VII • Coming Together and Apart

I wish now to explore some parts of that more familiar realm where the one and the many retain their more usual distances and where our chief preoccupation is not our relation to the ONE or ALL but coming together and apart with other individuals of our own species, a realm that is perhaps best entered by another myth, the one offered by Aristophanes in Plato's Symposium to explain the origin of human love. It is worth relating with something of the fullness with which it appears in the original. “In the beginning,” Aristophanes explains, “we were nothing like we are now.” For one thing, there were three sexes—male, female, and a third, an actual “hermaphrodite,” a creature that was half male and half female. And secondly, each of these beings was globular in shape, with rounded back and sides, four arms and four legs, and two faces, both the same on a cylindrical neck; and one head, with one face one side and one the other, and four ears, and two lots of privates, and all the other parts to match. They walked erect, as we do ourselves, backwards or forwards, whichever they pleased; but when they broke into a run they simply stuck their legs straight out and went whirling around them like a clown turning cartwheels. And since they had eight legs, if you count their arms as well, you can imagine that they went bowling along at a pretty good speed.

Such was the strength, energy, and arrogance of these creatures that they actually tried (as Icarus probably did not) to scale the heights of heaven and set upon the gods. Zeus, who does not wish to destroy them completely, which would mean giving up all their offerings and devotions, decides to weaken them by cutting them in half, “thus killing two birds with one stone; for each one will be only half as strong, and there’ll be twice as many of them, which will suit us very nicely. They can walk about, upright, on their two legs, and if . . . I have any more trouble with them, I shall split them
up again, and they’ll have to hop about on one.” After cutting each in half, he tells Apollo to turn each of the faces toward the side that was cut away—“thinking that the sight of such a gash might frighten them into keeping quiet—and then to heal the whole thing up.” Apollo does this by pulling the skin tight “like those bags you pull together with a string and tied up the one remaining opening so as to form what we call the navel.”

When all this is done, each half creature is left with a desperate yearning for its other half, and they all run about flinging their arms around each other’s necks, wishing somehow to be rolled back into one. Pretty soon they begin “to die of hunger and general inertia because neither would do anything without the other. And when one half was left alone by the death of its mate, it wandered about questing and clasping in the hope of finding a spare half-woman—or a whole woman, as we should call her nowadays—or half a man.” Before long the race begins to die out because the sexual organs had “originally been on the outside—which was now the back” and they had conceived not upon each other but, like the grasshoppers, upon the earth.

Zeus takes pity on them and moves their sex organs around to the front and has the male beget upon the female—“the idea being that if, in all these clippings and claspings, a man should chance upon a woman, conception would take place and the race could be continued, while if a man should congregate with man, he might at least obtain such satisfaction as would allow him to turn his attention to the everyday affairs of life. So you see, gentlemen, how far back we can trace our innate love for one another; and how this love is always trying to reintegrate our former nature, to make two into one, and to bridge the gulf between one human being and another.”

Aristophanes goes on to draw the obvious corollaries that heterosexual and homosexual proclivities depend upon the sex of the original slices and to develop the expected Greek emphasis upon the love of men for men, but also argues that the sexual pleasures can “hardly account for the huge delight
lovers take in one another’s company. The fact is that both their souls are longing for... that original state of ours... that primeval wholeness.” He concludes that “the happiness of the whole human race, women no less than men, is to be found in the consummation of our love, and in the healing of our dissevered nature by finding each his proper mate. And if this be a counsel of perfection, then we must do what, in our present circumstances, is next best, and bestow our love upon the natures most congenial to our own.” If we show sufficient reverence for the gods, love “will one day heal us and restore us to our old estate, and establish us in joy and blessedness.”

Despite its comic aspects, such a myth perhaps explains as well as any other the strength with which most of us feel the urge to unite with particular other members of our species, sexually and otherwise, the enormous amount of time, energy, and money we devote to that endeavor, and the curious extent to which we have chosen to describe, and to want to describe, such connections as achievements of oneness. At least until recently. The urge still seems to be there, of course, though now many of the lovers apparently prefer to be partners in a “relationship,” sometimes with explicitly defined duties and privileges, rather than to be united in holy matrimony with a “better half.” The injunction “What God hath joined let no man cut asunder” seems for some to have been replaced by something like “Don’t get hitched too tightly,” as though marriage were only a set of harnesses. And I have attended a marriage ceremony recently in which the dominant note was not the bonds between the two but Kahlil Gibran’s warning to be sure to keep spaces between them. I understand there are those who prefer engaging in sexual congress to making love.

But this is the easy, though irresistible, grumbling of my middle age. I should remember the long, long line of marriages of the past not made in heaven, including the one in which the knot was tied with bride and groom and parson all falling through the sky harnessed to parachutes. And though there may have been some recent real damage to love and lan-
guage, I believe it is local and that the condition described by the myth will continue to prevail. The couple, in fact, who were married with Gibran’s spaces, appear to be closely and happily welded.

Popular lyrics will no doubt continue to say such things as

Lovers are very special people,
They’re the luckiest people in the world.
With one person
One very special person
A feeling deep in your soul
Says. You were half, now you’re whole.²

We will, I believe, go on responding to Romeo and Juliet and understanding the feeling that generates exchanges like the one between Maria and Robert Jordan in Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in which she says: “I am thee and thou art me and all of one is the other. And I love thee, oh, I love thee so. Are we not truly one?” and he answers, “Yes. . . . It is true.”³ I think we will go on having lovers, friends, comrades, pals, buddies, chums, mates, and sidekicks as well as “relationships,” and will continue to understand when Saint Augustine writes this passage, which Auden did not choose to quote, about his response to the death of his friend: “I wondered yet more that myself, who was to him a second self, could live, he being dead. Well said one of his friends, ‘Thou half of my soul:’ for I felt that my soul and his soul were ‘one soul in two bodies:’ and therefore was my life a horror to me, because I would not live halved.”⁴ And I trust we will go on delighting in lines like John Donne’s

Call us what you will, we’re made such by love;
Call her one, me another fly,
We’re tapers too, and at our own cost die.
And we in us find the eagle and the dove.
The phoenix riddle hath more wit
By us: we two being one, are it.
So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit.
We die and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love

(“The Canonization”)⁵
and the numerous other poems that might be anthologized under a title like Two Becoming One.\(^6\) 

Surely we will continue to understand the curious shifts in a passage like this one from Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse as Lily Briscoe wonders what it is that makes Mrs. Ramsay so remarkable. I quote at some length here in part as a way of introducing Lily, who will be an important presence later in this chapter.

... Sitting on the floor with her arms around Mrs. Ramsay’s knees, close as she could get, smiling to think that Mrs. Ramsay would never know the reason of that pressure, she imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public. What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through to those secret chambers? What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored? Could the body achieve, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? or the heart? Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? for it was not knowledge but unity she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay’s knee.

Nothing happened. Nothing! Nothing! as she leant her head against Mrs. Ramsay’s knee. And yet, she knew knowledge and wisdom were stored up in Mrs. Ramsay’s heart. How then, she had asked herself, did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were? Only like a bee, drawn by some sweetness or sharpness in the air intangible to touch or taste, one haunted the dome-shaped hive, ranged the wastes of air over the countries of the world alone, and then haunted the hives with their murmurs and their stirrings; the hives, which were people. Mrs. Ramsay rose. Lily rose. Mrs. Ramsay went. For days there hung about her, as after a dream some subtle change is felt in the person one has dreamt of, more vividly than anything she said, the sound of murmuring and, as she sat in the wicker arm-chair in the drawing-room window she wore, to Lily’s eyes, an august shape; the shape of a dome.\(^7\)

Even Freud, who confesses he has never experienced oceanic feelings and who is inclined to see most blurrings of
the self and the outer world as pathological, is willing to say: "There is only one state—admittedly an unusual state, but not one that can be stigmatized as pathological—" in which the ego does not maintain clear and sharp lines of demarcation between itself and the outside. "At the height of being in love the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away. Against all the evidence of his senses a man who is in love declares that 'I' and 'you' are one, and is prepared to behave as if it were a fact."\(^8\)

Even Auden, for a while at least, must have been overcome by a yearning enough like those defined in both myths to have written a stanza that ends as this one does:

There is no such thing as the State  
And no one exists alone;  
Hunger allows no choice  
To the citizen or the police;  
We must love one another or die.  

("September 1, 1939")\(^9\)

There is enough truth in those myths that I felt a strong sense of loss and sorrow when I first learned that Auden changed the final line to read: "we must love one another and die," then deleted the whole stanza, and finally dropped the poem in its entirety from his collected works. And there is enough truth in both myths so that I feel a similar sense of loss and sorrow as I now follow, as I must, some turnings of mind and heart that neither myth takes proper account of. The androgyny myth itself provides as good a bridge as any.

Near the end of his speech, as he is celebrating the joy of lovers who find their other halves, Aristophanes asks what would happen if Hephaestus were to come and stand over such lovers with his tool bag as they lay together, and to offer to roll them into one, "so that you could always be together, day and night, and never be parted again? Because if that's what you want I can easily weld you together; and then you can live your two lives in one, and when the time comes, you can die a common death and still be two-in-one in the lower world. Now what do you say? Is that what you'd like me to
do? And would you be happy if I did?” Without a moment’s pause or hint of irony, Aristophanes goes on: “We may be sure gentlemen, that no lover on earth would dream of refusing such an offer, for not one of them could imagine a happier fate. Indeed, they would be convinced that this was just what they’d been waiting for—to be merged, that is, into an utter one-ness with the beloved.”

I cannot resist suggesting immediately, and not just facetiously, that the lovers’ response might depend a good deal upon whether Hephaestus had approached them just before or after their sexual climax. Yet even in the heat of sexual union, I suspect, most lovers might hesitate to accept Hephaestus’s offer. At any other time, nearly all of us, I believe, would make the choice to remain incomplete and apart, within our separate skins.10

No doubt there are many reasons why this would be true, including some profound chemical or biological ones of the sort that cause us to reject transplanted organs even from our own kin unless the rejection is inhibited by drugs, that make us want to cut apart Siamese twins or else hide them away in freak shows where we can exercise a little ambivalence but not much, and that lead most of us, despite a wish to be close to our beloveds when we die, to choose to lie in separate graves.

But I think the deepest reason is that remaining incomplete allows us to be lonely and to devote much of our lives to that most fascinating of occupations—the effort at once to preserve and overcome our aloneness, even to perform the impossible feat of simultaneously merging and remaining separate. I do not mean to sound clever, for this contradiction more than any other, I believe, shapes our lives. It is hard to see how it could be otherwise given our elemental biological and psychological histories. For beneath all the subtleties and complexities spelled out by Freud, Jung, and the legions of developmental theorists who followed them, this much is clear. Each of us did at one time live within the body of another, sharing its food and blood (and if the New Puritans are right, nicotine and alcohol). Each of us came into being
from the entrance of one body into another and from the profound mingling of the cells from two other bodies that, in turn and on and on back in time, came into being from a union of other bodies. Even if we are not all great-great-grandchildren of Adam and Eve or of a father who art in heaven, or of those eight-footed heaven-scaling creatures proposed by Aristophanes, or of the latest fossilized anthropoid announced by the anthropologists, we all must have some common great-grandparents somewhere in the past. All of us knew some kind of warm embrace or touch, at least in infancy, and reached out a small arm and hand to touch another. We all lived for a while in a state of helplessness in which we depended entirely on others to remain alive (and still do depend on others to help feed and clothe us). All of us very early watched others go away from us into separateness and distance, sometimes when we needed them or desired them. Nearly all of us, I would guess, began to try to tame this mystery, sometimes by crying, sometimes by little games of hide-and-seek in which, for a while at least, the other always reappeared, sometimes by pretending we did not care. All of us very early had encounters that gave us pain, and as we grew had to have the experience of others as intruding (with commands, demands, questions, touches, blows) upon our growing sense of selfhood and private space. We also had to have the experience again and again of discovering that others did not know what was going on inside us and of realizing that we were in some sense alone within our own skins and short of death could not fully merge again with any other. These things alone, even without any of the further experiences of weaning, adolescence, sex, and death, suggest how much our lives must come to be defined by motions toward and away from one another and how exquisitely complex our feelings and thoughts will come to be about such motions, or even about the possibilities of them.

These things alone go far toward explaining the special claim put on our attention by nearly anything that strikes the chords of separateness and oneness, distance and closeness, or loneliness and connectedness. And they are chords in that
the poles are indissoluble, can be defined only in relation to each other. One could not conceive of the meaning of separateness were there not the possibility of union and vice versa. The same is true for loneliness and connectedness. The very word loneliness implies a yearning for connection. It is this indissolubility that probably accounts for much of our fascination with solitary or lonely figures—not only with romantic or heroic ones like Leatherstocking, Heathcliff, Ahab, and the Count of Monte Cristo but with hermits, recluses, and solitary voyagers of all kinds, both real and fictional; and it is tempting to dwell upon such figures, to stare at the space that surrounds one or another Bartleby, Prufrock, Sister Carrie, or Eben Flood. I sometimes think American literature is defined more by such spaces than by any of the geographical ones it populates. But it is the chords in which the antithetic states vibrate with more noticeable dissonance, the human connections in which the poles are in greater tension, that I wish most to sound, and which seem to me to resound most tellingly (tell most resoundingly?) of our human plight.

I am thinking of titles like The Lonely Crowd or The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter; phrases like “hardhearted,” “parting is such sweet sorrow,” “absence makes the heart grow fonder,” “good fences make good neighbors,” “keep your distance,” “don’t touch me,” “nothing can touch me,” “ships that pass in the night,” and “each man kills the thing he loves”; the numberless lyrics that beg beloveds to come closer or lament how far off they have gone; the cowboy’s plea to “bury me not on the lone prairie.” I think of all those scenes in movies (which have made my tears spurt against my will) where the lovers are physically dragged apart by parents, policemen, soldiers, or things from outer space, or where they embrace across barbed wire, or one in a train and one on the platform, they hold together as long as they can as the train is pulling out and we must both watch and hear the growing distance and sometimes watch them wave. And all those train scenes in Thomas Wolfe’s novels that once struck my adolescent heart, as they did his, as the most poignant representations of human loneliness and yearning for connection. And prob-
ably still would if not for the overwriting. Here is the culmi-
nation of an accidental race between two trains that had 
jolted the passengers out of their lonely isolation and caused 
them to crowd at the windows, "grinning like children for 
delight and jubilation" as first one train and then the other 
took the lead:

And they looked at one another for a moment, they passed and 
vanished and were gone forever, yet it seemed to him that he had 
known these people, that he knew them better than the people in 
his own train, and that, having met them for an instant under 
immense and timeless skies, as they were hurled across the conti-
nent to a thousand destinations, they had met, passed, vanished, 
yet would remember this forever. And he thought the people in 
the two trains felt this, also: slowly they passed each other now, 
and their mouths smiled and their eyes grew friendly, but he 
thought there was some sorrow and regret in what they felt. For, 
having lived together as strangers in the immense and swarming 
city, they now had met upon the everlasting earth, hurled past 
each other for a moment between two points in time upon the 
shining rails, never to meet, to speak, to know each other any 
more, and the briefness of their days, the destiny of man, was in 
that instant greeting and farewell.\textsuperscript{11}

(In airplanes we cannot have such experiences—one more 
price we pay for thinking we should be high-soaring birds.)

When I think of Wolfe, I think of Sherwood Anderson and 
all those lonely figures in \textit{Winesburg, Ohio} who, as Irving 
Howe has so well put it, are alienated from each other partly 
because "the very extremity of their need for love [has] itself 
become a barrier to its realization"\textsuperscript{12}; Louise Bentey, who 
feels "that between herself and all the other people in the 
world, a wall had been built up and that she was living just on 
the edge of some warm inner circle of life that must be quite 
open and understandable to others"\textsuperscript{13}; the stranger in "Tandy," 
who, as Maxwell Geismar rightly observes, expresses the 
underlying obscurely felt emotion of the town when he says, 
"I am a lover and have not found my thing to love. . . . It 
makes my destruction inevitable, you see."\textsuperscript{14} I think espe-
cially of Anderson's wonderfully explicit commentary when 
George Willard, after paroxysms of loneliness, takes a walk
with Helen White: “The feeling of loneliness and isolation that had come to the young man in the crowded streets of his town was both broken and intensified by the presence of Helen.” I think more soberly of statements like Rilke’s that “between even the closest human beings infinite distances continue to exist”; of passages like the one by Olive Schreiner that Patrick White uses as an epigraph in his *The Aunt’s Story*, a story about a woman who inhabits an exceptionally wonderful and terrible aloneness: “She thought of the narrowness of the limits within which a human soul may speak and be understood by its nearest of mental kin, of how soon it reaches the solitary land of the individual experience, in which no fellow footfall is ever heard”; of the lines that end Emily Dickinson’s “I Cannot Live with You”:

So we must keep apart,
You there, I here,
With just the door ajar
That Oceans are,
And prayer,
And that pale sustenance,
Despair.

and of the terrifying passage that ends E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, that book which so powerfully mirrors the looks of certain distances between cultures, between individuals, and between man and his universe, and that also describes some quite remarkable efforts to look across those distances:

Fielding mocked again.
And Aziz in an awful rage danced this way and that, not knowing what to do and cried: “Down with the English anyhow. That’s certain. Clear out, you fellows, double quick, I say. We may hate one another, but we hate you most. If I don’t make you go, Ahmed will, Karim will, if it’s fifty-five hundred years we shall get rid of you, yes, we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then”—he rode against him furiously—“and then,” he continued, half kissing him, “you and I shall be friends.”

“Why can’t we be friends now?” said the other, holding him affectionately. “It’s what I want. It’s what you want.”
But the horses didn’t want it—they swerved apart; the earth didn’t want it; sending up rocks through which riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn’t want it, they said in their hundred voices, “No, not yet,” and the sky said, “No, not there.”

It is the “not yet,” I believe, with its possibility of future union that gives this distance its especially agonizing look.

I think of the passage in Another Country where James Baldwin says of Vivaldo, just after Ida has finished telling him about her whorishness with Ellis, that “his heart began to beat with a newer, stonier anguish, which destroyed the distance called pity and placed him, very nearly, in her body.” A moment later he goes to her “resigned and tender and helpless, her sobs seeming to make his belly sore. And, nevertheless, for a moment, he could not touch her, he didn’t know how.” During that night of their farthest penetration of one another, he does not physically enter her body; when they finally embrace, there “was nothing erotic in it; they were like two weary children” (p. 362). And though it hints at a large number of matters I am not ready to deal with yet, I must note also that immediately after this new oneness with Ida, Vivaldo is apparently able to close another distance, for he is able to work on his novel all that night, a novel that had been giving him great difficulty because his characters “did not seem to trust him. . . . He could move them about but they themselves did not move. He put words in their mouths which they uttered sullenly, unconvinced. With the same agony, or greater, with which he attempted to seduce a woman, he was trying to seduce his people: he begged them to surrender up to him their privacy. And they refused—without, for all their ugly intransigence, showing the faintest desire to leave him” (p. 111). Our final glimpse of the two figures draws much of its power from the space between them across which she calls his name and from the jostling in the spaces beyond them: “Much, much later, while he was still working and she slept, she turned in her sleep, and she called his name. He paused, waiting, staring at her, but she
did not move again, or speak again. He rose, and walked to the window. The rain had ceased, in the black-blue sky a few stars were scattered, and the wind roughly jostled the clouds along” (p. 362). And I must mention one more phrase from that much undervalued book: Cass’s saying that if her husband had been unfaithful to her she would not try to hold him, as he was trying to hold her, with threats or want to punish him because “after all—he doesn’t belong to me, nobody belongs to anybody” (p. 339).21

Another lady (from the pen of a writer whose distance from James Baldwin seems at once astronomical and easily bridged), Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, puts it this way: “And there is a dignity in people, a solitude; even between husband and wife a gulf; and that one must respect . . . for one would not part with it oneself, or take it, against his will, from one’s husband, without losing one’s independence, one’s self-respect—something, after all, priceless.”22 Since it always seems a special distortion to offer only one perspective from a novel by Virginia Woolf, we should note that this same “priceless” “solitude” or “gulf” seems to make it impossible for her husband to say outright that he loves her even on a day when he has come home especially to do so and that he thinks on that occasion “it is a thousand pities never to say what one feels” (p. 175).23 And note that Mrs. Dalloway on another occasion thinks of herself as one who “could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet,” “a cold spirit” that often leads her to fail her husband. “She could see what she lacked . . . something central which permeated; something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman, or of women together” (p. 46). And she knows something of what it can mean to cross that gulf. For “she could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman . . . confessing, as to her they often did, some scrape, some folly. And whether it was pity, or their beauty, or that she was older, or some accident—like a faint scent, or a violin next door (so strange is the power of sounds at certain moments), she did undoubtedly then feel what men felt. Only for a moment; but it was enough” (p. 53).
Mrs. Dalloway is an especially fascinating mixture of desires to merge and to preserve herself intact. Even death she sees as something that permits both a preservation of self and a surrendering of it. Hearing about the suicide of a young man, she thinks how she and her old friends "would grow old. A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the center which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death" (pp. 280–81). She intuits correctly that the young man killed himself because of a certain kind of arrogant doctor's capability of committing "some indescribable outrage—forcing your soul, that was it . . . they make life intolerable, men like that" (p. 281). At one point while writing the book, Virginia Woolf had thought she might have Mrs. Dalloway kill herself. Instead she ends the book with a tribute to the power of her particular selfhood as Peter Walsh witnesses her return to the party:

What is this terror? what is this ecstasy? he thought to himself.
What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?
It is Clarissa, he said.
For there she was. (P. 296)

Tensions between self-preservation and self-annihilation and between separateness and connection are so central and fascinating a part of Virginia Woolf's vision (and life as well) that it is tempting to go on giving illustrations. And I shall return to her later to show ways by which some of her characters manage to cross distances between one another without surrendering their aloneness or private space. For now though, a brief look at one more pair of her characters, a Mr. Serle and Miss Anning, who have been introduced to one another by Mrs. Dalloway, though not in the novel bearing her name but in a short story with a title so blatantly in accord with my theme that I am embarrassed to exploit it—"Together and Apart." Two essentially lonely middle-aged people, Mr.
Serle and Miss Anning, chat with increasing warmth about Canterbury, which has been important to both of them, until they achieve a moment of real connection which is described so: “Their eyes met, collided rather, for each felt that behind the eyes the secluded being, who sits in darkness while his shallow agile companion does all the tumbling and beckoning, and keeps the show going, suddenly stood erect; flung off his cloak, confronted the other.” For each of them this experience is both “alarming” and “terrific.” Like “a white bolt in a mist . . . it had happened; the old ecstasy of life; its invincible assault; for it was unpleasant, at the same time that it rejoiced and rejuvenated the veins and nerves with threads of ice and fire; it was terrifying.” At this point Miss Anning says, “‘Canterbury twenty years ago,’ . . . as one lays a shade over an intense light or covers some burning peach with a green leaf, for it is too strong, too ripe, too full.” But she thinks about her occasional wish that she had married. “Sometimes the cool peace of middle life, with its automatic devices for shielding mind and body from bruises, seemed to her, compared with the thunder and the livid apple-blossom of Canterbury, base. She could imagine something different, more like lightening, more intense” (pp. 141-42). This moment is followed by another in which her nerves lie quiescent, “as if she and Mr. Serle knew each other so perfectly, were, in fact, so closely united that they had only to float side by side down the stream.” As soon, however, as she notices herself thinking the word love, she rejects it and begins to orchestrate her retreat. As I read the closing passage, I am not sure whether to shudder more at their haste to disentangle or from fear that it will not happen quickly enough:

That is what she felt now, the withdrawal of human affection, Serle’s disappearance and the instant need they were both under to cover up what was so desolating and degrading to human nature that everyone tried to bury it decently from sight—this withdrawal, this violation of trust, and, seeking some decent acknowledged burial form, she said:

“Of course, whatever they may do, they can’t spoil Canterbury.”
He smiled; he accepted it; he crossed his knees the other way about. She did her part; he his. So things came to an end. And over them both came instantly that paralyzing blankness of feeling, when nothing bursts from the mind, when its walls appear like slate; when vacancy almost hurts, and the eyes petrified and fixed see the same spot—a pattern, a coal scuttle—with an exactness which is terrifying, since no emotion, no idea, no impression of any kind comes to change it, to modify it, to embellish it, since the fountains of feeling seem sealed and as the mind turns rigid, so does the body; stark, statuesque, so that neither Mr. Serle nor Miss Anning could move or speak, and they felt as if an enchanter had freed them, and spring flushed every vein with streams of life, when Mira Cartwright, tapping Mr. Serle archly on the shoulder, said:

"I saw you at The Meistersinger, and you cut me. Villain," said Miss Cartwright, "you don't deserve that I should ever speak to you again."

And they could separate. (Pp. 142-43)

The tone of this story is deeply ambivalent and obviously reflects the author's pull in both directions. At times she encourages us to view the two characters almost as gamesters of a sort whose self-consciousness and fear of real intimacy has left them with empty lives, and yet she leads us also to participate in their drive to separate and to share their relief when they are finally released from one another.

Perhaps the most disturbing human relations are those in which the pulls together and apart are so strenuous, the self-enclosures so severe, the armor so thick that linkage can take place only through violence, sometimes limited to feelings, sometimes reaching a point where caresses may even become blows: like the relation between Joanna Burden and Joe Christmas in Faulkner's Light in August. Joanna, encased in a "spiritual privacy so long intact that its own instinct for preservation had immolated it, its physical phase the strength and fortitude of a man," whose sexual surrender Joe remembers as "hard, untearful and unfilthy and almost man-like. . . . It was as if he struggled physically with another man for an object of no actual value to either, and for which they struggled on principle alone"; Joe himself, so terrified about the fragility of his armor that he must ward off all closeness and softness and whose relations with women are
all marked by violence; and not incidentally, while still an
adolescent, damaged by a ruthless stepfather into feeling “like
an eagle: hard, sufficient, potent, remorseless, strong . . .
though he did not then know that, like the eagle, his own
flesh as well as all space was still a cage.”

But when considering such relations in Faulkner, whose
works are full of them, mostly I think of Addie Bundren in As
I Lay Dying, who as a teacher is tormented by having to look
at her pupils “day after day, each with his and her secret and
selfish thought, and blood strange to each other blood and
strange to mine” and looks forward “to the times when they
faulted, so I could whip them. When the switch fell I could
feel it upon my flesh; when it welted and ridged it was my
blood that ran, and I would think with each blow of the
switch: Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in
your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with
my own forever and ever”; for whom sex and motherhood
are defined by pain rather than words; who understands
when her first child, Cash, is born, that the experience with
her pupils “had been, not that my aloneness had to be vio­
lated over and over each day, but that it had never been vio­
lated until Cash came. Not even by Anse [her husband] in the
nights. . . . and then made whole again by the violation”
(p. 164); who thinks of her preacher lover as “dressed in sin”
and “would think of him as thinking of me as dressed in sin, he
the more beautiful since the garment which he had exchanged
for sin was sanctified. I would think of the sin as garments
which we would remove in order to shape and coerce the ter­
rrible blood to the forlorn echo of the dead word high in the
air” (pp. 166–67). Out of this relation comes Jewel, who is
the child she both whipped and petted most, and who
becomes someone whose relation between himself and the
thing he loves most, his horse, is marked by a terrible tension
of union and repudiation. When Jewel whistles for him, the
horse makes several rushes toward him and then when Jewel
can almost touch him “stands on his hind legs and slashes
down at Jewel.” They struggle for a while until Jewel finds the
horse’s nostrils and then both “are rigid, motionless, terrific,
the horse back-thrust on stiffened, quivering legs, with lowered head; Jewel with dug heels, shutting off the horse's wind with one hand, with the other patting the horse's neck in short strokes myriad and caressing, cursing the horse with obscene ferocity.” When finally he has gotten the animal into his stall,

the horse kicks at him, slamming a single hoof into the wall with a pistol-like report. Jewel kicks him in the stomach; the horse arches his neck back, crop-toothed; Jewel strikes him across the face with his fist and slides on to the trough and mounts upon it. Clinging to the hay-rack he lowers his head and peers out across the stall tops and through the doorway. . . . He reaches up and drags down hay in hurried armfuls and crams it into the rack.


Perhaps the most awful of such relations is the one between the officer and his orderly in D. H. Lawrence’s “The Prussian Officer”: the officer so long repressed, so unwilling to be touched into life by the “warm flame” of the orderly’s soft unconscious grace that his passion for the youth takes the form of irritation accompanied by increasingly brutal kicks and blows: (to “see the soldier’s young, brown, shapely peasant’s hand grasp the loaf or the wine bottle” sends “a flash of hate or of anger through the elder man’s blood”; when he has hit the servant in the face with a belt and watches “the youth start back, the pain-tears in his eyes and the blood on his mouth,” he feels “a thrill of deep pleasure and of shame”); the orderly trying to keep himself “intact” and “impervious to the feelings of his master,” but goaded into increasing consciousness by the flashes of heat that run through his heart until finally there are “only the two people in the world now—himself and the Captain,” and he crosses the distance between them with this terrible embrace:

The orderly, with serious, earnest young face, and underlip between his teeth, had got his knee in the officer’s chest and was pressing the chin backward over the farther edge of the tree-stump, pressing, with all his heart behind in a passion of relief, the
tension of his wrists exquisite with relief. And with the base of his palms he shoved at the chin, with all his might. And it was pleasant, too, to have that chin, that hard jaw already slightly rough with beard, in his hands. He did not relax one hair's breadth, but, all the force of all his blood exulting in his thrust, he shoved back the head of the other man, till there was a little "cluck" and a crunching sensation. Then he felt as if his head went to vapour. Heavy convulsions shook the body of the officer, frightening and horrifying the young soldier. Yet it pleased him, too, to repress them. It pleased him to keep his hands pressing back the chin, to feel the chest of the other man yield in expiration to the weight of his strong, young knees, to feel the hard twitchings of the prostrate body jerking his own whole frame, which was pressed down on it.  

With this, of course, we have crossed into the realm of sadomasochism, in which I do not wish to remain very long. I must observe, though, how much such relations can be understood in terms of the intimate connections between the inviolateness of the self-enclosures and the violence required to break through or break out. The thicker the armor, the more powerful the blow needed to penetrate it. The purpose of the blows is not so much to inflict pain as to make connection. It is as though the connection is defined or validated by pain, as though the other is not there unless there is pain. I must also observe the latent, and sometimes not so latent, violence nearly always involved in that most profound penetration and intermingling of personal space, sexual copulation, a violence most visibly confessed in the ease and universality with which such expressions as "fuck you" and "screw you" and "up yours" are used as verbal blows. I shall make no comment on the ingredients and tonal variations in distance of "fuck you, buddy," and "mother-fucker," or about the terrible conjunctions of distance and connection in hard-core pornography between the paid participants, and between them and the viewers.

Before retreating to what most will regard as more encouraging ways of seeking to preserve and overcome aloneness, we should view two further instances where the chord of separateness and connection (yes, cord, too) becomes a kind of quiet shriek. One, a not totally distant relative of "Ring
around the Rosy” and “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” is a poem with the inviting title “Let’s All Join Sticky Hands.”

your politics and breath offend me
and the mention of my name
causes you to puke green bile
but hold my hand tightly friend
because there is nothing but you and me
I boast of sleeping with your wife
and denigrate her prowess
you sell narcotics to my children
and tickle my daughter’s thighs
but hug me to your bosom friend
because there is nothing but you and me
I murdered your grandmother
and burned your family bible
you crucified my brother
and shot my old dog spot
I have drawn your boarlike face
on men’s room walls across the land
and you have denounced me
to twenty three top secret federal agencies
as a threat to the national security
but I have forgotten all that went before
and I can see nothing to follow
no beginning no end and a damned poor middle
with our palsied hands scratching at our rheumy eyes
so take your foot off my neck friend
because there is nothing but you and me.  

The other quiet shriek is that sounded by Parson Hooper of Hawthorne’s “The Minister’s Black Veil.” Of all the ways we have found to figure forth our separateness—armor, walls, shells, curtains, spaces—his is perhaps the most awesome. This decent and well-liked young minister appears before his congregation one day wearing a black veil. It is a veil, we are told, that “seemed to consist of two folds of crape, which entirely concealed his features, except the mouth and chin, but probably did not intercept his sight, farther than to give a darkened aspect to all living and inanimate things.”  

Though the members of his congregation are perplexed and
frightened by the veil, they are powerfully affected by his sermon, which "had reference to secret sin, and those sad mysteries which we hide from our nearest and dearest, and would fain conceal from our own consciousness, even forgetting that the Omniscient can detect them. . . . Each member of the congregation, the most innocent girl, and the man of hardened breast, felt as if the preacher had crept upon them, behind his awful veil, and discovered their hoarded iniquity of deed or thought" (p. 40). In public, however, they shrink from him and are prevented by a feeling of dread from asking him why he wears the veil. Even a delegation is unable to question him, for that piece of crape seems "to hang down before his heart, the symbol of a fearful secret between him and them. Were the veil but cast aside, they might speak freely of it, but not till then" (p. 45).

Only his fiancee remains unterrified and is able to question him directly. To her he explains with a faint smile that the veil is " 'a type and a symbol' " that he is bound to wear as long as he remains on earth " 'both in light and darkness, in solitude and before the gaze of multitudes, and as with strangers, so with my familiar friends. No mortal eye will see it withdrawn. This dismal shade must separate me from the world: even you, Elizabeth can never come behind it!' " (p. 46). To her further questioning he responds, " 'If it be a sign of mourning . . . I, perhaps, like most other mortals, have sorrows dark enough to be typified by a black veil.' " When she suggests that others will suspect him of hiding from a sense of guilt, he answers, again with his sad smile, " 'If I hide my face for sorrow, there is cause enough . . . and if I cover it for secret sin, what mortal might not do the same?' " With "this gentle, but unconquerable obstinacy" (ibid.), he continues to resist all her entreaties until finally she too succumbs to the power of the veil, and trembling, turns to leave the room. He rushes to her and cries passionately, " 'Have patience with me, Elizabeth. . . . Do not desert me, though this veil must be between us here on earth. Be mine, and hereafter there shall be no veil over my face, no darkness between our souls! It is but a mortal veil—it is not for eternity! Oh! you
know not how lonely I am, and how frightened to be alone behind my black veil. Do not leave me in this miserable obscurity for ever!" To this she begs him to lift the veil just once and look her in the face. When he replies that cannot be, she says farewell and departs. As she leaves, "even amid his grief, Mr. Hooper smiled to think that only a material emblem had separated him from happiness, though the horrors which it shadowed forth, must be drawn darkly between the fondest of lovers" (p. 47).

As is so often true with Hawthorne, the highly symbolic content does not prevent one from responding both to the minister’s pain and his pride or from wondering what Elizabeth might have achieved through greater patience and greater tolerance of the distance between them.

From that time on, no further efforts are made to remove the veil, and the minister goes through life without ever lifting it, even though he suffers greatly from others’ continued dread and suspicion and especially from the children’s fear of his melancholy figure. In fact, his own antipathy to the veil becomes so great that he never willingly passes a mirror or stoops to drink at a still fountain lest “he should be affrighted by himself.” He is so enveloped in “an ambiguity of sin or sorrow . . . that love or sympathy could never reach him”; he passes through his whole life “kind and loving, though unloved” separated from “cheerful brotherhood and woman’s love,” and locked by that veil “in that saddest of all prisons, his own heart” (pp. 48–50). At the same time, the veil makes him, as Hawthorne so interestingly puts it, “a very efficient clergyman,” one with particular power over “souls that were in agony for sin” and a particular ability “to sympathize with all dark affections” (p. 49).

On his deathbed at the end of a long and virtuous life, he is attended by a zealous young minister who begs permission to remove the veil so that no shadow should be left on so pure a life and then bends forward to lift it. At this the dying man, “exerting a sudden energy which made all the beholders stand aghast,” covers the veil with his hands and cries: “Never! . . . On earth, never!” and concludes his life with this terrifying eloquence:
“Why do you tremble at me alone?” cried he, turning his veiled face round the circle of pale spectators. “Tremble also at each other! Have men avoided me, and women shown no pity, and children screamed and fled, only for my black veil? What, but the mystery which it obscurely typifies, has made this piece of crape so awful? When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best-beloved; when man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsome treasuring up the secret of his sin; then deem me a monster, for the symbol beneath which I have lived, and die! I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil!” (Pp. 51–52)

There are many responses, of course, to be made to such an argument and to such a prideful man, but it is instructive to remember how difficult they would be to exert at such a final separation. Inappropriately but irresistibly I find myself mumbling: “The grave’s a fine and private place / But none, I think, do there embrace.” Well, maybe not so inappropriately, since one could accuse the minister of exhibiting, like Marvell’s mistress, a certain coyness of both the body and the heart. And I find myself thinking of those sad creatures who perform the crime labeled “exposing themselves” or their “private parts,” where the self exposed is only that one small piece of self that dangles between the legs. Perhaps they are seeking to escape prisons of their own hearts where love and sympathy can never reach them. And Moslem women. But all this, I suspect, is largely some coy and nervous fumbling of my own in the face of a peculiarly frightening effort to preserve a loneliness—here even in the very act of denouncing it, and because I have so many conflicting feelings about his gesture.

I know I like his melancholy smile better than the exultant self-dramatization of isolation exhibited by Oliver Wendell Holmes when he says:

Only when you have worked alone—when you have felt around you a black gulf of solitude more isolating than that which surrounds the dying man, and in hope and despair have trusted to your own unshaken will—then only will you have achieved. Thus only can you gain the secret isolated joy of the thinker, who knows that a hundred years after he is dead and forgotten men who have never heard of him will be moving to the measure of his thought. . . .
There is, perhaps, a real pain in the isolation celebrated here and a real yearning for connection, especially in the “secret isolated joy” at his relation with others in the future; and Gotesky, who quotes the passage, sees that assertion about the future as an effort “to give a halo to this experience of isolation which unfortunately will not crown the heads of most men.” But in the final phrase of Holmes, I hear less an impulse toward connection than one toward power and control. Despite the light note of exultancy in his final outburst, Parson Hooper takes very little pleasure in either his public exhibition or his private prison of the heart. Clearly he dreads as much as cherishes his aloneness.

I feel much sorrier for him than I do for those such as the aged narrator of Yeats’s “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” who are more or less satisfied at the end to rest alone “in the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart,” or those such as the wonderful isolato in Crane’s “The Heart”:

In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who squatting upon the ground,
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.

I said, “Is it good, friend?”
“It is bitter—bitter,” he answered;
“But I like it
Because it is bitter,
And because it is my heart.”

Among his other satisfactions, it is worth observing, this desert creature has encountered a fellow creature who has some knowledge about heart-eating and who calls him friend.

I think too that Parson Hooper’s exaggerated and self-defeating sense of the awfulness of separation and solitude is a necessary antidote to the many overly comfortable celebrations of those states: like James Thomson’s “Hymn on Solitude,” in which he speaks of “solitude” thus:
Companion of the wise and good,
But from whose holy piercing eye
The herd of fools and villains fly.
O! how I love with thee to walk,
And listen to thy whispered talk.
Which innocence and truth imparts,
And melts the most obdurate hearts.
A thousand shapes you wear with ease,
And still in every shape you please.

and begs of it:

Oh, let me pierce thy secret cell,
And in thy deep recesses dwell!\textsuperscript{36}

or like some of Thoreau's musings in \textit{Walden}, wonderful as they are:

Society is commonly too cheap. We meet at very short intervals, not having had time to acquire any new value for each other. We meet at meals three times a day, and give each other a new taste of that old musty cheese that we are. We have had to agree on a certain set of rules, called etiquette and politeness, to make this frequent meeting tolerable and that we need not come to open war. We meet at the post office, and at the sociable, and about the fireside every night; we live thick and are in each other's way, and stumble over one another, and I think that we thus lose some respect for one another. . . . It would be better if there were but one inhabitant to a square mile, as where I live. The value of a man is not in his skin, that we should touch him.\textsuperscript{37}

or like this more elaborate proclamation, which I quote at some length because its terminologies reveal certain strains in such postures that greater artists obscure:

Solitude is a return to one's own self when the world has grown cold and meaningless, when life has become filled with people and too much of a response to others. . . . The overdevelopment of socialized man, the constant need for involvement with people, is often motivated by a fear of discovering one's own real self. . . . Socialized man too often lacks the courage to become more profoundly aware, to stretch his resources to new levels, and to participate in the mystery of living, which is ineffable, unpredictable, and, in some ways, private and unsharable. The
response to others, however meaningful or meaningless, can be broken only through solitude.

In solitude, man does not deal with concrete and practical realities, for being practical is simply another way of socializing. The truly solitary process is not tangible and materialistic; it cannot be defined and quantified. It remains aesthetic and mystical. The moment it is studied and "understood" it becomes something else, something radically unlike the original solitude, with all its vague, diffuse visions and dreams, with all its imagining and wondering and its incomprehensible powers that sensitize and cleanse. In the process the individual often purges himself of false idols, distortions, and deceptions; he creates a new picture of reality and reaches for the truth. The moment of solitude is a spontaneous, awakening experience, a coming to life in one's own way, a path to authenticity and self-renewal.38

How easy to drift from this into the comfortable dialectic with which this writer ends his book:

Loneliness is an inevitable outcome of real love, but it is also a process through which new love becomes possible. Love which is genuine is its own thing. It is unique, incomparable, true only as itself. And because real love is unique, it is inescapably lonely. In the alive person, the rhythms of loneliness and love deepen and enrich human existence. The lonely experience gives a person back to himself, affirms his identity, and enables him to take steps toward new life. The experience of love is the spark and energy of excitement and joy; it is what makes friendship a lifetime joy and what makes activity purposeful. A balance is essential. Exaggeration of either loneliness or love leads to self-denial and despair. Love has no meaning without loneliness; loneliness becomes real only as a response to love.39

I certainly do not wish to denies the importance of solitude, and I believe it does have very important relations to a heightened awareness of others, some of which I shall explore shortly. Nor do I want to accuse these romantics of doing precisely what is described by Robert Weiss when he says that though loneliness is entirely natural in certain situations, "it is so easy to think of it as weakness or self-indulgence, so easy to say that since one is suffering no physical pain or obvious privation, it should be possible to shrug off one's loneliness, even to label it solitude and thereupon enjoy it."40 But rose-colored glasses and clean
hands can distort as much as black veils. Neither loneliness nor attachment to others is nearly so nice as such descriptions make them. Such conditions have terrible as well as wonderful dimensions. Solitude can exert the restorative powers and provide the renewal of self described by romantics like Thoreau, Thomson, and Moustakas; it can also, as Weiss reports, cause people to feel they are not themselves; it can even destroy all sense of selfhood and meaning as it does for Martin Decoud in Conrad’s *Nostromo*, who kills himself to escape the void created by ten days of solitude. Loneliness can be so “frightening and uncanny,” as Frieda Fromm-Reichman explains, that some of its victims “try to dissociate the memory of what it was like and even the fear of it.” What Moustakas finds a comfortable rhythm between loneliness and love can become the terrible tearing it was for Scobie or Miss Lonelyhearts. For some unfortunate creatures, the truth would be in Orwell’s assertion that “the essence of being human” includes being “prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one’s love upon other human individuals.”

Still, Parson Hooper is guilty of a willful suppression of sunshine, both in his own life and in others’, and of flaunting his awareness of the truths of sin and separation. The word *willful* seems too strong though, when one thinks of some of Hawthorne’s statements about his own twelve-year period of isolation in the middle of Salem, especially in the letter to Longfellow, in which he writes: “By some witchcraft or other—for I really cannot assign any reasonable why and wherefore—I have been carried apart from the main current of life, and find it impossible to get back again. Since we last met [at college] . . . , I have secluded myself from society; and yet I never meant any such thing. . . . I have made a captive of myself, and put me into a dungeon, and now I cannot find the key to let myself out.”

And yet and yet and yet—what a terrible way Parson Hooper has found to perceive his loneliness and to pronounce his simultaneous separation from, and attachment to, the rest of mankind. And to go all the way to his death
behind the veil, to remain even in the grave a veiled corpse: 
"The grass of many years has sprung up and withered on that 
grave, the burial stone is moss-grown, and good Mr. Hooper's 
face is dust; but awful is still the thought that it mouldered 
beneath the Black Veil!"

Hawthorne himself at least partially escaped his dungeon 
through marriage and fatherhood, as well as through his 
writing, perhaps, and could write to his wife:

So now I begin to understand why I was imprisoned for so many 
years in this lonely chamber, and why I could never break through 
the viewless bolts and bars; for if I had sooner made my escape 
into the world, I should have grown hard and rough, and have 
been covered with earthly dust, and my heart might have become 
callous by rude encounters with the multitude. . . . But living 
in solitude till the fullness of time was come, I still kept the dew of 
my youth and the freshness of my heart. . . . 45

Having finally found a way to get a little out from under 
my own black veil, let me put down a few more testaments to 
the possibly beneficent effects of loneliness on the heart: 
Graham Greene's, that "in solitude, one welcomes any living 
thing—a mouse, a bird on the sill, Robert Bruce's spider. In 
complete loneliness even a certain tenderness can be born"; 46 
Mrs. Ramsay's feeling that when "one was alone, one leant to 
inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed 
one; felt they became one; felt they knew one; felt an irra-
tional tenderness thus . . . as for oneself"; 47 and perhaps 
most moving of all, Elizabeth Bowen's observation in The 
Death of the Heart that "only in a house where one has learned 
to be lonely does one have this solicitude for things. One's 
relation to them, the daily seeing or touching, begins to 
become love, and to lay one open to pain." 48 I do not 
think it is too much a lowering of the veil to add that one of 
the things that makes loneliness easier to bear, or even a 
pleasure, is the sense one has during such experiences of the 
wonderfulness and meaningfulness of connection; one for-
gets or represses one's knowledge of its frequent emptiness or 
triviality. The pleasure is not unlike that of the lonely alco-
holic who settles comfortably onto his or her stool at the bar
at the beginning of the evening’s drinking, savoring what looks like the warm haze of friendliness lying ahead. And, of course, as William James has pointed out, the alcohol will reduce the thickness of armors and will often lead to temporary states of consciousness sufficiently mystical and unifying to be included as a variety of religious experience. For certain lonely ones, as we shall see, the distance of others invests them with poignance approaching sacredness.

It is their failure to recognize all these wonderful and terrible tensions within and between self and other that most marks the victims and definers of what has been called “alienation.” One of the chief symptoms of the disorder seems to be an immense obliviousness to the mystery, threat, attractiveness, complexity, and, above all, whatness of the other. And that same obliviousness seems manifest in all but a few (notably Erik Erikson and Rollo May) who have written on the subject. They convey little sense of the magicality and physicality that inheres in almost any human being or of the interestingness of all things “other.” Indeed, they probably help spread the disease by their insistence upon the importance of being able to relate to abstractions such as the universe, or work, or causes, or society and by their own inability to feel the importance and drama of the relationship with particular beings and things, both real and fictional. They see bowling or gardening as escapes; they do not feel the weight of the ball on the arm, hear the crash of the pins, or see the flower one has grown in all its inconceivable presence. They do not feel the texture—flabby, horny, or firm—of the hand one holds or fails to hold, even (or especially) when it is a sticky hand. A somewhat similar blindness, I believe, afflicts most of the metaphysicians and even many of the religious existentialists who have written about “self” and “other.” They too usually turn the other into an abstraction, tend to forget that we can actually touch the other or yearn to touch the other, kill the other, or have an experience like the one of Vivaldo’s quoted earlier, in which “his heart began to beat with a newer, stonier anguish, which destroyed the distance called pity and placed him very nearly” in another’s body.
It is the existence of such dimensions and strains in our ties to one another and distances from one another, the mysteries inherent in our condition of remaining together and apart, that above all make necessary the further expansion of Auden’s canvas.

On a hill above that sea into which Icarus has plunged, surely there must be someone in that heightened confusion about self and others that sometimes afflicts all of us, like Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Jarvis, the clergyman’s wife, who is unhappy but “not very unhappy”; but on the moors, 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 only I could give some one. . . . ’ But she does not know what she wants to give, nor who could give it to her.”

In addition to Auden’s and Bruegel’s ploughman, who “may have heard the splash, the forsaken cry” but for whom “it was not an important failure,” there must have been a farmworker more like the one in Robert Frost’s “The Tuft of Flowers.” Having come to a field to turn over the grass, this man looks and listens for the person who had mowed it earlier in the day.

But he had gone his way, the grass all mown,  
And I must be, as he had been,—alone.  
“As all must be,” I said within my heart,  
“Whether they work together or apart.”

As he says this, however, a “bewildered butterfly” flies past him seeking an uncut flower to light upon. The man watches his quest sympathetically and is just about to start his work when the butterfly turns and leads his eyes to “a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook” that the mower had spared. Upon approaching the flowers and discovering they are butterfly weed, the man goes on to muse:
The mower in the dew had loved them thus,
By leaving them to flourish, not for us,
Nor yet to draw one thought of ours to him,
But from sheer morning gladness at the brim.

The butterfly and I had lit upon,
Nevertheless, a message from the dawn,
That made me hear the wakening birds around,
And hear his long scythe whispering to the ground,
And feel a spirit kindred to my own;
So that henceforth I worked no more alone;

But glad with him, I worked as with his aid,
And weary, sought at noon with him the shade;

And dreaming, as it were, held brotherly speech
With one whose thought I had not hoped to reach.

"Men work together," I told him from the heart,
"Whether they work together or apart."

If one finds the poem a bit sentimental, as I do, in its easy transition from aloneness to togetherness and in the comfortable formulation at the end, one is certainly entitled to read it as a dramatic monologue of a lonely man who from the opening line is yearning for connection, and to be moved by his sympathy with the bewildered butterfly, by the way he unites himself and the butterfly into “us” and “our,” and by the eagerness with which he becomes an imaginary brother of his invisible companion. If one is bothered by the narrator’s insistence that the message was not intended and that the communion is over the tuft of flowers, I would suggest that is the only way certain shy and lonely ones can connect.

Somewhere on the shore, there must also be someone like Lily Briscoe, whom we have already observed as a young woman longing to become one somehow with Mrs. Ramsay. I would like to join her some years later and remain with her for a while as she engages in a more complicated effort to manage her distances and takes part in one of Virginia Woolf’s most fascinating exhibitions of the intricacies by
which a number of people manage that apparently necessary feat of remaining simultaneously together and apart.

On the morning in question, Lily has placed her easel on the lawn at the edge of the sea and is desperately trying to resist the appeals for sympathy of the now-widowed Mr. Ramsay. As he groans and sighs, all Lily can wish is "that this enormous flood of grief, this insatiable hunger for sympathy, this demand that she should surrender herself up to him entirely . . . should leave her, should be diverted . . . before it swept her down in its flood." At the same time, she chides herself bitterly for being "not a woman, but a peevish, ill-tempered, dried-up old maid" (p. 226). "His immense self-pity, his demand for sympathy poured and spread itself in pools at her feet, and all she did, miserable sinner that she was, was to draw her skirts a little closer round her ankles, lest she should get wet" (p. 228). Both of them become more and more enclosed in their characteristic gestures, until Lily notices the remarkable way his boots express his character and exclaims spontaneously, "What beautiful boots!" (p. 229). Ashamed of herself for praising his boots when "he asked her to solace his soul; when he had shown her his bleeding hands, his lacerated heart, and asked her to pity them," she expects and feels she deserves a sharp, ill-tempered response.

Instead, Mr. Ramsay smiles. "His pall, his draperies, his infirmities" fall away and lifting his feet to show them off agrees they are first-rate boots and discourses happily on the difficulties of getting boots made as they should be. At this she feels they have reached "a sunny island where peace dwelt, sanctity reigned and the sun forever shone, the blessed island of good boots," and "her heart warmed to him" (p. 230). Then, when he shows her the knot he has invented and has three times knotted and unknotted her laces, she is further opened to him:

Why, at this completely inappropriate moment, when he was stooping over her shoe, should she be so tormented with sympathy for him that, as she stooped too, the blood rushed to her face, and, thinking of her callousness (she had called him a play actor) she felt her eyes swell and tingle with tears? Thus occupied
he seemed to her a figure of infinite pathos. He tied knots. He bought boots.

She is aware “there was no helping Mr. Ramsay on the journey he was going,” (a literal journey to the lighthouse but with very complex associations and also a journey toward death). But “now just as she wished to say something, could have said something perhaps,” given him the word of sympathy he had seemed so much to need, his children arrive for the journey and he leaves her. When they have gone, she sighs with both “relief and disappointment. Her sympathy seem[s] to be cast back on her, like a bramble sprung across her face,” and she feels “curiously divided,” as if one part of her were drawn out toward the lighthouse, which “looked this morning at an immense distance,” and “the other had fixed itself doggedly, solidly” on the lawn with her paints and canvas (p. 234).

She never is able literally to give him the words of sympathy he so wishes for, but during the hour or so that it takes the boat to reach the lighthouse, she experiences a very complex course of memories and thoughts that in a sense bring her and Mr. Ramsay together. These are too complex to do justice to here, for they compose one of the most intricately woven streams of consciousness I know of. But they include a terribly painful sense of loss and yearning for the dead Mrs. Ramsay and an effort, generated by her unexpended sympathy for Mr. Ramsay, to keep track of the boat and to imagine its arrival at the lighthouse.

At one point, as the boat seems to merge with the sea and sky, Lily thinks:

So much depends . . . upon distance: whether people are near us or far from us; for her feeling for Mr. Ramsay changed as he sailed further and further across the bay. It seemed to be elongated, stretched out; he seemed to become more and more remote. He and his children seemed to be swallowed up in that blue, that distance; but here, on the lawn, close at hand, Mr. Carmichael suddenly grunted. She laughed. He clawed his book up from the grass. He settled into his chair again puffing and blowing like some sea monster. That was different altogether, because he was so near. (P. 284)
Lily is only partly right, however, for in the process of painting her picture, thinking about the Ramsays' love for one another and wanting Mrs. Ramsay, she seems to achieve some deeper sense of connection with Mr. Ramsay. "And as if she had something she must share, yet could hardly leave her easel, so full her mind was of what she was seeing, Lily went past Mr. Carmichael holding her brush to the edge of the lawn. Where was the boat now? And Mr. Ramsay? She wanted him" (p. 300).

Although she can no longer see the boat, at the very moment Mr. Ramsay does, in fact, step ashore at the lighthouse, Lily says aloud, "He must have reached it," and suddenly feels completely tired out. For the lighthouse had become nearly invisible in the blue haze, "and the effort of looking at it, and the effort of thinking of him landing there, which both seemed to be one and the same effort, had stretched her body and mind to the utmost. Ah, but she was relieved. Whatever she had wanted to give him, when he had left her that morning, she had given him at last" (pp. 308-9).

This moment of separateness and union is followed immediately by another, for as she stands there, old Mr. Carmichael joins her at the edge of the lawn, saying "They will have landed," and she felt that she had been right [in her earlier feeling that he had been sharing her thoughts]. They had not needed to speak. They had been thinking the same things and he had answered her without her asking him anything. He stood there as if he were spreading his hands over all the weakness and suffering of mankind; she thought he was surveying, tolerantly and compassionately, their final destiny" (p. 309).

A moment later Lily is able to complete the painting that has been giving her so much difficulty throughout the book. "With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision" (p. 310), and with this the book ends.

That line which completes the picture signifies many
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things, but I think of it mostly as that harmony she felt unable to maintain earlier in the morning when she first begins to vacillate between her canvas and the seascape and feels “she could not achieve that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces; Mr. Ramsay and the picture; which was necessary” (p. 287): Mr. Ramsay with his insistent claim for sympathy representing human involvement and all the “disorderly sensations” (p. 234) these arouse in her; the picture, her escape into the pursuit of artistic wholeness and truth, which draws her “out of gossip, out of living, out of community with people,” a pursuit that gives her both a kind of purpose and peace but also an emptiness and loneliness.

An odd metaphor that “razor edge of balance” in its simultaneous cutting edge and equipoise. With that kind of balance, it is understandable that Lily’s unions would have to incorporate so much distance and yet so much intensity.

Most of us have a lonely enough and embittered enough part of ourselves to note, probably with mixed relish and dismay, that Mr. Ramsay is not aware of Lily’s experience of union, any more than Frost’s early morning reaper was aware of the sense of communion with him experienced by the farmworker who narrates the poem. Although, as I will explain shortly, Virginia Woolf leads us to far more complex awarenesses than that, she does allow such a recognition and also tinges our final glimpse of Lily with loneliness and fatigue; for in returning to her canvas, she has turned away from the sea and from Mr. Carmichael. She does not even have the sense that her vision will be shared, for she thinks that her canvas “would be hung in the attics . . . would be destroyed.” And I cannot prevent myself from remembering the one occasion on which she had shared her painting—an occasion that significantly is presented in direct conjunction with the passage I quoted earlier on Lily’s desire to merge with Mrs. Ramsay or to be the bee that haunted her dome-shaped hive. And that passage is associated directly with an imaginative effort of Lily’s to confute Mrs. Ramsay’s serene certainty that she and all other women should marry or else miss the best of life: “She would urge her own exemption from the
universal law; plead for it; she liked to be alone; she liked to be herself; she was not made for that” (p. 77). The person she shares the painting with is Mr. Bankes, whom Mrs. Ramsay thinks it would be an admirable idea for her to marry (p. 109).

When Mr. Bankes first approaches her easel, Lily

winced like a dog who sees a hand raised to strike it. She would have snatched her picture off the easel, but she said to herself, One must. She braced herself to stand the awful trial of some one looking at her picture. One must, she said, one must. And if it must be seen, Mr. Bankes was less alarming than another. But that any other eyes should see the residue of her thirty-three years, the deposit of each day's living mixed with something more secret than she had ever spoken or shown in the course of all those days was an agony. At the same time it was immensely exciting. (Pp. 80-81)

He asks some questions about her intentions and listens interestedly to her efforts to explain until, fearing to bore him, she takes the canvas off the easel and thinks:

But it had been seen; it had been taken from her. The man had shared with her something profoundly intimate. And, thanking Mr. Ramsay for it and Mrs. Ramsay for it and the hour and the place, crediting the world with a power which she had not suspected—that one could walk away down that long gallery not alone anymore but arm in arm with somebody—the strangest feeling in the world, and the most exhilarating—she nicked the catch of her paint box to, more firmly than was necessary, and the nick seemed to surround in a circle forever the paint box, the lawn, Mr. Bankes, and that wild villain, Cam, dashing past. (P. 83)

To some extent then, despite her momentary sense of unity with Mr. Ramsay and Mr. Carmichael, Lily may be seen as a “dried-up old maid,” one who is walking down that long gallery still alone and has probably missed the best of life; this even though she is able to feel as she does about Mr. Bankes because he too craves separateness for himself and permits her to maintain her private space (Mrs. Ramsay thinks they should marry in part because they “are both cold and aloof
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and rather self-sufficing” [p. 157]) and even though she later thinks of her failure to marry as an escape “by the skin of her teeth” and had felt an “enormous exultation” when “it had flashed upon her that she . . . need never marry anybody” (p. 262).

But Virginia Woolf has made our sense of Lily’s experience at the end and our own experience more complex than I have so far suggested. Each time Lily’s unexpended sympathy leads her to look toward the boat and sea, there is a break in the text and the scene shifts to the boat. These scenes are narrated by a third-person narrator and convey what are presumably the actual thoughts and actions of the characters rather than Lily’s imagining of them. But this narrator is so unobtrusive and the narration so resembles some of Lily’s earlier imaginings of scenes that the line between the two becomes blurred and we feel that Lily, through an exhausting outflinging of sympathy, has somehow shared the actual experiences in the boat, and thus is not merely a lonely observer. At one point, after we have witnessed directly a period of separateness, silence, and withholding of sympathy in the boat, and the narrator has turned back to Lily’s mind, we read: “There he sits, she thought, and the children are quite silent still. And she could not reach him either. The sympathy she had not given him weighed her down. It made it difficult for her to paint” (p. 254).

What we and Lily have shared is a most amazing illustration of the ways in which three people—the now 71-year-old Mr. Ramsay and his two youngest children, 17-year-old Cam and 16-year-old James—contrive to keep themselves together and apart. Since this literal journey to the lighthouse is too long and intricate even to summarize effectively, I will offer here only a brief indication of how it begins and ends, a long footnote with a slightly fuller tracing of what happens in between, a ruminative note or two, and a plea for my reader to turn to the book itself. From the beginning and throughout the trip, the three family members sit apart, Mr. Ramsay in the middle, Cam alone in the bow, James in the rear, steering. The children, angry at their father’s general self-assertiveness
and because they feel he has forced them to make the trip against their wills, are bound in a silent compact to resist his tyranny "to the death." So they sit "one at one end of the boat, one at the other, in silence. They would say nothing, only look at him now and then where he sat with his legs twisted, frowning and fidgeting, and pishing and pshawing and muttering things to himself, and waiting impatiently for a breeze. And they hoped it would be calm. They hoped he would be thwarted. They hoped the whole expedition would fail, and they would have to put back with their parcels, to the beach" (p. 243). At the same time, of course, they are acutely aware of him. As old Macalister (who along with his son is accompanying them) talks about the great storm last Christmas, they only caught a word or two but "were conscious all the time of their father—how he leant forward, how he brought his voice in tune with Macalister's voice; how puffing at his pipe, and looking there and there where Macalister pointed, he relished the thought of the storm and the dark night and the fisherman striving there. . . . So James could tell, so Cam could tell (they looked at him, they looked at each other), from his toss and his vigilance and the ring in his voice" (p. 245) as he questions Macalister about the ships that had been driven into the bay in the storm, three of which had sunk.

Since we have Bruegel's canvas and Auden's poem to worry about as well as Lily's and Virginia Woolf's, I must note that Macalister and others had not turned away from the disaster but had launched a lifeboat in the storm to try to save the shipwrecked sailors and that Cam's compact with her brother slackens a bit as she finds herself feeling proud of her father, thinking that had he been there he would have launched the lifeboat and reached the wreck (p. 246).

Relevant also to this canvas, and perhaps to Lily's too, is the fact that this trip to the lighthouse is the completion and commemoration of one planned by the charitable and sympathetic Mrs. Ramsay many years before—a trip whose chief purpose was to bring some comforts for the lighthouse keepers,
those poor fellows, who must be bored to death sitting all day with nothing to do but polish the lamp and trim the wick and rake about on their scrap of garden, something to amuse them. For how would you like to be shut up for a whole month at a time, and possibly more in stormy weather, upon a rock the size of a tennis lawn? she would ask; and to have no letters or newspapers, and to see nobody; if you were married, not to see your wife, not to know how your children were,—if they were ill, if they had fallen down and broken their legs or arms; to see the same dreary waves breaking week after week, and then a dreadful storm coming, and the windows covered with spray, and birds dashed against the lamp, and the whole place rocking, and not to be able to put your nose out of doors for fear of being swept into the sea? How would you like that? she asked, addressing herself particularly to her daughters. So she added, rather differently, one must take them what comforts one can. (Pp. 11-12)

And although not the dominant note at the end of the book, those gifts for the lighthouse men are much more prominent than has usually been recognized. The final paragraph describing the trip begins with Mr. Ramsay telling the children to “bring those parcels. . . . The parcels for the Lighthouse men” and ends with Mr. Ramsay springing “lightly like a young man, holding his parcel, on to the rock” (p. 308). The next paragraph is the one that ends with Lily feeling she finally had been able to give something to Mr. Ramsay.

I must also, I am afraid, add Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay to our collection of birds; for according to Lily, Mrs. Ramsay has “an instinct like the swallows for the south, the artichokes for the sun, turning her infallibly to the human race, making her nest in its heart” (p. 292). Mr. Ramsay, to himself and to the narrator perhaps, seems fated “whether he wished it or not, to come out thus on a spit of land which the sea is slowly eating away, and there to stand, like a desolate sea-bird, alone” (p. 68). To James he feels sometimes like a “fierce sudden black-winged harpy, with its talons and its beak all cold and hard, that struck and struck at you (he could feel the beak on his bare legs, where it had struck when he was a child) and then made off, and there he was again, an old man, very sad, reading his book” (pp. 273-74)—a book, I wish I had not noticed, with covers “mottled like a plover’s egg” (p. 273). To
Cam, "with his great forehead and his great nose, holding his little mottled book firmly in front of him, he escaped. You might try to lay hands on him, but then like a bird, he spread his wings, he floated off to settle out of your reach somewhere far away on some desolate stump" (p. 302).

But since they are not birds, they must go on to the end with their human flutterings toward and away from one another, and we watch for some twenty-five pages as the three, sometimes imaginatively, sometimes with actual verbal and physical gestures, perform their advances and retreats.52

The journey ends with Mr. Ramsay giving to James what he has desperately wished for all of his life, a word of praise, immediately after which Cam gives us this marvellous bridging and maintenance of space:

There! Cam thought, addressing herself silently to James. You've got it at last. For she knew that this was what James had been wanting, and she knew that now he had got it he was so pleased that he would not look at her or at his father or at anyone. There he sat with his hand on the tiller sitting bolt upright, looking rather sulky and frowning slightly. He was so pleased that he was not going to let anybody share a grain of his pleasure. His father had praised him. They must think that he was perfectly indifferent. But you've got it now, Cam thought. (P. 306)

And then this one, as Mr. Ramsay, holding his parcel, ready to land, sits looking back at the island:

What could he see? Cam wondered. It was all a blur to her. What was he thinking now? she wondered. What was it he sought, so fixedly, so intently, so silently? They watched him, both of them, sitting bareheaded with his parcel on his knee, staring and staring at the frail blue shape which seemed like the vapour of something that had burnt itself away. What do you want? they both wanted to ask. They both wanted to say, Ask us anything and we will give it you. But he did not ask them anything. He sat and looked at the island and he might be thinking, We perished, each alone, or he might be thinking, I have reached it. I have found it. But he said nothing.

Then he put on his hat.

"Bring those parcels," he said, nodding his head at the things Nancy had done up for them to take to the Lighthouse. "The
parcels for the Lighthouse men,” he said. He rose and stood in the bow of the boat, very straight and tall, for all the world, James thought, as if he were saying, “There is no God,” and Cam thought, as if he were leaping into space, and they both rose to follow him as he sprang, lightly like a young man, holding his parcel, on to the rock. (Pp. 307-8)

As I read these final passages in the context and movement of the book, I experience, and think I am meant to, a sense of hope and exultation, especially so, I suspect, because I am old enough to need my children to forgive my self-indulgences and mannerisms and the space I keep around myself. Younger readers might feel, despite Mr. Ramsay’s gift of praise, that Cam and James had given in too easily, especially since Mr. Ramsay’s final words to them are commanding ones, precisely the kinds of words that leagued them against him to start with. Even such readers, though, would have to share something of the children’s sudden yearning to give him something and their pride in his straight, tall youthfulness as he springs ashore.

A moment later, however, I feel something like Lily’s exhaustion from my “effort of looking at it and the effort of thinking of him landing there” as well as a degree of Lily’s exhaustion I share through empathy. And upon reflection, I become more sharply aware not only of the extent to which the unions are consummated within the separate skulls of the characters but of the extent to which the characters’ imaginings about one another may or may not be correct or remain unverified. The children do not know what their father wants or what he is thinking. Lily’s looking and thinking may or may not have been a sharing of the experiences in the boat or of our experience of them. She does not know that Mr. Carmichael has, in fact, been thinking the things she has, and there is evidence in the book that he probably has not. I am not suggesting that these uncertainties invalidate the connections. That would be not only simpleminded about the possibilities of ever knowing others accurately, it would be callous, for we must connect as we can. And certainly even wondering what another is thinking is a kind of connection. But I
am left with an acute sense of the distance that remains between the characters even as they unite, and a sense that their effort to imagine or wonder about the experience of another is, again, as for so many others, as much a way of preserving aloneness as it is of overcoming it. Also, despite considerable involvement in their efforts to connect, I feel a surprising degree of detachment from them. Even from Lily. I think she would be glad of that. At the same time, I see her very distinctly in all her selfhood and otherness.

Lily and Icarus? I suppose one could say she keeps her distance from him too. But she does not turn leisurely away.

Before leaving this already absurdly overcrowded and anachronistic seascape, I must add two more figures. Their lonely embrace is of a sort that more properly belongs to the next chapter, but they need to be here too along with Frost’s farmworker and Lily Briscoe and all those other figures who do not wish to become one with the ocean or their fellows, but stand at the edge, at once together and apart. One of the figures we have already encountered as a younger man listing his various addresses in the universe. It is, of course, no accident here, or for Joyce, that his name is Stephen Dedalus, which makes him a sort of Icarus or brother to him, and Stephen is aware of his mythological father’s feats of aeronautical engineering, though not of our particular drowning boy. The other figure becomes, among other things, another kind of bird. Stephen has for some time been pursuing an idealized female image he calls Mercedes (from *The Count of Monte Cristo*) and has felt that an encounter with that image in the real world would transfigure him and cause all his weakness, timidity, and inexperience to fall away. Now, having wandered to the seaside, he stands in a rivulet in the strand.

A girl stood before him in midstream, alone and still, gazing out to sea. She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird. Her long slender bare legs were delicate as a crane’s and pure save where an emerald trail of seaweed had fashioned itself as a sign upon the flesh. Her thighs, fuller and soft-hued as ivory, were bared almost to the hip where the white fringes of her drawers were like featherings of
soft white down. Her slateblue skirts were kilted boldly about her waist and dovetailed behind her. Her bosom was as a bird's soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some darkplumaged dove. But her long fair hair was girlish, and touched with the wonder of mortal beauty, her face.

She was alone and still, gazing out to sea; and when she felt his presence and the worship of his eyes her eyes turned to him in quiet sufference of his gaze, without shame or wantonness. Long, long, she suffered his gaze and then quietly withdrew her eyes from his and bent them towards the stream, gently stirring the water with her foot hither and thither. The faint noise of gently moving water broke the silence, low and faint and whispering, faint as the bells of sleep; hither and thither, hither and thither: and a faint flame trembled on her cheek.

Heavenly God! cried Stephen's soul, in an outburst of profane joy. (P. 171)