament and in their understandings of life can both be understood as expressing aspects of the author's own understanding?

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<sup>74</sup> Mrs. Dalloway, p. 203.

<sup>75</sup> Jean Guiget, Virginia Woolf and her Works (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1965), p. 255.



What is ironic in this relationship is that Clarissa's affirmation of life and rekindling of her own will to live cannot be read as a refutation of Septimus' rejection of life. We are, in fact, neither surprised nor bemused when we finally read the now unreprinted preface to the first edition of the novel that tells that the author considered ending the novel with Clarissa's suicide, just as we are not jarred while reading the novel itself when we come to the expression of Clarissa's empathy with the suicidal young man whom she does not even know. The reason for this lies in the nature of the alter ego relationship that exists between these characters.

Typically in literature, the alter ego represents a repressed aspect of the protagonist's identity, and as a consequence his interaction with the main character invokes a new self-knowledge for one or both characters, as in the relationships between the fugitive Leggatt and the duty-bound Captain in "The Secret Sharer," and between the intellectual Stephen and the practical Bloom in Ulysses. But the relationship between Septimus and Clarissa is not based upon a repressed aspect of Clarissa's identity, but rather upon a suppressed aspect. When Clarissa hears the news of Septimus' suicide during the party, we understand immediately why she feels empathy because we have come to understand her to be far more complex than others in her life believe her to be. Clarissa's struggle to reaffirm her commitment to life has been, throughout the novel, a struggle with the same sense of paralyzing nihilism that drove Septimus to suicide.

What explains Septimus' nihilism and the insanity that results from it? The war, the death of his friend Evans, are in themselves only the surface causes of his derangement. His inability to accept

life derives from a more general obsession with the immorality and irrationality of human experience. He measures life against a vision of perfection and meaningfulness that life cannot fulfill, a vision that reminds us, deranged though it is, of the absolute distinction between earthly life and "true being" that Socrates defines in Phaedrus, and that causes Jacob to "turn with wrath upon whoever had fashioned life thus."

Men must not cut down trees, There is a God, (He noted such revelations on the backs of envelopes,) Change the world. No one kills from hatred, Make it known (he wrote down), He waited, He listened, A sparrow perched on the railing opposite chirped Septimus, Septimus, four or five times over and went on, drawing its notes out, to sing freshly and piercingly in Greek words how there is no crime and, joined by another sparrow, they sang in voices prolonged and piercing in Greek words, from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk, how there is no death.<sup>76</sup>

Septimus is tyrannized by such paradisiacal visions. He reaches the state of mind in which "he could not feel. He could reason; he could read; . . . his brain was perfect; it must be the fault of the world then--that he could not feel."<sup>77</sup> He thinks, "How Shakespeare loathed humanity--the putting on of clothes, the getting of children, the sordidity of the mouth and the belly! This was now revealed to Septimus; the message hidden in the beauty of words. The secret signal that one generation passes, under disguise, to the next is loathing, hatred, despair,"<sup>78</sup> Hamlet-like, he concludes that "One cannot bring children into a world like this. One cannot perpetuate suffering, or

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<sup>76</sup> Mrs. Dalloway, p. 28.

<sup>77</sup> Mrs. Dalloway, p. 98.

<sup>78</sup> Mrs. Dalloway, p. 98.

increase the breed of these lustful animals, who have no lasting emotions, but only whims and vanities, eddying now this way, now that,"<sup>79</sup>

It is precisely such an absolutism that is invoked in Clarissa when she hears the news of the suicide at her party. She thinks of the suicide as a positive act that snatches a moment of personal meaning from the meaningless flow of life's events:

A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about the chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the center, which, magically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death.

But this young man had killed himself--had he plunged holding his treasure? "If it were now to die, 'twere now to be most happy!"<sup>80</sup> she had said to herself once, coming down in white.

Through the party itself and the news of the suicide that intrudes suddenly upon the evening's excitement, Clarissa experiences both of her contradictory responses to life's dualistic nature. Her empathy with Septimus' suicide derives from her intellectual repudiation of life, an understanding of existence that sees suicide as a meaningful act of personal defiance against a life that was "a disgrace, . . . a punishment."<sup>81</sup> Yet, in the midst of such nihilistic understandings of life, of her party, and of her personal significance, ". . . she had never been so happy,"<sup>82</sup> Unlike Septimus, who could think clearly, but who could not feel, Clarissa thinks and feels, and it is feeling that ultimately dominates the complexity of her response. Just as

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<sup>79</sup>Mrs. Dalloway, p. 99.

<sup>80</sup>Mrs. Dalloway, p. 202.

<sup>81</sup>Mrs. Dalloway, p. 203.

<sup>82</sup>Mrs. Dalloway, p. 203.

earlier in the day when the momentary jealousy that she experienced on hearing of Peter's new romance brought forth in her, " . . . the indomitable egoism which forever rides down the hosts opposed to it, the river which says on, on; even though, it admits, there may be no goal for us whatever,"<sup>83</sup> Clarissa's heart prevails. As she had hoped from the beginning, the party has served to rekindle her relationship to life, to "the waves of the divine vitality which she loved," despite, or perhaps even because of, the news that brought death to her mind, " . . . in the middle of my party,"<sup>84</sup>

Peter's function in the novel is to bring Clarissa's values into accord with the reader's, for we must presume that it is he who responds to Clarissa in the way that Mrs. Woolf would expect her readers to respond. His early judgments of her values are in accord with what we must, in part, think about her. Although we share his fascination with her vitality, we must wonder why indeed she chose a marriage and a way of life that Peter believed would "stifle her soul, . . . make a mere hostess of her, [and] encourage her worldliness,"<sup>85</sup> Peter, if he does not think for every reader, is at least the spokesman for those who struggle against the ordinary, commonplace aspects of life in their attempts to find a mode of existence that satisfies their need for meaning. He who has refused to compromise throughout his life, who unlike Clarissa has refused to accommodate society in exchange for a comfortable place in it, is a worthy judge of a woman who seems to have

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<sup>83</sup> Mrs. Dalloway, pp. 50-51.

<sup>84</sup> Mrs. Dalloway, p. 201.

<sup>85</sup> Mrs. Dalloway, p. 84.

forsaken her youthful idealism and search for meaning in exchange for what is really no more than a pleasant and comfortable place in the society into which she was born. Thus when his judgments dissolve in the spell she casts through her party, we too are caught in the spell. His excitement of that moment which resolves the ambivalence he has felt about her since their youth together completes the novel's apologia.

How and why does Peter achieve this resolution? What is it that has changed in him that allows for this unequivocal acceptance of the woman about whom he has felt so ambivalently throughout his life? To some extent the question is unanswerable because the significance of the event that brings his perceptions to this focus is finally inexplicable. The party has been, throughout the novel, as it remains at the end, an affair of Clarissa's heart, and what is communicated by it to Peter and others is a feeling about life rather than an idea. All we can do is relate the feelings he experiences to the dualistic understanding of the human condition that has permeated the novel. We can recall that at the conclusion of Peter's dream about life and its meaning, when he was dozing on the bench at Regent's Park, he saw as the final image an old woman, a landlady, routinely going through the functions of life. At the moment he experienced the dream, the meaning of this image was impossible to determine. But when we recall it in the light of its several recurrences in the novel, and particularly when Clarissa, only moments before her triumph at the party, parts her curtains and sees " , , in the room opposite the old lady star(ing) straight at her,"<sup>86</sup> we know that he has learned something from his

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<sup>86</sup> Mrs. Dalloway, p. 204,

dream, albeit subconsciously, that has prepared him for this experience at the party, He has learned that there is no meaning to life, and that finally the will to live is as tentative and as inexplicable as the old woman's desire to continue living, If the old woman is offered as an objective correlative of human existence, then it is in the feelings that sustain her in the face of approaching darkness that we must find the will to live.

#### CHAPTER IV: REDEMPTIVE VISION IN TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

A single minute released from the chronological order of time has recreated in us the human being similarly released.<sup>1</sup>

No more direct expression of Woolf's dualism can be found in her fiction than in James' thoughts as the boat is approaching the lighthouse near the end of To the Lighthouse.

"It will rain," he remembered his father saying. "You won't be able to go to the Lighthouse."

The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening. Now--

James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see the windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry. So that was the Lighthouse, was it?

No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other was the Lighthouse, too. It was sometimes hardly seen across the bay. In the evening one looked up and saw the light opening and shutting and the light seemed to catch them in that airy sunny garden in which they sat.<sup>2</sup>

James thinks here what Woolf herself believes--that what is real for the "eager and dissatisfied self" is just as real as what the "stern and philosophical self" empirically proves to itself to be true. Although the journey to the lighthouse has demonstrated that the lighthouses we

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<sup>1</sup>Marcel Proust, Remembrance of Things Past (New York: Random House, 1934), II, 996.

<sup>2</sup>Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1927), p. 277.

look at with yearning are merely buildings on rocks, and that our romantic thoughts about them seem merely to be projections of our desires, James defiantly sustains his commitment to the other lighthouse, not simply as the symbol of a persistent and necessary illusion, but as a reality. He goes on, in fact, to say that if one truth takes precedence, it is the truth of our needs: "She [Mrs. Ramsey] alone spoke the truth; to her alone could he speak it."<sup>3</sup> But in this later assertion he is caught in the sweep of his defiance. He had spoken Woolf's understanding, as clearly as it could be spoken, three paragraphs before, and in so doing had come personally to the problem that is at the center of all of Woolf's novels, and that all of her contemplative characters confront--"how to adjust the two worlds."

In the novel that preceded To the Lighthouse, we saw that the conflict between the two worlds was unresolved in the mind of Clarissa Dalloway and that the acceptance of life's dualistic nature was the novel's central theme. Although Sally Seton, in the excitement of the party can say for herself and others, "What does the head matter, compared to the heart?" Clarissa, in her empathy with Septimus' suicide and in her acknowledgment of the dolorous stare of the woman in the window across the street, affirms the persistence of truths insisted upon by the "stern philosophical self." Mrs. Dalloway, like Jacob's Room, is clear in its understanding of the human condition. Our need for a redemptive vision is unfulfillable because no synthesis of the two worlds in which we live is possible. Our choice is either, like Jacob and Septimus, "tear up [our] ticket and walk away," or, like

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<sup>3</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 278.



Clarissa, to accept life as a constant negotiation between the despair that results from life observed and the affirmation that can result from life experienced. By implication, Mrs. Dalloway is as much an apologia for Septimus' suicide as it is for Clarissa's vitalism.

In To the Lighthouse, however, Woolf takes a significant step beyond this understanding in that her principal characters, Mrs. Ramsey and Lily Briscoe, experience a redemptive vision based upon a synthesis of life and thought that is qualified, but not repudiated, in the novel's thematic structure. If, as I have tried to show, Woolf's other novels must finally be understood as commentaries on our incapacity to sustain belief in the value of such visions, then To the Lighthouse is unique among her novels. I believe that it is, and that the reason for this uniqueness is that only in To the Lighthouse is Woolf able to resist or overcome her persistent need to define and evaluate the human condition in the terms that Pepper attributed to the organistic world hypothesis and accepts, instead, the terms of contextualism that I believe are the soul of her vision.<sup>4</sup> Virginia Woolf struggled in her writing to find a way of expressing a redemptive truth about life that she recurrently sensed the possibility of in the privacy of her meditations. In To the Lighthouse, a novel in which technique and meaning are grounded in the epistemology and ontology of contextualism, she accomplishes this aim.

What distinguishes the moments of vision in To the Lighthouse is that they are not based upon the discovery of an absolute that underlies and gives meaning to all experience, but rather upon the experiencing

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<sup>4</sup>I discuss Pepper's distinction between contextualism and organicism in Chapter I, pp. 18-26.



of a synthesis of all factors incorporated in and delimited by the immediate context. Both organicism and contextualism, says Pepper, are focused on the human need for synthesis, a synthesis that includes the subjective needs, desires, and responses of the perceiver in its unification of the worlds of thought and action. But contextualism, Pepper points out, understands synthesis in a way that differs from organicism. Organicism, we recall, posits, as do formism and mechanism, a vertical cosmology. The moment of vision of the organicist requires that the particularities of experience be understood as the manifestation of an absolute that is itself the only reality. What is finally true about the world for the organicist is what we unveil. Differences among particulars, and between particular situations, are illusory; all phenomena are translucent manifestations of an ultimate truth that is itself the only reality. The universe, for the organicist, is finally one thing, or better, one spirit manifesting itself in the particular forms of the mundane world.<sup>5</sup> Thus James's conclusion that "nothing was simply one thing" is alien to the organicist's understanding.

"Contextualism" says Pepper, "justifies no such faith. There is no cosmological mode of analysis that guarantees the whole truth or an arrival at an ultimate nature of things. On the other hand, one does not need to hunt for a distant cosmological truth, since every present event gives it as fully as it can be given. All one has to do to get at the sort of thing the world is is to realize, intuit, get the quality of whatever happens to be going on."<sup>6</sup> Each context according to the

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<sup>5</sup>See my Pepper discussion on p. 21.

<sup>6</sup>"A whole is something imminent in an event and is so intuited, intuited as the quality of that very event." World Hypotheses, p. 238.

contextualist, has a quality which is the experienceable manifestation of the synthesis sought. Pepper defines contextualistic acts of perception as ". . .voluntary vivid intuitions of quality."<sup>7</sup> The contextualist's cosmology, then, is horizontal rather than vertical in that the meaningful experience of the quality of any context points to nothing outside of itself, no truth, other than the potentiality for experiencing quality, that pertains to any other context. What is illuminating and satisfying in the experience is the experience of the quality of the context, an experience contingent upon the attainment of synthesis.

Pepper identifies the root metaphor of contextualism as "the historical event"<sup>8</sup> and in so doing draws our attention to the centrality of the subject of time in contextualistic theory and to the way in which the organicist's concept of time differs from the contextualist's concept: "It is the integration in the process that the organicist works from, not the duration of the process. When the root metaphor reaches its ultimate realization the organicist believes that the temporal factor disappears."<sup>9</sup> No such transfiguring reality lies behind the world of appearances for the contextualist. Historical time, understood to be unreal by the organicist, is real in the cosmology of the contextualist, but distinguished from qualitative time in that it is not part of "actual" experience: "Beyond the intuited present quality we have evidence for events that are past and for events to come. The great function of schematic time is to order these non-actual events. But

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<sup>7</sup>The Basis of Criticism in the Arts, p. 56.

<sup>8</sup>World Hypotheses, p. 232.

<sup>9</sup>World Hypotheses, p. 281.



actual time is the forward-and-backward spread of the quality of an event. It is the tensional spread of the quality."<sup>10</sup> Each actual event, says Pepper, creates a new context, the contents of which can themselves be experienced through a new vivid intuition of the quality: "This change goes on continuously and never stops. It is a categorical feature of all events; and, since, on this world theory all the world is events, all the world is continuously changing in this manner. Absolute permanence or immutability in any sense is, on this theory, a fiction, and its appearance is interpreted in terms of historical continuities which are not changeless."<sup>11</sup> It is this paradoxical understanding of time that is manifested in To the Lighthouse, most evidently in the key "moments of vision," and most explicitly in Lily's when she experiences the vision that allows her to complete her painting. In order to experience the moment, the memory of the dead Mrs. Ramsey must be momentarily transfigured. Historical time must give way to qualitative time: Mrs. Ramsey must in fact be there, sitting in her rocker, knitting. Yet Woolf takes pains to indicate that Lily's experience, like Mrs. Ramsey's experience at the dinner party, was already passing as it was being experienced.

Like the organicist, then, the contextualist focuses upon the achievement of a synthesis in which all contradictions and fragments are overcome, but he does not conceive of the synthesis as a particular manifestation of a universal synthesis that is pertinent to all time

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<sup>10</sup>World Hypotheses, p. 242.

<sup>11</sup>World Hypotheses, p. 243.



and every experience, but as the actualization of a potentiality that exists in every context. Synthesis, for the contextualist, must be defined in language that verges upon paradox on that the very idea of synthesis is at odds with a fundamental category of the contextualist's cosmology, namely that disorder, the inevitable product of schematic or historical time, is a permanent aspect of reality:

. . .disorder is a categorical feature of contextualism, and so radically so that it must not even exclude order. That is, categories must be so framed as not to exclude from the world any degree of order that it may be found to have, nor to deny that this order may have come out of disorder and may return to disorder again--order being defined in any way you please, so long as it does not deny the possibility of disorder or another order in nature also. This italicized restriction is the forcible one in contextualism, and amounts to the assertion that change is categorical and not derivative in any degree at all.<sup>12</sup>

This ontology provides the epistemological loophole that the contextualist philosopher makes use of in his assertion that the synthesis achieved in the experience of a "voluntary vivid intuition of quality" is an experience of a "truth," and not merely of a subjective projection, even though the synthesis upon which it is based necessarily contradicts the empirical conclusion that disorder is a categorical feature of reality. This epistemology is what leads Woolf to have James say that "nothing was simply one thing." Close up, the lighthouse is indeed a symbol of mutability and fragmentation. We do indeed, "perish each alone," just as Mr. Ramsey constantly intones. But the lighthouse seen from the garden that symbolizes the yearning for and the possibility of a redemptive synthesis that provides an "exemption from the universal law" is also real.

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<sup>12</sup>World Hypotheses, p. 234.





It is this understanding of the two modes of time that lies behind Pepper's identification of the root metaphor of contextualism as the historical event: "By historical event. . .the contextualist does not mean primarily a past event, one that is, so to speak, dead and has to be exhumed. What we mean by history, he says, is an attempt to re-present events, to make them in some way come alive again. The real historical event, the event in its actuality, is what is going on now, the dynamic dramatic active event. We may call it an 'act' if we like, and if we take care in our use of the term. But it is not an act conceived alone or cut off that we mean; it is an act in and with its setting, an act in its context."<sup>13</sup> The two "historical events" experienced by Mrs. Ramsey at the dinner party and Lily as she is painting at the end are "acts" in this sense in that both events are experiences of the quality of the moment, and the synthesis that is the ground of that quality, achieved through the experiencing of qualitative time. In To the Lighthouse, as in Mrs. Dalloway, the permanently conflicting realities of the two selves are acknowledged; there are, indeed, two lighthouses. Yet a redemptive vision is achieved that is based, paradoxically, upon synthesis. We live, says Woolf in To the Lighthouse, modally, and those modalities are categorically tied to the way in which we experience time. Schematic time exists; in detachment we cannot help but acknowledge its reality and its agency. But to experience time in its qualitative sense we must overcome detachment and in so doing we overcome fragmentation and alienation. "Intimacy is knowledge,"<sup>14</sup> says

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<sup>13</sup>World Hypotheses, p. 232.

<sup>14</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 79.



Lily at one point, which is another way of saying that knowledge of a certain kind is the product of undetached experience, not detached observation. She understands that to grasp the knowledge that she believes Mrs. Ramsey embodies she must become "one with the object adored."<sup>15</sup> To achieve this union, which is a metonymy for and necessary aspect of the larger synthesis she requires, she must accept her oneness with the human condition and commit herself to the human endeavor, a commitment about which her "stern, philosophical self" is legitimately skeptical. Mr. Bankes' question at the dinner party, "Why take such pains for the human race to go on?"<sup>16</sup> is the seminal question of To the Lighthouse in general and for Lily in particular. We discover that the question is somehow answered for Lily in her achieved vision when we discover that she is then not only willing to give Mr. Ramsey the sympathy Mrs. Ramsey always gave willingly, a willingness that stands throughout the novel as a metonymy for her commitment to humanity in general, but needs to do so. "She wanted him"<sup>17</sup> are the final, startling words used to describe her vision.

The overcoming of detachment, in Woolf and for the contextualist philosopher, is an aspect of both the method for and the product of experiencing the quality of any context and it is for this reason that Pepper identifies the contextualist's epistemology as intrinsically subjective: ". . .by our examination of the texture of perception we see that the texture of the verifying act (which is a perception) must

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<sup>15</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 79.

<sup>16</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 134.

<sup>17</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 300.



be partly made up of the strands carried into it by the activities of the perceiver. When these activities are the operations of verifying a hypothesis, these operations are precisely the agent's contribution to the verifying texture."<sup>18</sup> We see here why Woolf is so centrally concerned with the inadequacy of Mr. Ramsey's philosophical epistemology in To the Lighthouse. For Mr. Ramsey, ". . .thought is like the keyboard on a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet . . . ranged in so many letters all in order. . . ."<sup>19</sup> When Andrew is explaining to Lily what Mr. Ramsey's books are about, he cryptically states, "Subject and object and the nature of reality," and in reply to her saying that "she had no notion what that meant," he suggests that she "Think of a kitchen table. . .when you're not there."<sup>20</sup> Mr. Ramsey is doomed by his objective epistemology to fail in his search for a redemptive understanding of life because life observed in detachment is inevitably characterized by disorder and fragmentation: we do "perish each alone" in a world that has lost its belief in any of the "vertical" cosmologies that relate individual human existence to a higher reality. It is only in the "voluntary vivid intuition of quality" that we can see ourselves as part of a synthetic whole; the coalescence of subject and object is both the path to and an aspect of the reality of what we seek. Since reality in one of its modes is nothing but "events" actualized voluntarily by the perceiver, the truth that characterizes

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<sup>18</sup>World Hypotheses, pp. 275-76.

<sup>19</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 53.

<sup>20</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 38.

this mode can only be grasped by accepting one's involvement in the context.

Albert Levy, in his chapter on Henri Bergson in Philosophy and the Modern World, is more explicit than Pepper in identifying the dual epistemology of contextualism:

All this [Bergson's repudiation of the finality of a mechanistic view of the World] is accomplished through a dual epistemology. Granted that instinct and intelligence are complementary in their functioning and interpenetrate each other, that they are tendencies rather than absolutes, nevertheless the function of the intelligence is to contrive tools (symbolic or otherwise) for the manipulation of the environment. And instinct, fringed about by intelligence, grown almost self-conscious as it were, turns into that higher form of awareness which is intuition. Intuition as knowledge can be defined only poetically, that is, by suggestion. In An Introduction to Metaphysics Bergson has called it "the kind of intellectual sympathy by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible." He also said that intuition provides an absolute and not a relative awareness, and the conclusion of Creative Evolution is that it is the culminating form of consciousness which has developed in the evolutionary process.<sup>21</sup>

The belief in the validity of those experiences in which the perceiver senses himself at one with the object being perceived is offered by the contextualist as an alternative to the alienation that is implicit in mechanism. Woolf relies heavily on the recording of such experiences in the visionary moments that Mrs. Ramsey and Lily experience. Mrs. Ramsey, in her meditation on the lighthouse, will "become the thing she looked at--that light, for example,"<sup>22</sup> as she moves toward her vision of collective identity at the dinner party. Lily, in her moment of vision

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<sup>21</sup> Albert William Levy, Philosophy and the Modern World (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959), pp. 97-98.

<sup>22</sup> To the Lighthouse, p. 97.

on the beach, will experience the "oneness" with the "object adored" that must occur before her painting can be completed. Such moments of identification will be offered as the basis for their replies to Mr. Ramsey's insistence that "We perish, each alone."

One final point about contextualist theories and their relationship to Woolf's vision in To the Lighthouse should be made before proceeding to the more thorough discussion of the text. The contextualists reject the idea that the subjective element in their epistemology necessarily leads to some form of solipsism. In arguing that redemptive truth can only be known through direct experience, through an act of verification that "must be partly made up of the strands carried to it by the activities of the perceiver," the contextualist leaves himself open to the question, "How do I know that what you say is true about the world and its potentiality to be experienced synthetically if I do not have similar experiences?" Pepper points out that the contextualist's characteristic response to such questions is "Catch me if you can."<sup>23</sup> Woolf's diaries and essays reveal her own recurrent concern about this criticism: "Have I the power to convey the true reality? Or do I write essays about myself?"<sup>24</sup> she says at one point, and at another, "For it is only by knowing how to write that you can make use in literature of your self; that self which, while it is essential to literature, is also its most dangerous antagonist. Never to be yourself and yet always--that is the problem."<sup>25</sup> In my discussion of The Waves, I pointed out that the

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<sup>23</sup>World Hypotheses, p. 252.

<sup>24</sup>A Writer's Diary, June 19, 1923, p. 57.

<sup>25</sup>"The Modern Essay," Collected Essays, II, p. 46.



effort to resolve this problem in that novel was the genesis of its unique technique and directly related to the sense of failure to achieve a redemptive vision of human experience in that novel. I believe that Woolf had already solved the problem in To the Lighthouse in that in it she convincingly implicates the experiencing of something that we might call a transcendental ego, the overcoming of unique personality, as the necessary verifying act of perception. Her success at depicting this experience is, I believe, what made possible her achievement of a redemptive vision of life that is universal. It is ironic that she achieved this end in what was, in genesis and substance, the most autobiographical of her novels.

It is this understanding of Woolf's vision and accomplishment that I hope to substantiate in my discussion of To the Lighthouse. My contention that this novel, and not The Waves, is her most significant accomplishment is based upon my belief that it is only in To the Lighthouse that she convincingly achieves a redemptive understanding of human experience that incorporates the principal verities of her understanding of life. Woolf was fundamentally a dualist who required synthesis. As a consequence, as we have seen, her novels are usually characterized by the melancholy of hopeless defiance, as in The Voyage Out, Night and Day, and The Waves, or by the melancholy of resignation, as in Jacob's Room and to some extent Mrs. Dalloway. They are, as she says, "elegies." To the Lighthouse is also an elegy, but is not, like her other novels, an elegy for the human condition, but rather, an elegy for her mother that ends, as elegies traditionally do, in affirmation.

"The Window": Mrs. Ramsey's Temperament

In "A Sketch of the Past," an essay written shortly before her death and twelve years after the publication of To the Lighthouse, Woolf recalls her mother in terms that remind us vividly of the novel:

What a jumble of things I remember, if I let my mind run, about my mother; but they are all of her in company; of her surrounded; of her generalized; dispersed, omnipresent, of her as the creator of that crowded, merry world which spun so gaily in the centre of my childhood. It is true that I enclosed that world in another made by my own temperament; it is true that from the beginning I had many adventures outside that world; and often went far from it; but there it always was, the common life of the family, very merry, very stirring, crowded with people; and she was the centre; it was herself. This was proved on May 5th, 1895. For after that day there was nothing left of it.<sup>26</sup>

Woolf characterizes Julia Stephen in the same way as she characterized Mrs. Ramsey in the novel, as the creator and sustaining spirit of a world that died with her death, a world that Lily Briscoe in the novel, like Woolf in life, enclosed in another made of her own temperament.

Understanding the relationship between these temperaments is the key to understanding To the Lighthouse, for the novel is at its heart a successful effort to reconcile them and the sense of life's verities on which they are based. Underlying the novel's multiplicity of interests and themes--its probings into the tyranny of sexual stereotypes, into the destructiveness and absurdity of the ego, into questions of aesthetics and epistemology--is again Woolf's understanding of the duality of existence, and the struggle for wholeness of identity that results from that duality. In Jacob's Room and Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf

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<sup>26</sup>Virginia Woolf, Moments of Being (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976), p. 84.

was content to establish the validity of the claims of the two worlds. In To the Lighthouse, she attempts and achieves a reconciliation of the claims: "For convenience sake, a man must be whole."

As with Clarissa and Septimus in Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf establishes and explores her theme by juxtaposing two characters who personify the conflicting "worlds" which comprise the human condition, and by again establishing an unspoken link between the characters that extends the meaning of their relationship beyond a simple rendering of a conflict of values to an understanding of the conflict as the central fact of human existence. Just as Septimus' paralyzing sense of moral purity and Clarissa's commitment to the "waves of divine vitality" were the conflicting verities of Mrs. Dalloway, Lily's commitment to the purity and perfection of art and Mrs. Ramsey's to the potentialities of life experienced are the conflicting verities of To the Lighthouse.

The most direct statement of the conflict between Lily and Mrs. Ramsey occurs late in the novel, shortly before Lily completes her painting and the boaters reach the lighthouse:

And all the time she was saying that the butter was not fresh one would be thinking of Greek temples, and how beauty had been with them there. She never talked of it--she went, punctually, directly. It was her instinct to go, an instinct like the swallows for the south, the artichokes for the sun, turning her infallibly toward the human race, making her nest in its heart. And this, like all instincts, was a little distressing to people who did not share it; to Mr. Carmichael perhaps, to herself certainly. Some notion was in both of them about the ineffectiveness of action, the supremacy of thought.<sup>27</sup>

This understanding of the intrinsic conflict between life and thought, which has stood as a barrier between the two in Lily's mind throughout

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<sup>27</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 301.

the novel, is the basis of Lily's resistance to what she sees as a tyranny Mrs. Ramsey imposed over others in life, and through memory, in death. The perceived tyranny, manifested in pressures to be kind to the likes of Charles Tansley, to marry because men like William Bankes need flowers in their homes, and to willingly provide the "sympathy" persistently demanded by Mr. Ramsey and, apparently, by all males, is in a deeper sense seen by Lily as a tyranny imposed by one who is committed to humanity, to the alleviation of pain, the enrichment of experience, and the perpetuation of life, on one who is not. Throughout the novel, Lily seeks with ". . . a desperate courage. . . her own exemption from the universal law. . ." <sup>28</sup> resisting the demands of Mrs. Ramsey whom she sees ". . . presiding with immutable calm over destinies she completely failed to understand." <sup>29</sup>

But Lily's resistance to Mrs. Ramsey is countered by her conflicting fascination with the vitality and richness of the world that Mrs. Ramsey presides over and seems to sustain. Although Mrs. Ramsey's commitment to human experience is discredited by Lily's acute sense of "the ineffectiveness of action, the supremacy of thought," she senses something of value behind that commitment, a truth that Mrs. Ramsey personifies: "Was it wisdom? Was it knowledge? Was it, once more, the deceptiveness of beauty, so that all one's perceptions, half way to truth, were tangled in a golden mesh? or did she lock up within herself some secret which certainly Lily Briscoe believed people must have for the world to go on at all?" <sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 77.

<sup>29</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 81.

<sup>30</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 78.

This ambivalence, reminiscent of Peter Walsh's toward Clarissa, must be resolved before Lily can achieve the synthetic vision that she struggles for throughout the novel, a vision that will permit her to complete her painting while simultaneously freeing and requiring her to give Mr. Ramsey the sympathy that he needs, a need that we are asked to understand as a symbol for the needs of humanity. What Lily will discover, intuit, is that what motivates her as an artist has its analogue in what motivated Mrs. Ramsey in life, that beyond Mrs. Ramsey's seemingly futile pragmatic motivations were what Lily comes to understand as aesthetic motivations that finally required commitment to human experience to be actualized, a commitment that Lily, too, must recognize and accept before she can fulfill herself as an artist. Finally, Lily will discover that the choice between art and life, thought and action, cannot be made because the fulfillment of these commitments are contingent upon each other. In coming finally to understand the relationship between her own identity as a thinker and artist and Mrs. Ramsey's as the Magna Mater, Lily will achieve the most profound "adjustment" of the two worlds to be found in Woolf's novels.

Like Septimus and Clarissa, and by extension, Jacob and Clarissa, Lily and Mrs. Ramsey are alter egos whose public personalities represent for Woolf the polarities of meaningful human identity. In Mrs. Ramsey, beneath her public image, we find Lily's values suppressed, or at least unspoken: she is conscious of them and the values are a significant part of her self image even though others are unaware of them. In Lily, we find Mrs. Ramsey's public values repressed--the basis of feelings of attachment and empathy that she does not understand. Lily's discovery of the subconscious bond between them, a discovery that they are secret

sharers of a common sense of life's verities, is the climactic event of the novel; the completion of the painting, which can only be completed when Lily accepts this bond, is the novel's denouement. To be the artist she wants to be, Lily must not only understand that we live in two worlds, but must accept her obligation to live in both worlds. In short, she must approach her art as Mrs. Ramsey, the artist of life, approached life.

That the characterization of Mrs. Ramsey is grounded in a dualistic understanding of existence is no more evident than in her conflicting thoughts, at the dinner party, about the engagement of Paul and Minta, an engagement that she, according to Paul, encouraged and caused:

This will celebrate the occasion--a curious sense rising in her at once freakish and tender, of celebrating a festival, as if two emotions were called up in her, one profound--for what can be more serious than the love of man for woman, what more commanding, more impressive, bearing in its bosom the seeds of death; at the same time, these lovers, these people entering into illusion glittering-eyed, must be danced around with mockery, decorated with garlands.<sup>31</sup>

In such thoughts, Woolf reveals a significant aspect of Mrs. Ramsey's conception of life, a private sense of life's meaninglessness, in this instance, of life's absurdity, that is at odds with her Magna Mater commitment to the lives of her family, friends, and all who need her. "Why," thinks William Bankes as he observes her at the party, "does one take all these pains for the human race to go on? Is it so desirable?" He would be surprised to know that the same question, implied if not expressed, is seldom far from Mrs. Ramsey's own mind.

"How could any Lord have made this world?" she asks in a Septimus-like reflection. "With her mind she always seized the fact that there

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<sup>31</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 147.

is no reason, order, justice; but only suffering, death, the poor. There is no treachery too base for the world to commit; she knew that. No happiness lasted; she knew that."<sup>32</sup> While at another time, reflecting on August Carmichael's antipathy toward her, she recognizes ". . .the pettiness of some part of her, and of human relationships, how flawed they are, how despicable, how self-seeking at their best."<sup>33</sup> "All this desire of hers to give," she thinks at another point, "was vanity."<sup>34</sup> Such reflections are too consistent to be understood as momentary lapses into self-doubt, or as simply expressions of modesty or humility. They represent instead a consistent understanding of human existence, an understanding at odds with her public image as ". . .this delicious fecundity, this fountain and spray of life," whose commitments to the lives of others through the encouragement of marriages, of social causes, and of children's dreams are the basis of her familial and public personality. Her dolorous husband, ". . .with all his gloom and desperation" was indeed "happier, more hopeful on the whole than she. . ."<sup>35</sup> in that her secret melancholy is based not only on an obsession with mutability and individual loneliness ("We perish, each alone," is his idée fixe), but also on an acute and potentially paralyzing sense of the degrading self-centeredness of all human motivation.

Yet despite this private pessimism, Woolf asks us to believe in the sincerity and efficacy of Mrs. Ramsey's public hopefulness, not

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<sup>32</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 134.

<sup>33</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 98.

<sup>34</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 65.

<sup>35</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 91.

simply as a desire on her part to make the best of the bad situation that life seems clearly to be, but as an attitude necessary for the actualization of real potentialities in life. Although she is very much a provider of "sympathy," she is no Mater Dolorosa whose principal motivation is to give solace for and encourage distraction from an intrinsically unsatisfactory reality, but a Magna Mater who like Blake's "Mother Earth" in Thel encourages life because she believes in its possibilities despite the paralysis that is the logical result of life observed. Her husband does not understand or accept this hopefulness: ". . . she flew in the face of facts, made his children hope for what was utterly out of the question, in effect, told lies,"<sup>36</sup> and beneath the simple conflict over whether or not James will be able to sail to the lighthouse we find this larger conflict about life's possibilities. Mrs. Ramsey, too, understands the weather report and that the hoped-for trip will not take place in the morning, but she is thankful that the circumstances that distract James allow her to avoid acknowledging this to him, for she also understands that the anticipation of the trip and the belief in its possibility are more important than whether or not this particular trip actually occurs. He will have to confront the facts soon enough. It is hope, not the trip itself, that is at stake. She understands that the child's hope to go to the lighthouse is, at a deeper, inchoate, level, symbolic of our hopes to satisfy our deepest needs for a fulfilling life, hopes that Mrs. Ramsey believes must be kept alive in order that these needs can be satisfied. Her hopefulness, then, the "yes" that is her

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<sup>36</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 50.



first word and the first word of the novel, is an attitude held despite the evidence of life observed, but sustained by her recollections of life experienced. It is this kind of experience that late in the evening occurs at the dinner party.

What does the party mean to Mrs. Ramsey? To understand this we must identify her state of mind in the hours between James's going to bed and the party, since what occurs at the party is for her, as it is meant to be for the reader, an answer to the self-doubt and pessimism that she experiences during that time. We first find her in a state of near capitulation to her husband, momentarily resigned to his view of the world. She has just completed reading Grimm's story about the fisherman and his wife to James, a story whose outcome serves as an ironic comment on the conflict between herself and her husband in that in it, the fisherman's wife has allowed her husband to renounce his kingship by accepting the responsibility for herself. Yet it is at this moment that Mrs. Ramsey, doubtful about herself and her own values, had accepted the necessity to tell James that there would be no trip to the lighthouse the next day because "Your father says not."<sup>37</sup> Clearly, her melancholy acceptance of Mr. Ramsey's insistent prediction is tied to doubts she has expressed to herself about the validity of her own values:

. . . she must admit that she felt this thing that she called life terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on you when you gave it a chance. There were the eternal problems: suffering; death; the poor. There was always some woman dying of cancer, even here. And she had said to all these children, You shall go through it all. To eight people she had said relentlessly that (and the bill for the greenhouse would be fifty pounds) . . . she was driven on, too quickly she knew, almost as

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<sup>37</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 95.

if it were an escape for her too, to say that people must marry; people must have children.<sup>38</sup>

When Mildred comes to put James to bed, Mrs. Ramsey is grateful that she will not have to say to James what she now believes must be said, but she is sure that he knows, and that the consequences of his knowing will be greater than momentary disappointment, that in his child's mind, the belief in the possibility of going to the lighthouse means to him what it means to her: ". . .she was certain he was thinking, we are not going to the lighthouse tomorrow; and she thought, he will remember that all his life."<sup>39</sup>

It is at this point that Mrs. Ramsey begins to reconstruct her values, and the emotional and mental developments that she experiences from this moment through the party are offered by Woolf as a reply to the idea that the commitment to life that she encourages in others and that she characteristically holds herself need be thought of as simply encouragement to escape the truths of life in the distractions of activity. What she experiences, first in her moments alone, then with her husband, then in preparation for the dinner party, and finally at the party itself, is offered by Woolf as an apologia for her values--a manifestation of an archetypal process leading from reflective despair to experienced affirmation, a process that Lily will also go through in "The Lighthouse." Both Lily and Mrs. Ramsey will, in their respective moments, move from a dispirited sense of life's intrinsic disorder and fragmentation to a convincing experience of a moment of life as a synthetic whole, and in

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<sup>38</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 92.

<sup>39</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 95.

so doing Mrs. Ramsey will reaffirm for herself, and Lily will discover, that it is only commitment to the human experience in general that makes such moments possible. If life observed offers confirmation of the rhetorical pessimism behind Mr. Bankes' question, life experienced can provide a meaning that refutes it. There are, indeed, two lighthouses.

Mrs. Ramsey's restoration of faith in her own values begins in privacy, and it is ironically significant that it does, for it is as if she must touch again, Antaeus-like, something that exists as the bed-rock of her strength, something asocial, separate even from her own personality, before she can begin to restore her faith in her own personality and in the possibilities of the social world. Although Woolf's description of the experience is one of the most memorable parts of To the Lighthouse, it is necessary to quote from it at length because several aspects of the experience need to be discussed:

No, she thought, putting together some of the pictures he had cut out--a refrigerator, a mowing machine, a gentleman in evening dress--children never forget. For this reason, it was so important what one said, and what one did, and it was a relief when they went to bed. For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of--to think; well, not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. Although she continued to knit, and sat upright, it was thus that she felt herself; and this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures. When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless. And to everybody there was always this sense of unlimited resources, she supposed; one after another, she, Lily, Augustus Carmichael, must feel, our apparitions, the things you know us by, are simply childish. Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. Her horizon seemed to her limitless. There were all the places she had not seen; the Indian plains; she felt herself pushing aside the thick leather curtain of a church in

Rome. This core of darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it. They could not stop it, she thought, exulting. There was freedom, there was peace, there was, most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability. Not as oneself did one find rest ever, in her experience (she accomplished here something dexterous with her needles) but as a wedge of darkness. Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity; and pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke, for watching them in this mood always at this hour one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw; and this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke. 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 end, she said. It will come, 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 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.<sup>40</sup>

The meditation begins with her thoughts about James and what she anticipates the effect of the disappointment will be on him in later life. At one level, of course, her concern is excessive; such

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<sup>40</sup>To the Lighthouse, pp. 95-98.

disappointments are inevitably part of the texture of life. What, then, does the disappointment mean to her? What does she believe it will mean to James? Certainly, we must look to her deeper conflict with her husband to answer these questions.

The conflict between them is centered on one question: is it possible to satisfy our deepest spiritual needs, or are we doomed by the human condition to the melancholy of unfulfillment? The nature of this need is clear--we need to feel connected with the world in some redemptive way, to be able to see ourselves as part of a timeless whole that repudiates the sense that isolated selfhood and mutability are the iron laws of existence. For Mr. Ramsey, "Someone had blundered"<sup>41</sup> in arranging the human condition. For him, our need to believe that we are redemptively connected with something, whether God or some other universal truth, or simply with humanity, is an unfulfillable need; for him, the grammar of life is simple: "We perish, each alone." Certainly his compulsion to tell James that there will be no trip to the lighthouse the next day is more a spiritual grammar lesson than a prediction about a specific event, just as Mrs. Ramsey's hopefulness, despite the evidence, is an extension of something in her that believes fulfillment through synthesis is possible, that there is in life some alternative to the alienation that is the inevitable result of believing that we live in a world defined by disorder and fragmentation. It is to reaffirm this belief that she turns inward.

That her thoughts are focused upon disorder and fragmentation at the beginning of the meditation is indicated symbolically by the

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<sup>41</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 31.

disparate cutouts that James has left for her to pick up, for certainly we are to understand the disunity of these objects--the refrigerator, the mowing machine, the gentleman in the evening dress--and James' failure to assemble them into a coherent whole--as an orchestration of the mood and thought of the moment. But it is not the social world that they depict to which she turns her attention, but to a deeper, intrinsically private world. For the moment, her conflict with her husband and her concern for James is put aside; what she needs is to reassure herself that at some level of being, at least, she can experience herself connected meaningfully to something outside of herself, as if it is necessary for her to reaffirm a truth that has nothing to do with social existence, and the ego that is involved in that existence, before she can return with confidence to the social world.

That she is successful in having this experience is clearly indicated by the metaphor of the bride and lover that concludes the passage I have quoted, a metaphor that rhapsodically culminates the mental events that have taken place in that the focus of the meditation is the experiencing of a unity between an aspect of herself and the world that she is observing: ". . .she became the thing she looked at--that light, for example." What has occurred in short is the coalescence of subject and object that is a necessary aspect of the experiencing of the "quality" of any moment for the contextualist, an event that Bergson, in An Introduction to Metaphysics, refers to as resulting from ". . .that intellectual sympathy by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Henri Bergson, An Introduction to Metaphysics, trans. T. E. Hulme (London: G. P. Putnam, 1912), p. 7.

That it is the lighthouse beam itself that she identifies with is doubly significant since it serves throughout the novel as a releasing stimulus for the human hope to affirm the synthetic truth we seek and need.

What are the implications of this experience? How does it relate to Mrs. Ramsey's shaken faith in her commitment to the possibilities of the social world? First, we should determine the sense in which it does not, for it seems to me unlikely that the passage can be read without its evoking the organistic ideas of romanticism. The bride and lover metaphor, as Meyer Abrams points out in Natural Supernaturalism, is a seminal metaphor of the romantic movement, which expresses the characteristic belief of the romantic writer in the power of the imagination to consummate "a holy marriage with the external universe, to create out of the world of all of us, in a quotidian and recurrent miracle, a new world which is the equivalent of paradise,"<sup>43</sup> a belief in the ultimate marriage between the supernal and the mundane that was the soul of their rebellion against the dispiriting implications of the mechanistic world view of the Enlightenment. These same dispiriting implications are, of course, at the soul of Mrs. Ramsey's conflict with her husband, but her experience of a synthesis is clearly qualified to deny the truth of the organistic reply.

Certainly this is what is implied by Mrs. Ramsey's irritation with herself for allowing the momentum of her thoughts to lead her to say, "We are in the hands of the Lord," as it is later in the meditation when she refers to "some irony in her interrogation, for when one woke at all,

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<sup>43</sup>Meyer Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1971), p. 28.

one's relations changed." If for the romantic, such experiences were verification of their belief in the redeemability of the social world, to her they are not: "What had brought her to say that: 'We are in the hands of the Lord?' she wondered. The insincerity slipping in among the truths roused her, annoyed her. She returned to her knitting again. How could any Lord have made this world? she asked. With her mind she had always seized the fact that there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death, the poor. There was no treachery too base for the world to commit; she knew that. No happiness lasted; she knew that." The sense of synthesis, order, and fulfillment that she is experiencing is here pointedly dissociated from the operations of history or the activities of the social world, from any belief that the particulars of existence can ultimately be understood as participating, beneath a veil of appearances, in an ultimate and beneficent teleology. If her meditative experience is to be understood as a step towards her regaining faith in and restoring commitment to the possibility of meaningful fulfillment in the social world, it must be understood in different terms, terms that are "horizontal," rather than "vertical" in their cosmological implications, for even though the experience has been dissociated from the reassurances implicit in vertical cosmologies, it concludes positively with the words, "It is enough! It is enough!" thus indicating that some kind of answer to the problem on her mind at the beginning of the meditation has been achieved.

Why, then, is her experience "enough?" What relationship does it have to social existence if it does not serve to encourage faith in the ultimate outcomes of human experience? Nothing in the experience itself or in her immediate reflections about it provides an answer to this





question. Woolf is clear in indicating that Mrs. Ramsey, before the party, has no sense that any connection exists between what she has experienced in her private meditation and what she will attempt at the party. We find her, at the beginning of the party, still doubtful about her values, questioning, in fact, the value of her life and of her commitment to the possibilities of human experience that the party represents: "But what have I done with my life? thought Mrs. Ramsey, taking her place at the head of the table. . . ." <sup>44</sup> That she is as dispirited as she was in the moments before her private meditation is clear: ". . . she began all this business, as a sailor not without weariness sees the wind fill his sail and yet hardly wants to be off again and thinks how, had the ship sunk, he would have whirled round and round and found rest at the bottom of the sea." <sup>45</sup> Consciously at least, the synthetic vision that she has achieved in private meditation is unrelated to the event that she is anticipating: we find her still focused on fragmentation: "The room (she looked around it) was very shabby. There was no beauty anywhere. . . . Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her." <sup>46</sup> It is her doubt about her ability to bring about this merger that leads her to wish for "rest at the bottom of the sea." At the conscious level, then, what has occurred in her meditative experience is "enough" only because it provides consolation for what seems to her at this point to be the ultimate poverty of human experience.

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<sup>44</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 125.

<sup>45</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 127.

<sup>46</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 126.

But if we look ahead to the party itself we discover that it is the kind of experience that she has achieved in private meditation, there defined as asocial in nature, that defines the kind of redemptive experience that she achieves in her social world. In both experiences, what occurs is what contextualists refer to as "voluntary vivid intuitions" of the "quality" of the moment, an event that is intrinsically synthetic. Finally, Woolf implies through Mrs. Ramsey's experience, we can confirm our commitment to the value of the human experience not by reference to some ultimate and redemptive good that will or can occur in the future, but through the experiencing of a sufficient good that is the potentiality of every lived moment. Ralph Freedman's observation that "The prevailing view in romantic and symbolist traditions usually presupposed that experience is primarily a mental quality and that the mind reflects a 'reality' that is obscured by the physical world"<sup>47</sup> is definitive on this point, although I will later show that for Woolf, as for the Romantics and the Symbolists, the mind functions more as a "lamp" than as the "mirror" implied by Freedman in that she sees the role of the experienter/perceiver as active and contributive rather than passive and receptive. Mrs. Ramsey experiences the party as a mental quality, as an event occurring in "real" time, the realm of potential synthesis and permanence, instead of simply observing it and understanding it in terms of "schematic" or "clock" time, the realm intrinsically characterized by disorder, fragmentation and mutability. The synthesis of life and thought that is the potentiality of experienced life is offered as

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<sup>47</sup> Ralph Freedman, The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Hermann Hesse, André Gide, and Virginia Woolf (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 269.

sufficient compensation for the fragmentation that is the inevitable characteristic of observed life: "Some change went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had there common cause against the fluidity out there."<sup>48</sup> This experience of synthesis, here experienced as a sense of community, is, as she said of her earlier experience, "enough:" "It partook. . .of eternity; as she had already felt about something different once before that afternoon; there is a coherence to things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out. . .in the face of the flowing, the spectral, like a ruby; so 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 endures."<sup>49</sup> As for the contextualists, although "disorder is a categorical feature" of reality when observed in detachment, synthesis is a potentiality of life experienced. If Mr. Ramsey's lighthouse is real, so is hers, for as James will later discover, "nothing was simply one thing."

Mrs. Ramsey, then, in her experience at the party, achieves a resolution of the conflict that is at the center of To the Lighthouse, and at the center of all of Woolf's novels. Her resolution is based upon her acceptance of a dual epistemology that is in accord with contextualistic theory. Although her commitment to the value of human experience cannot be justified in detachment--Woolf, in fact, reinforces her objective pessimism later in the novel through a series of cryptic

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<sup>48</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 147.

<sup>49</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 158.

announcements about the outcomes of Mrs. Ramsey's efforts and the fates of the people at the party--it can be justified by the quality of the experiences her efforts produce. The experiencing of a synthesis between life and thought is itself "the thing that is made that endures"; the failure of the marriage she has promoted does not mitigate the value of the moment achieved, but rather confirms her own understanding of the ultimate outcomes of human experience. But Paul and Minta, and the others at the party, ". . .would. . .come back to this night; this moon; this wind; this house; and to her too."<sup>50</sup> Through her effort, a moment of human experience had become a work of art, synthesized in substance and idea: "All the odds and ends of the day stuck to this magnet; her mind felt swept, felt clean. And then there it was, entire; she held it in her hands, beautiful and reasonable, clear and complete, the essence sucked out of life and held rounded here--the sonnet."<sup>51</sup> Her accomplishment is her self-justification, for without her instinctive commitment to the value of human experience, a commitment held despite the conclusions of her "stern philosophical self," the moment could not have occurred. She has earned the ironic triumph of her last words: "'Yes, you were right. It's going to be wet tomorrow. You won't be able to go.'" And she looked at him smiling. For she had triumphed again. She had not said it: yet he knew."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 170.

<sup>51</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 181.

<sup>52</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 186.

"Time Passes" and "The Lighthouse": Lily's Temperament

In letters to V. Sackville-West and Ottoline Morrell regarding To the Lighthouse, Woolf expressed reservations about the effectiveness of her writing in "Time Passes."<sup>53</sup> Whatever the fictional merits of this unusual interlude are, and I believe they are considerable, there can be no doubt about its usefulness in the development of the novel's theme, placed as it is immediately after Mrs. Ramsey's successful resolution of the conflict between life and thought that is at the center of the novel, for it is essential to Woolf's vision that the problem be resolved not only by the person who instinctively gravitates toward human experience, as does Mrs. Ramsey and as did Virginia Woolf's mother, but also by the person who is predisposed to doubt its value, as does Lily and as Woolf did herself. "Time Passes" describes the effect of time on the house, the people who were present at the party, and on humanity in general. The point of view is omniscient and detached: what happens is not experienced by the "consciousness" that recounts the events; it is only observed. We are reminded here of Mr. Ramsey's epistemology: "Think of a kitchen table, when you are not there." The ten years between the party and the melancholy return of some of the still living members of the group who were present at the party is described from the point of view of the "stern, philosophical self," the aspect of the self's dual nature that is predisposed to believe, as are Mrs. McNab and Mr. Carmichael, the members of the group who figure most predominantly in this section, and as is Lily, upon whom the interlude focuses at the

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<sup>53</sup>The Letters of Virginia Woolf, III, pp. 373-374 and 377-378.

end, in the "ineffectiveness of action, the supremacy of thought." It is to the vision of the world that lies behind Lily's temperament that we turn in "Time Passes."

The central question of "Time Passes" is a version of the central question of the novel as a whole, but in "Time Passes" it is phrased rhetorically. "Did Nature supplement what man advanced? Did she complete what he began?"<sup>54</sup> and answered unequivocally: ". . .should any sleeper fancying that he might find on the beach an answer to his doubts, a sharer of his solitude, throw off his bedclothes and go by himself to walk on the sand, no image with semblance of serving and divine promptitude comes readily to hand bringing the night to order and making the world reveal the compass of the soul. . . ." <sup>55</sup> There is no more direct rejection of belief in "vertical" cosmologies in the novel: "That dream of sharing, completing, of finding in solitude on the beach an answer, was then but a reflection in a mirror. . . ." <sup>56</sup> In the absence of an experiencing self, no "horizontal" cosmology is offered to provide the sense in which the world can "reveal the compass of the soul."

The theme of "Time Passes" then, is acknowledgment of the inexorably destructive process of time. The focus on Mr. Carmichael and Mrs. McNab, the housekeeper who struggles to make the decaying house habitable again, is appropriate, in that both characters view the world from the point of view of stoical resignation. Like the omniscient observer who describes

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<sup>54</sup>To the Lighthouse, pp. 201-2.

<sup>55</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 193.

<sup>56</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 202.

the decay that has occurred in the house, and reports the sad fates and failed hopes of the people who were present at the party, and of European civilization in general, Mr. Carmichael and Mrs. McNab see nothing in life that mitigates the truth derived from life observed. Mr. Carmichael is "untempted from his bed," preferring to read Virgil into the night, presumably finding in the characteristic sadness of Virgil's poetry a correlate to his own bleak view. We assume that his own volume of poems, published during the spring and successful, we are told, because of the despairing mood in England that has resulted from the war, expressed similarly despairing views about the possibility of personal spiritual fulfillment. (Later, while painting, Lily imagines that she knows what his poetry was like: "It was seasoned and mellow. It was about the desert and the camel. It was about the palm tree and the sunset. It was extremely impersonal; it said something about death; it said very little about love."<sup>57</sup>) Mrs. McNab, prompted to activity by the news that after ten years the family was returning, engages in dispirited efforts to reclaim the house from decay; content, as she works, with her own understanding of the nature of things: "So she was dead; and Miss Prue dead too, with her first baby; but everyone had lost someone in those years."<sup>58</sup> In "Time Passes," then, human history is reduced to an aspect of natural history: the house and what happens to it serve as a metaphor for the fate of mankind: "Listening (had there been anyone to listen) from the upper rooms of the empty house only gigantic

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<sup>57</sup>To the Lighthouse, pp. 289-90.

<sup>58</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 205.



chaos streaked with lightning could have been heard tumbling and tossing, as the winds disported themselves like amorphous bulks of leviathans whose brows as pierced by no light of reason, and mounted one on top of another, and lunged and plunged in darkness or the daylight (for day and night, month and year ran shapelessly together) in idiot games, until it seemed as if the universe itself were battling and tumbling, in brute confusion and wanton lust aimlessly by itself."<sup>59</sup>

In "Time Passes," the world is seen and defined solely from the perspective of the stern and philosophical self, and it is found wanting. But unlike Mr. Ramsey, whose response to the same knowledge is posturing self-pity and romantic melancholy, the omniscient observer who describes and narrates the events, and Mr. Carmichael and Mrs. McNab, who reflect his attitude, respond to the knowledge with stoical resignation, as if they had disciplined their spirits by reading not only Virgil on the impossibility of personal fulfillment, but also Lucretius on the fear of death and Epictetus on the destructiveness of emotional yearning. It is with this understanding of life that the "voice" in the final paragraph tempts Lily, an understanding to which we already know she is predisposed: ". . .why not accept this, be content with this, acquiesce and resign?"<sup>60</sup> But Lily at the end is "tempted from her bed to seek an answer." We find her at the end of "Time Passes," ". . .sitting upright in her bed. Awake."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 206.

<sup>60</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 214.

<sup>61</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 214.

What Lily awakens to is announced in the opening sentence of "The Lighthouse": "What does it mean then, what can it all mean?"<sup>62</sup> Her state of mind at this point parallels Mrs. Ramsey's in the moments before the party ("But what have I done with my life?") in that she too is tempted to "acquiesce and resign" to the conclusions of the "stern and philosophical self." Interestingly, her first effort to formulate an answer to the question on her mind recalls Mrs. Ramsey's momentary capitulation to her husband's view of the world: "('Alone' she heard him say, 'Perished' she heard him say) and like everything else this strange morning the words became symbols, wrote themselves all over the grey-green walls. If only she could have put them together, she felt, write them in one sentence, then she would have got at the truth of things."<sup>63</sup> But it is the finality of this truth that she has awakened to confront and repudiate. Consciously, she is on the verge of accepting it; subconsciously she has been awakened by the imperatives of the "eager and dissatisfied self" to search for an alternative truth.

We find her acutely aware of her alienation: ". . .she felt cut off from other people, and able only to go on watching, asking, wondering. The house, the place, the morning, all seemed strangers to her. She had no attachment here, no relations with it. . . ." <sup>64</sup> "How aimless it was, how chaotic, how unreal it was, she thought, looking at her coffee cup. Mrs. Ramsey dead; Andrew killed; Prue dead too--repeat it as she might, it roused no feeling in her." Like Mrs. Ramsey in the

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<sup>62</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 217.

<sup>63</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 219.

<sup>64</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 218.

moments after James has gone to bed and before the party, Lily is focused on disorder and fragmentation. Her sense of personal detachment is extended to the scene she is observing, and as she begins painting, her effort to find some way to organize the scene ("The question was of some relation between the masses"<sup>65</sup>) is thwarted by her sense that ". . . it was a house full of unrelated passions," an observation that echoes Mrs. Ramsey's thought at the beginning of the dinner party that "Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her."

The parallel between Lily's state of mind at this point in the novel and Mrs. Ramsey's before the party is extended by the intrusion of Mr. Ramsey and his needs on her thoughts. Just as Mrs. Ramsey was distracted from her concentration on the lighthouse, Lily is distracted from her canvas, which is for her what the lighthouse was for Mrs. Ramsey, a releasing stimulus for her need to seek a meaning and order unadulterated by the incoherence and fragmentation of social existence: "She saw her canvas as it floated up and placed itself white and uncompromising directly before her. It seemed to rebuke her with its cold stare for all this hurry and agitation, this folly and waste of emotion; it drastically recalled her and spread through her mind first a peace, as her disorderly sensations (he had gone and she felt sorry for him and she had said nothing) trooped off the field; and then, emptiness."<sup>66</sup>

What it recalled her from was her irritation with Mr. Ramsey for his intrusion and her anger with Mrs. Ramsey, who in her role as

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<sup>65</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 221.

<sup>66</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 234.

comforting earth mother symbolizes for Lily the conventional imperatives and expectations that Lily believes she must resist in order to function as an artist: "Really, she was angry with Mrs. Ramsey. . . .It was all Mrs. Ramsey's doing. She was dead. Here was Lily, at forty-four, wasting her time, unable to do a thing, standing there, playing at painting, playing at the one thing one did not play at, and it was all Mrs. Ramsey's fault. She was dead. The step where she used to sit was empty. She was dead."<sup>67</sup> We recall that Mrs. Ramsey when interrupted had, grudgingly perhaps, but finally, consistent with her "instinct for life," willingly, turned to her husband to satisfy his need for sympathy and attention. Lily, by contrast, toys with him by praising his boots, rejecting as she does "His immense self-pity, his demand for sympathy [that] poured and spread itself in pools at her feet, and all she did, miserable sinner that she was, was draw her skirts a little closer around her ankles, lest she should get wet."<sup>68</sup> It is Mrs. Ramsey's instinct for life and the imperatives implied by it that angers her, which, "like all instincts, was a little distressing to those who do not share it. . . ."

There are two ironies in her response. First, she resists Mr. Ramsey's demand for sympathy despite her acceptance, at this point, of the truth upon which his self-pity is based. Certainly, had she formulated the sentence out of the words "perished" and "alone" that she had earlier sought to formulate, the result would have been his sentence, "We perish, each alone." Second, she will discover after he is gone and while she is painting that she cannot complete the painting unless

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<sup>67</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 224.

<sup>68</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 228.

she not only gives, but recognizes her need to give, the sympathy that he demands. Moments later, when the group has just set sail, she begins the process of understanding this second irony ("She felt curiously divided, as if one part of her were drawn out there"<sup>69</sup>), a process that will end in her accepting the truth that Mrs. Ramsey instinctively knew-- that the answer to the question that she needs before she can complete her painting (What does it mean then, what can it all mean?) can only be found in experience, and in the acceptance of the imperatives of both worlds in which man lives.

The drama of "The Lighthouse," then, is in Lily's movement from alienation and pessimism to acceptance and affirmation. In discovering that the vision she needs in order to answer the question about life's meaning is achieved only when she accepts her involvement in the context she is trying to paint, she discovers that she must move beyond her belief in "the ineffectiveness of action, the supremacy of thought" and accept the commitment to life that Mrs. Ramsey represents. If, in reflection, she can only conclude that the spiritual grammar of life is expressed most adequately by Mr. Ramsey's sentence, in experience, she finds an alternative to that truth. The nature of the experience, and Lily's path to it, parallels Mrs. Ramsey's experience at the party in that she finds that life and commitment to life is justified not by anticipation of the consequences of human action and concern about its "effectiveness," but in the full experiencing of its quality. This event will serve to symbolize, through the reconciliation of their conflicting temperaments, the human capacity to resolve, in moments of vision that

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<sup>69</sup>To the Lighthouse, pp. 233-4.



are themselves mutable but which have permanent impact, the conflict between life and thought that is at the core of the novel.

Lily's struggle to achieve her vision parallels Mrs. Ramsey's in other ways as well, and these parallels reinforce the idea that her movement towards vision, despite fundamental differences that result from their conflicting temperaments, confirms the validity and universality of Mrs. Ramsey's vision. Like Mrs. Ramsey, she sees herself in battle against a "formidable ancient enemy," but it is consistent with her conscious values that she names the enemy differently. For Lily, the enemy is "this other thing, this truth, this reality" which she understands to be separate from and at odds with lived existence, while for Mrs. Ramsey, who accepts instinctively that it is human experience itself that must be redeemed, the enemy is "Life."<sup>70</sup> Mrs. Ramsey, unlike Lily, understands that the struggle for synthesis must continue beyond the fulfillment she experienced in private meditation, that finally, she must confront and master the recalcitrant particulars of lived existence before resting in satisfaction. Lily will need to discover this truth as she "tunnel(s) her way into her picture, into the past."<sup>71</sup>

Like Mrs. Ramsey, who understood that although the vision she sought was subjective in that it needed to be experienced rather than understood, Lily must first repudiate personality and search within for a deeper ground of being: "Certainly she was losing consciousness of outer things. And as she lost consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance, and whether Mr. Carmichael

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<sup>70</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 92.

<sup>71</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 258.

was there or not, her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes and names and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modeled it in greens and blues."<sup>72</sup> The reader recalls Mrs. Ramsey's thoughts, at the beginning of her meditation on the lighthouse: "When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless. And to everyone was always this sense of limitless resources, she supposed; one after another, she, Lily, Augustus Carmichael, must feel, our apparitions, the things you know us by are simply childish. Beneath it is all dark, it is spreading, it is unfathomably deep, but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you know us by."<sup>73</sup> Clearly, Woolf wants the reader to understand the visions they have as being experienced by an archetypal human identity that is the ground of individual existence. We are reminded of the recurrence, in Woolf's diaries and essays, of the problem of personality for the artist who deals with the inner experiences of her characters: "Have I the power to convey the true reality? Or do I write essays about myself?"<sup>74</sup>

The most significant parallel between their experiences, however, is in the nature of their respective visions and in their understandings of how their visions provide an answer to the question of life's meaning that they both seek to answer. The dual epistemology that we noted in Mrs. Ramsey's meditation on the Lighthouse and in her experience at the

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<sup>72</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 258.

<sup>73</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 96.

<sup>74</sup>A Writer's Diary, June 19, 1923, p. 63.



party is also apparent in Lily's vision, as Lily, too, understands that whatever answer she finds to the question in the experience of the visionary moment will not alter her understanding of life when seen from a detached perspective. Like Mrs. Ramsey in her irritation with herself for allowing the momentum of her thoughts to lead her momentarily to a providential view of life ("We are in the hands of the Lord.") and in her dual response to the anticipated announcement of the engagement, Lily draws attention to what she understands as the universal fate of human effort when she qualifies her vision by anticipating the fate of her painting: it will "molder in attics,"<sup>75</sup> she notes, or be "hung in servants' bedrooms."<sup>76</sup> Woolf orchestrates this understanding by juxtaposing scenes that are taking place in the boat to what Lily is experiencing on the beach, scenes which qualify her vision in the same way that the "Time Passes" interlude qualifies Mrs. Ramsey's vision at the party. Two examples of this use of juxtaposition occur immediately before and after section XI in which Lily finally experiences the vision that allows her to complete her painting. Before, we find Cam, who has been meditating about her father and what he means to her, overcoming her antipathy and accepting his view of life as she murmurs to herself, "dreamily half asleep, how we perished, each alone,"<sup>77</sup> and after, we find James also acknowledging the validity of his understanding: "He looked, James thought, getting his head now against the Lighthouse, now against the

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<sup>75</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 309.

<sup>76</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 237.

<sup>77</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 284.

waste of waters running away into the open, like some old stone lying in the sand; he looked as if he had become physically what was always at the back of both of their minds--that loneliness that was for both of them the truth about things."<sup>78</sup> At the same moment, Lily, too, discovers that, "Whatever she had wanted to give him, when he left her that morning, she had given him at last."<sup>79</sup> What she gives him, of course, is the sympathy that can only be adequately expressed in his own words. Woolf's point is clear, and it is a point directly reflective of the dual epistemology of contextualism: whatever redemptive meaning Lily grasps in her moment of experienced vision, it does not alter the fact that disorder, fragmentation and mutability are the iron laws of the observed world.

But for Lily on the beach, as for Mrs. Ramsey at the party, something does occur that is not subject to these laws, and its occurrence verifies the existence of a mode of reality that is the basis for an alternative answer to the question she awakened to answer that morning. In her dramatic movement towards this experienced truth, Lily provides a series of observations about what is happening to herself that further tie what she experiences in the climactic moment of her vision to the theories of contextualism.

Perhaps the most significant of these observations is her growing sense, as she moves towards vision, that she is experiencing time in a new way: "she could not shake herself free from the sense that everything this morning was happening for the first time, perhaps for the

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<sup>78</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 301.

<sup>79</sup>To the Lighthouse, pp. 308-9.



last time."<sup>80</sup> When we relate this observation to the memories of the past that dominate her reverie, these memories take on a new significance. Gradually, her perception of Mrs. Ramsey shifts from recollections of the dead past to the experience of the living present, from the sequential conceptualization of time to the experience of "actual" time, or duration. The culmination of this epistemological shift will occur at the moment of vision itself, when she will experience the living presence of Mrs. Ramsey on the beach beside her. Although she is assuredly not writing a ghost story, Woolf is clear in asking her reader to accept Mrs. Ramsey's presence literally, and clear in her implication that Lily's redemptive vision is contingent upon her fully accepting and experiencing her presence. Lily's struggle to achieve "exemption from the universal law" must finally be seen as a struggle with death and the triumph of her vision occurs through the experiencing of time in a new mode; the experiencing of Mrs. Ramsey's living presence has released her in the moment of vision from the sway of the laws of sequential time. In experiences what is enduring and most real in herself, namely, the "secret which Lily Briscoe believed people must have for the world to go on at all." As quoted earlier, "A single minute released from the chronological order of time has recreated a human being similarly released." It is such an experience that is the basis of Lily's vision: a vision that confirms Bergson's observation that "Theory of knowledge and theory of life seem to us inseparable."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 288.

<sup>81</sup>An Introduction to Metaphysics, p. 1.

Woolf, then, like Bergson in particular and the contextualist philosophers in general, leaves us in her novel with a dual epistemology, and through this dual epistemology, with two conflicting absolutes in answer to Lily's question of life's meaning. Levy notes that "The paradox of Time and Free Will is that it leaves Bergson with a deep split between the external world of nature and the deepest personal self. . . . His perplexity is not over how knowledge of the external world is possible, but over how knowledge of the inner self is possible."<sup>82</sup> Woolf solves the problem in the same way that Bergson solved it, that is by acknowledging the epistemological significance of experienced time. If our knowledge of the external world tells us that man is nothing but a victim of temporal succession and change, our experience counters this knowledge with the belief that something endures of our lives that is not subject to these laws. In duration, we experience time as a continuous flow rather than as a series of moments in a sequence, and in this experience, we grasp the reality of something in our own identity, and in human identity in general, that endures within the succession and change that characterizes the external world. It is certainly this duality that is acknowledged by Lily when she, at her moment of redemptive vision, simultaneously acknowledges Mr. Ramsey's spiritual grammar.

What, then, is the "secret" that Mrs. Ramsey had "lock[ed] up within herself" that Lily experiences and, through experience, acknowledges? Woolf warns us about the danger of labelling the secret: We are reminded when Lily recalls Mrs. Ramsey saying, "Aren't things spoiled by saying

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<sup>82</sup>Philosophy in the Modern World, p. 75.

them"<sup>83</sup> that Mrs. Ramsey was never able to speak her deepest feelings to her husband, but could only express them in action. The word "love," for someone who is acutely aware of "some pettiness of some part of herself and of human relationships, how flawed they were, how despicable, how self-seeking at their best," must certainly have stuck in her throat, but it is nothing less than this word that will suffice for Lily, and nothing less than this that she gives Mr. Ramsey in the moment of total rapport that she experiences on the beach. "Love had a thousand shapes," thinks Lily at one moment on her path to vision, "There might be lovers whose gift it was to choose out of the elements of things and place them together and so, giving them a wholeness not theirs in life, make of some scene, or meeting of people (all now gone and separate) one of those globed compacted things over which thought lingers and love plays."<sup>84</sup> Love, then, as the aspiration for synthesis and the commitment to attain it, is what has endured of Mrs. Ramsey and what Lily, in becoming "one with the object adored," has experienced and acknowledged in herself. What she defines in this passage as "love" is most certainly to be understood as her primary motivation as an artist, an understanding that repudiates her conscious sense of "the ineffectiveness of action, the supremacy of thought" with the understanding that the unconditional acceptance of the life she seeks to portray is prerequisite to achieving the vision that allows her to portray it. We recall that earlier, she had noted that Mrs. Ramsey's accomplishments affected her "Like a work of art," and we understand that she recognizes that the love that

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<sup>83</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 256.

<sup>84</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 286.

motivated Mrs. Ramsey, the artist of life, is the love that must motivate her own efforts.

But more important than her labelling the secret, is her experiencing of it. We recall Terence's words from The Voyage Out, Woolf's first effort in fiction to define the relationship between life and thought: "I want to write a novel about silence, the things people don't say" and remember that nothing of significance is said aloud by one person to another in To the Lighthouse; what is significant is what is experienced internally. Perhaps we should turn again to Bergson to understand why this must be so:

The enterprise was indeed discouraging: how could the conviction derived from experience be handed down by speech? And above all, how could the inexpressible be expressed? But these questions do not even present themselves to the great mystic. He has felt truth flowing into his soul from its fountainhead like an active force. He can no more help spreading it abroad than the sun can help diffusing its light. Only, it is not by mere words that he will spread it.<sup>85</sup>

Woolf has spread her truth not by "mere words" but by writing a novel that is "one of those globed compacted things over which thought lingers and love plays," and in so doing has resolved, through the convincing description of shared experience, the conflict between life and thought that dominated her life and that she believed dominates the lives of all of us.

How does Woolf convey this understanding? Certainly Lily's conceptualizations as she moves towards the vision that affirms it are useful guides for Lily herself and for the reader, but it is her experience of love, not her conceptualization of it, that carries the weight of

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<sup>85</sup>Henri Bergson, The Two Sources of Morality and Religion (New York: Holt, 1935), p. 222.





meaning, and it is in the convincing description of Lily's movement towards this experience, and of the moment of experience itself, that To the Lighthouse earns its stature as Virginia Woolf's finest novel. Woolf makes clear throughout "The Window" that however accurate Lily's observations are on her path toward vision, they are inadequate to her needs. Woolf reveals this epistemological insight by the way that she structures Lily's path toward vision, taking her through a series of epiphanies of increasing intensity and significance that lead her to affirmative understandings which she is unable to sustain as she ponders more deeply on the meaning of what she is experiencing. What Woolf conveys is that conceptually, the conflict between the eager and dissatisfied self and the stern and philosophical self cannot be resolved. The resolution can only be achieved in the experience of a synthetic truth.

The unfolding structure of Lily's path towards vision is consistent in this regard. After her first significant epiphany, a reliving of a moment of rapport with Charles Tansley, Lily acknowledges the power and significance of Mrs. Ramsey's artistry and the relationship of her artistry to her own efforts as an artist:

What is the meaning of life? That was all--a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsey bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsey saying, 'Life stand still here'; Mrs. Ramsey making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily tried to make of the moment something permanent)--this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos, there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing . . . was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsey said. "Mrs. Ramsey! Mrs. Ramsey!" she repeated. She owed it all to her.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>To the Lighthouse, pp. 240-241.

This affirmative understanding gives way, however, to a recurrence of her antipathy when she recalls the fate of the Rayley's marriage: "She could not help feeling a little triumphant, telling Mrs. Ramsey that the marriage had not been a success."<sup>87</sup> But in the process of repudiating Mrs. Ramsey ("It has all gone against your wishes. They're happy like that; I'm happy like this") her thoughts turn to William Bankes, and again, in the reliving of a moment of rapport that Mrs. Ramsey had encouraged and that Lily had resisted, Lily experiences and affirms Mrs. Ramsey's creative power: "What did it mean? Could things thrust their hands up and grip one; could the blade cut; the first grasp? No learning by heart the ways of the world? No guide, no shelter, but all was miracle, and leaping from the pinnacle of a tower in the air? Could it be, even for elderly people, that this was life?--startling, unexpected, unknown?"<sup>88</sup> Again, however, her affirmative understanding gives way to a recurrence of her intellectual resistance, and it is in the moments between these ecstatically expressed rhetorical questions and the final experiencing of vision that we find Lily's resistance to Mrs. Ramsey and her values most strongly stated. Woolf emphasizes the significance of Lily's resistance at this point by focusing Lily's thoughts on her shared world-view with Mr. Carmichael who is described at this point as being like "a creature gorged with existence,"<sup>89</sup> and upon their shared belief in "the ineffectiveness of action, the supremacy of thought." It is, finally, this understanding of life that her climactic vision repudiates. Structurally, we move from conceptual denial, to re-experienced affirmation

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<sup>87</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 260.

<sup>88</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 268.

<sup>89</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 265.

in each stage of the unfolding drama of Lily's struggle for truth. Each experience of affirmation increases in intensity as the figure at the center increases in significance, from the insignificant Charles Tansley, to the important Mr. Bankes, to the central Mr. Ramsey. Perhaps Woolf signifies the finality of Lily's concluding moment of vision by implying at the end that even Mr. Carmichael acknowledges its occurrence when he is stirred from detachment to observe the landing at the lighthouse. In her movement towards vision, concepts and words first serve and then fail Lily; finally, it is only experienced truth that satisfies her.

Certainly this is why Woolf has Lily observe in her path toward vision that "the vision must be perpetually remade,"<sup>90</sup> and perhaps even more importantly, that it is not the actual picture created "but what it attempted that 'remained forever.'"<sup>91</sup> If love cannot be understood as a ruling force in the universe observed by man, and through such an understanding as an aspect of a vertical cosmology, it can be acknowledged as an absolute and actualizable inclination within man. Bergson's epistemology and ontology explains this truth in general terms: "This reality is mobility. Not things made, but things in the making, not self-maintaining states, but only changing states exist. Rest is never more than apparent, or, rather, relative. The consciousness we have of our own self in its continual flux introduces us to the interior of a reality on the model of which we represent other realities. All reality, therefore, is tendency."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 270.

<sup>91</sup>To the Lighthouse, p. 267.

<sup>92</sup>An Introduction to Metaphysics, pp. 65-6.

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