INTRODUCTION

ON READING THE MANUSCRIPT OF JACOB'S ROOM, VIRGINIA WOOLF'S husband, Leonard, remarked that she had "no philosophy of life" (D, 27 July 1922). 1 Certainly Woolf did not share Leonard's conviction of the "fresh air and pure light of plain common-sense" he found in the ethics of G. E. Moore. 2 Furthermore, she found no philosophical system from which she could derive satisfactory answers to the existential questions with which she was constantly engaged. Some critics have traced a philosophy in Woolf's writings to sources in, for example, Bergson, Moore, and even McTaggart. 3 It is not my concern here to trace any such (real or imagined) debts but rather to explore the deep concerns of Woolf's art, which is implicitly philosophical. I would concur with Harvena Richter that "one does not draw a particular philosophy or discipline from her work. One can only conclude that her examination of her own encounter with lived experience was transmuted into the novel's form: modes of life became modes of fiction." 4

What follows arose in part from a dissatisfaction with the general trend of works on Woolf to devote a chapter to each of her novels, from beginning to end. These books, though frequently offering useful insights, seem to me often to work against the grain of Woolf's own procedures and aims, imposing a linear development on her art that the novels themselves do not support. A novel-by-novel approach invites "definitive" readings and a need for closure that leads to adapting the territory to fit a particular map.

My starting point was to look at the persistent themes of Woolf's fiction, taking account of the commentary on the act of reading that can be gleaned from both her novels and her essays. From such an approach it became apparent that the concerns of Woolf's art remained constant throughout her life. Although her angle of vision undoubtedly changed, the objects of that vision
remained the same. The constant echoing back and forth of perennial themes and events throughout the novels, and the many descriptive homologies (to which I frequently draw attention) lend credence to a view of Woolf's art as dynamic, in constant flux, rather than linear. She herself, as I will show, was explicit about the "circularity" of her own methods; indeed, the image of circle and circumference appears in myriad forms in everything she wrote.

The "philosophy" with which I am concerned is intended solely in the specific sense in which Woolf herself used the word in her late memoir, "A Sketch of the Past" (1939/40). There (MOB, 72) she wrote of her "philosophy" or "constant idea" as a conceptual rod that she felt stood always behind her art. It is the philosophy of her fiction in this restricted sense of what she felt was the background to her art that I wish to elucidate.

There are many contexts for inquiry, each of which privileges a particular set of concerns: such concerns might include the transactions between a writer and her times (the historical); the inscription of gender and the struggle of the body (the feminist); narrative technique and style (the literary); characterization and relationships (the psychoanalytic). Though all of these categories draw on all the others to a certain extent, and all certainly provide valuable readings of a writer's oeuvre, each must begin from a position outside the texts; each must seek, if only initially, to be objective.

The context of this study is in one sense extremely limited, yet I feel it might also be universal: the subjectivity of Virginia Woolf as embodied in her writing is the framework within which I have constructed an account of her worldview. The space dealt with here is essentially "inner space" in the sense that I have not taken the logical next step of formulating concepts and theories from what I see as offered in Woolf's art.

Simone de Beauvoir speaks of woman's need for ontological optimism. Recently, much women's writing has been concerned with the "wild zone," the "lacuna" (it is variously named) from which, some women feel, female experience and its expression must arise. There is a tension in Woolf's art, confirmed by her autobiographical writings, between the need for
optimism and the real presence of absence, of nothingness. The “form of the sentence” that solicits her to fill it with meaning is charged with exhilaration and terror because in writing she simultaneously denies and affirms the emptiness at the heart of life.

It seems eloquent that as Woolf’s status in the mind of the reading public undergoes revaluation much of the most innovative and challenging work is presented as collections of essays: Woolf seems to resist the summary and conclusiveness demanded of a book-length study. Those who have written books on Woolf have dealt with this by writing a chapter on each of her novels (in effect, nine essays). There are, of course, some very valuable readings obtained in this way, and some others have successfully written on Woolf without using this format.

Virginia Woolf’s art tells us not about an external, objective Reality, but about our experience of the world. One of the most salient points she has to make is that the experience of being in the world is different for everyone and is endless, a process of constant creativity. “Every moment,” she wrote in “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” “is the center and meeting-place of an extraordinary number of perceptions which have not yet been expressed. Life is always and inevitably much richer than we who try to express it” (GR, 23). In her fiction Woolf seems always to be resisting definition and closure. It would, therefore, seem absurd to attempt to stand apart from her work and sum it up; to say it is, finally, this or that.

The “work” here refers to both her fiction and other writings—her diary, essays, autobiographical fragments, even (sometimes) her letters. More, perhaps, than any other person in literary history, Woolf wrote her life. Her day was a schedule of different writings: handwritten composing in the morning, typing up the draft in the afternoon, diary after tea, and perhaps some letters in the evening. Such a routine speaks of a certain socio-economic circumstance, but the fact remains: writing was her life. Roger Poole has described Woolf’s output—the novels and diary, specifically—as “an enormous, complex structure” that is a reservoir of “vast and complex subjectivity.” Apart from isolated insights such as this, it seems to me that the actual import of
Woolf's art is only just now beginning to be acknowledged and explored.

This study of her work hopes to light up a new field of inquiry: the philosophical implications of Woolf's art, and thus the implications for our lived experience of the world. The goal is not conclusions but more searching questions than have yet been asked of that art. The form of the circle, then, might be said to organize this inquiry, as I hope to show it influenced Woolf's thinking. To be left with questions rather than answers seems to me indicative of a new and needed honesty, which might have appealed to the "restless searcher" in Woolf.

In an essay on "Montaigne" (1924), Woolf wrote of the "soul" that no one knows "how she works or what she is except that of all things she is the most mysterious, and one's self the greatest monster and miracle in the world" (CRI, 96). In the dominant tradition of Western thought, the self has constantly been the primary object of inquiry. Descartes, Locke, and Hume represent a tradition which held that human nature is, in Hume's words, the "capital or center" of knowledge. This tradition—which is predominantly Cartesian—is marked, up to Freud, by an objectivity that leads the honest philosopher into inescapable dilemmas. We thus find Descartes, in his Meditations, caught out by his intuition of the relationship between body and mind, which he cannot explain. Hume must eventually dismiss questions of personal identity from philosophy, saying that they are "grammatical" difficulties. In Freud's psychoanalysis his natural scientific bias leads to what Ludwig Binswanger termed "a one-sided, i.e. irreversible, relationship between doctor and patient, and an even more impersonal relationship between researcher and object of research."

In contrast to this tradition stands the modern phenomenological movement, which sees human life as "being-in-the-world" (Dasein, in Heidegger's term). Phenomenology rejects the mechanistic/scientific conceptions of human being that have dominated (and to a large extent still do) philosophy and psychology. It is a mode of thought that sets out to recover our basic experience of the world. A leading exponent of phenome-

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nology, M. Merleau-Ponty, articulates this in the Preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*:

I am not the outcome or the meeting point of numerous causal agencies which determine my bodily or psychological make-up. I cannot conceive myself as nothing but a bit of the world, a mere object of biological, psychological or sociological investigation. I cannot shut myself up within the realm of science. All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. (P. viii)

Practical application of phenomenological theory can be seen in the existential psychoanalysis of, for example, Binswanger and R. D. Laing. There, the divisions and subdivisions of the dominant tradition (psyche and soma, mind and body, personality, self) are resolved into the idea of human life as being-in-the-world: an embodied self, in relation to others. As before, the question of the nature of self is primary, the center of all subsequent inquiry. Merleau-Ponty finds in the ambiguous self—as he believes Montaigne did—"the place of all obscurities, the mystery of mysteries, and something like an ultimate truth."  

Virginia Woolf's novels are concerned with knowledge: knowledge of others, and knowledge of the world. The question of the nature of self is at the heart of her thinking, and, I believe, is the dynamic of her fiction. Her novels uncover what Georges Poulet has called "the essentially religious nature of human centrality." Beginning with Woolf's ideas of self and identity, we are led eventually to realize that her concept of the essential nature of human being was religious *in character*. Although an ardent atheist, Woolf gradually came to hold what can best be described as a faith, the essential element of which was belief in a "soul." Her point of departure is always a simple, but radical wonder in the face of being at all (what Heidegger called *Thaumazein*). This is a style of thought that places her in the company of such thinkers as Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger, tempered though it is by an English dryness.

The question of the nature of self seems always to underlie Woolf's thinking; however, it is rarely explicit. In the course of what follows, it will emerge that the problems of defining the
self are, as Hume said, "grammatical": questioning the nature of self reveals a fundamental inadequacy in language. As a writer, Woolf was profoundly concerned with the scope of language and its ability to reflect human experience accurately, especially as her fictions explore what she quickly decided is beyond words—the self.

Fundamental to Woolf’s thinking and art is a conflict between faith and despair: faith in the potential of human being to deny essential nothingness, and despair at the inadequacy of all human effort in the face of that nothingness. This conflict she felt was particularly acute for the artist, whose effort she sees as a continuous reaching after a certainty the artist knows better than anyone is an illusion. Throughout her writing, Woolf moves between the poles of faith and despair, sometimes extolling the power of art to overcome transience, at others denigrating its poverty. This tension between faith and despair is not explicitly linked to the question of the nature of self, but it should be understood that that question is the source of the tension.

The relationship between life and art is an important and constant concern of Woolf’s that once more bears on the question of the nature of self. The tension in her work between faith in an autonomous self (or soul) that gives meaning to the world, and despair at the possibility that there is no such self anticipates an argument that is focused on in current critical thought (the roots of which, however, are found even well before Woolf’s time). This argument is characterized by opposing views of the authenticity of literary art as an embodiment of “presence,” and can be demonstrated by the juxtaposition of two representative passages:

Lacan speaks of the ego as fictive. . . . What our analysis of Proust adds to this is a description of various forms of “art” as exemplary fictions which the (imaginary) self tells itself in order to defend its (illusory) sense of autonomy.11

That object wholly object, that thing made of paper, as there are things made of metal or porcelain, that object is no more, or at least it is as if it no longer existed, as long as I read the book. For the book is no longer a material reality. It has become a series of words, of images, of ideas which in their turn begin to exist. And where is this new existence? Surely not in the
In presenting this reading of Woolf I have generally confined myself to the terms of Woolf's own writing, drawing attention to the many points of contact between her fiction and autobiographical writings. I have tried as far as possible to read Woolf according to her own way of reading (which I will outline below). Where I have used theorists to expand and explain Woolf it should be understood that I have done so primarily for heuristic purposes only; because I find Georges Poulet, for example, illuminating should not require a complete devotion to the Geneva school of critical thought. Recent literary theory seems, as Wolfgang Iser remarks, to be "concerned primarily with approaches to literature and not with literature itself." This study does not, therefore, follow dogmatically a particular, exclusive approach. It is hoped that whatever looseness is consequent on an eclectic rather than strictly selective method will be compensated for by the effort to read the works as they themselves suggest they should be read.

Throughout essays, diary, and letters, as well as in her novels, Woolf gives her version of the act of reading. She consistently emphasizes the importance of memory through repetition, and of suspending judgments and conclusions. It seems that the state to which a reader should aspire is one in which he or she could write the book. In "How Should One Read a Book?" (1926), she wrote:

> Wait for the dust of reading to settle, for the conflict and the questioning to die down; walk, talk, pull the dead petals from a rose, or fall asleep. Then suddenly without our willing it, for it is thus that Nature undertakes these transitions, the book will return, but differently. It will float to the top of the mind as a whole. And the book as a whole is different from the book received currently in separate phrases. (CR11, 266-67)

The actual process of reading, then, is linear; however, in the mind of the reader the book can assume a new shape that may overcome the linearity of language. The book "as a whole" can exist only virtually, an incommunicable synthesis of the reading mind and the text. Throughout her œuvre Woolf stresses the experience of reading and the necessity of reading creatively. To
read Woolf, it seems we should read from the inside out, recreating fictional experience. Richter notes this:

Abstraction, reflection, metamorphosis, discontinuity—these and other modes are the means by which Mrs. Woolf brings the reader into the very center of the work. They are not artificial techniques, imposed from without, but the actual processes which, when rendered through the medium of language, tend to make the act of reading approximate the experience itself. (P. x)

Woolf appears to be an early reader-response critic, an amalgam, perhaps, of Wolfgang Iser and Georges Poulet!

For both Iser and Poulet, the literary work is actualized only through a convergence of reader and text, but whereas for Poulet this means allowing one's consciousness to be invaded by the consciousness of another, to Iser it means that the reader must act as co-creator of the work by supplying that portion of it which is not written but only implied.  

Woolf asked for an alliance between reader and writer (e.g., in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”) for she felt that the truth of fiction was so many-sided that only a continuous permutation of perspectives could comprehend it. She stressed that words live in the mind, and so cannot be trusted to refer in isolation to just one thing: “It is the nature of words to mean many things. . . . One sentence of the simplest kind rouses the imagination, the memory, the eye and the ear—all combine in reading it” (“Craftsmanship,” DM, 201-2). All these faculties must be brought into play in the “difficult and complex art” of reading: “You must be capable not only of great fineness of perception, but of great boldness of imagination if you are going to make use of all that the novelist—the great artist—gives you” (“How Should One Read a Book?” CR II, 260-61).

The thread of this commentary on the act of reading is that it is by circling backwards and forwards that the suggestive power of language can be realized, as opposed to the constricted image a linear progression produces. Taking as my sanction Woolf’s statement in “Modern Fiction” that “any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express, if we are writers; that brings us closer to the novelist’s intention if we are readers” (CRI, 192), I have tried as far as possible to adopt
an approach to reading she suggested in an essay of 1926 on De Quincey:

Then it is not the actual sight or sound itself that matters, but the reverberations that it makes as it travels through our minds. These are often to be found far away, strangely transformed; but it is only by gathering up and putting together these echoes and fragments that we arrive at the true nature of our experience. ("Impassioned Prose," GR, 40)

This approach will allow, as Woolf suggested, "the sunken meanings to remain sunken, suggested, not stated" ("Craftsmanship," DM, 202). Apart from their usual function of reference, the notes to each chapter will provide a subtext of echoes from Woolf’s writing that bear on what is being discussed. The philosophy of Virginia Woolf’s fiction does not need to be transposed to critics’ terms; it is implied in her work, which is above all a literature of rigorous honesty in its exploration of what it is to be.

The concept of identity that emerges from the novels allows for knowledge only of what Woolf termed (in Mrs. Dalloway) "apparitions." This concept has affinities with Hume’s notion of imaginary identity in a constant flux.15 What also emerges, however, is that Woolf was more interested in the gaps in being that such a concept revealed. Hume turned away from the soul as being beyond our comprehension; to Woolf it became the most significant aspect of being. "Soul" and "self," I will suggest, were synonymous for Woolf. The self, or soul, is an "essence" apart from all identities (apparitions) that cannot issue in the world but that may survive even death. By comparing passages and noting descriptive homologies it is seen that Woolf often writes about the soul without actually stating it; fish-like, the soul moves beneath the surface of her work, sometimes glimpsed, often hidden, but always there.

The primary focus of this study is Woolf’s record of a ‘reality’ that she apprehended in the actual world, but that transcends it. Her sense of the numinous and her idea of the soul are seen to be intimately related. The inherent conflict between faith in ‘reality’ and the soul, and despair at the sense of futility in all human effort, is manifest in the various thematic concerns of Woolf’s art.
What follows may be divided into two parts. The first part is primarily descriptive, seeking to provide an understanding of the actual context within which Woolf’s exploration of human being takes place. The picture that emerges is of a world characterized by a lack, by a sense of an abstract “gap” in being that cannot be directly referred to in language, but which is certainly a potential of human experience. In the modes of art, this tension is formalized and in the fourth chapter Woolf’s means of approaching fundamental existential questions by means of her aesthetic is demonstrated. At this point the problematic relationship between art and life is brought to the foreground of the discussion. The disjunction between language and reality is acute in *The Waves*. Usually regarded as her masterpiece, I find in *The Waves* a serious failure on the terms of her own aesthetic.

The sense of the numinous, Woolf’s idea of ‘reality’, and its relation to art is the focus of the latter part of the study. Temporality, as particularly manifest by the fact of death, is isolated as the most important concern in her emergent “religion.” Her ultimate resolution that literary art can embody the autonomous self, or soul, in the virtual space described by the act of reading is most confidently enshrined in her last novel, *Between the Acts*. There I find a circling back through the concerns of her entire lifework; indeed, there are startling similarities between passages from writings of her early twenties and from her last years. *Between the Acts* is at once a culmination and a new beginning, and discussion of it thus serves as a fitting conclusion to my reading. Woolf’s suicide, and her belief that *Between the Acts* should not be published, might be taken as controverting that work’s generally affirmative character: this is a final emblem of the profound polarity by which her life and art were riven.
THE SINGING
OF THE REAL WORLD
From this I reach what I might call a philosophy, at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. _Hamlet_ or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.

—VIRGINIA WOOLF, "A SKETCH OF THE PAST"