CHAPTER ONE
THE BODY

It seems proper to begin by examining briefly Woolf’s awareness of the body’s role in human being. The tradition of empirical and rational inquiry into the self has had to face (or ignore) the question of the relation of body and “mind.” The dominant tradition of Western philosophy is still Cartesian, treating body and mind as separate substances, one extended, the other not. Dualistic theories must assume the possibility of disembodied existence, but whenever such an idea is brought into contact with the world in which we actually live, its inadequacies are evident.¹ The self of Descartes, the individual “I” of his writings, is one that professes to need no body.²

Maurice Merleau-Ponty—whose phenomenology of perception has been influential in breaking down the Cartesian theory of the “ghost in the machine”—starts from a position very different to that of Descartes. Any apprehension of the world, and of our place in it, is from the situation of a body: the body is our general medium for having a world. The body is both that through which we experience the world immediately, and that by which we are experienced (initially) in the world by others; the body is the “vehicle of being in the world” (Phenomenology of Perception, 82).

Exponents of phenomenological theory have gone so far as to make the verb “to live” transitive, in so far as it implies a body. Thus, instead of the Cartesian formulation “I live in a body,” Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and, following them, R. D. Laing, would say “I live my body.” The idea that to live is at once to “live” a body lies behind Laing’s analyses of the embodied and unembodied self. In The Divided Self, Laing writes of the primary split in an ontologically secure person as being between mind and body; usually such a person feels most closely identified with mind. An embodied person feels he began when his body did
Laing's concepts can be used to identify the (phenomenological) way in which Woolf creates characters and conveys a sense of lived experience in her novels. He writes that "everyone, even the most unembodied person, experiences himself as inextricably bound up with or in his body" (The Divided Self, 66). Embodiment and unembodiment are not fixed, passive states but active tendencies, the possibilities of the way the body is lived giving rise to what Laing terms "a basic difference in the self's position in life" (The Divided Self, 66). Although the basic issues arise in the same way for the unembodied as for the embodied person, the contexts in which they are experienced are radically different, and thus the issues are lived differently. Although embodiment does not necessarily ensure ontological security, it is a starting point that is "the precondition for a different hierarchy of possibilities from those open to the person who experiences himself in terms of a self-body dualism" (The Divided Self, 68).

The body, therefore, is the correct starting-point in an account of self. Every person must "live" his or her body in some way, even if that way is to deny that it is "his" or "hers." As Laing suggests, the basic difference in ways of being lies in an individual's feeling of existing commensurately with the body or not: of being, in Laing's terms, embodied or unembodied.

Woolf's novels enquire into human being, and take account throughout of the effect on perception and action that ways of living the body have. Harvena Richter has noted that "before The Voyage Out was written, no novelist had ever tried to describe exactly how the eye-mind experiences the object, or how the body participates in this experience" (P. viii). From her first novel, Woolf was "aware of the effect of emotional and bodily states on the appearance of the external world" (Richter, 92). This early awareness of the lived body is well exemplified by her presentation of Rachel Vinrace, who becomes increasingly involved with her body as an object of thought; the way she lives her body is focused on as the novel progresses. The Voyage Out concentrates on the problems of engagement and marriage;
most significantly for our purpose here, the problems encountered by Rachel arise predominantly from her being forced to live her body in a way she is totally unprepared for.

Richard Dalloway's kiss (TVO, 84-85) drives her to see her body as an instrument of passion and temptation—one that she cannot live. Her engagement with Terence Hewet compounds the problem. Her body, to her, eventually becomes "the source of all the life in the world" (TVO, 315). Rachel's escape from a world she perceives as entirely threatening can be seen as an existential "fading-out" which is conveyed in images of the physical:

Her body became a drift of melting snow, above which her knees rose in huge peaked mountains of bare bone. . . . [F] or long spaces of time she would merely lie conscious of her body floating on the top of the bed and her mind driven to some remote corner of her body, or escaped and gone flitting round the room. (TVO, 423-24)

The tendencies toward embodiment and unembodiment can be taken as the opposing extremes of a scale of ways in which the body is lived. In Woolf's novels the broad range of this scale is well exemplified in the variety of ways characters are more or less "at home" in their bodies. The Waves provides a microcosm of this scale in the six different existential "settings" of the characters in one actual world.

In the following examples, two of the characters from that novel serve to demonstrate the opposing extremes of the scale of ways in which the body can be lived: Jinny stands as the most fully embodied of all Woolf's characters, whilst Rhoda lies at the extreme of unembodiment. The examples given do not follow the novels' chronology as they are intended to illustrate a spectrum against which all the characters of the novels may be measured.

**EMBODIMENT**

Of all the novels' characters it is Jinny in The Waves who is most "at home" in her body, most completely embodied. Jinny is her body: she experiences no gap between consciousness and
body, but lives entirely through her body. Her life as a child adumbrates the fierce sensuality of her adulthood: “I see a crimson tassel . . . twisted with gold threads” (TW, 6). The words of her lessons—seen differently by each of the six children whose lives form the substance of the book—are bright and burning; they inspire in her a dream of the fiery, yellow, fulvous dress she will wear to parties, attracting attention to herself, to her body.

The other two girls with whom Jinny grows up (Rhoda and Susan) are her immediate rivals; even Rhoda’s face—bestowed on her by Jinny, because to herself she has “no face”—is a threat, for it is “completed,” whereas Jinny complains of eyes too close together, lips too far apart.

Jinny is complete to herself: “I see my body and my head in one now; for even in this serge frock they are one, my body and my head” (TW, 30). The implication is that she feels no difference at all between body and mind: she “lives” her body absolutely, with no mediation between thought and action. Jinny does not dream because her imagination is “the body’s.” Her mind is reduced to a mere breath in her body; her perceptions are vibrantly alive, but without mystery, without depth, for she sees only with her body: “Yet I cannot follow any word through its changes. I cannot follow any thought from present to past” (TW, 30). Memory can hardly exist for her, for the body does not remember: its experiences are all momentary.

That Jinny should try to banish night is understandable: it is the realm of dreams and solitude when, in sleep, the body falls away and the mental dominates. At night, Rhoda must stretch out to the hard rail at the foot of her bed to preserve some sense of embodiment; Jinny, however, longs “that the week should be all one day without divisions” (39), and attempts to make it so by turning night into day with bright lights in brilliant rooms, or by wearing a radiant white dress. Those experiences that terrify Rhoda delight Jinny: “The door is opening and shutting. People are arriving; they do not speak; they hasten in” (TW, 73). How strange it is, thinks Jinny, that people should go to sleep, putting out the light and losing consciousness of their bodies.

Her childhood aspirations are realized as she grows up to take her place in what she calls the “great society of bodies.” In
Jinny's lived experience, consequent on her fully incarnate being, there is no need of a mind with any degree of detachment from the body, for life is carried on by instinct. Under an admiring gaze, her body "instantly of its own accord puts forth a frill" (45), communicating with others in a wordless society of bodies. Her body she describes as being “open” or “shut” at will (46), including or excluding another from that society, her world.

Jinny's life is a sexual adventure from the start, and it is at parties, where she makes her conquests, that she is seen at her most “at home” in the world: “Among the lustrous green, pink, pearl-grey women stand upright the bodies of men. They are black and white; they are grooved beneath their clothes with deep rills. I feel again the reflection in the window of the tunnel; it moves" (TW, 73). Dancing at a party is significantly described as a sea, and as a body; Jinny and her partner are swept in and out, round rocks, flowing but enclosed within a larger figure (TW, 74). The image of the sea emphasizes that Jinny's actual world is that shared world of all the others, existing in itself, beyond the individual world she experiences through the way she lives her body.

In the context of her full embodiment, the world for Jinny is a glittering party of bodies where names are unimportant. In this fulfilling of herself, she is supremely confident: "I look straight back at you, men and women. I am one of you. This is my world" (TW, 74). Only when the pact is firm between the bodies can she feel herself “admitted to the warmth and privacy of another soul” (TW, 75). The soul, though, has no interest for her because she constantly seeks moments of physical ecstasy; once passed, these moments give way to “slackness and indifference” and the search for a new partner—“beauty must be broken daily to remain beautiful” (TW, 124).

Jinny, I suggest, is at one extreme of that scale of ways in which the body can be lived; she can imagine nothing “beyond the circle cast by my body” (TW, 92). Her sense of unity projects itself through her body and affects others, as she is aware. Coming into the restaurant for Percival’s farewell dinner, Jinny seems to Susan to center everything, to pull everything to her. She makes others conscious of their bodies; the men straighten their
ties (clothes, which Jinny always notices, being in a sense an extension of the body), and Susan hides her hands beneath the table (TW, 86-87). Jinny proclaims herself wholly through her actions, and she perhaps makes others uncomfortable because she reminds them that they too have bodies, which they would rather forget: "My body goes before me, like a lantern down a dark lane, bringing one thing after another out of darkness into a ring of light. I dazzle you; I make you believe that this is all" (TW, 92). There is nothing interesting to Jinny in the stories one may read in people's faces, for there is no certainty about them. Body and mind to her are one: "We who live in the body see with the body's imagination things in outline" (TW, 125).

Most of the firmly embodied characters in the novels are in some degree threatening to those who fight a constant battle with their bodies. Those who tend to unembodiment are outcasts, outsiders, and visionaries. Jinny, though, is envied rather than feared, even if that envy is frequently manifested as a kind of fear. One of her friends, Bernard, remembers her in his summing-up, which concludes The Waves, as sterile, seeing only what was before her, on the surface; yet he admires her animal honesty. She relates to others solely through her body, as Bernard recalls: "It was a tree; there was the river; it was afternoon; here we were; I in my serge suit; she in green. There was no past, no future; merely the moment in its ring of light [cast by Jinny's body?], and our bodies; and the inevitable climax, the ecstasy" (TW, 179).

Jinny's embodiment is explicitly sexual. She cannot, like Neville, range in her memory back and forth in time, nor, like Susan, can she be a mother, for a relationship with children would not be physically sexual. When Jinny notices that she is ageing, this, to her, is not merely a case of more wrinkles on her face and less spring in her walk, but a real depletion of her very being. Her world begins to disappear as her charms fade: "But look—there is my body in that looking-glass. How solitary, how shrunk, how aged! I am no longer young. I am no longer part of the procession. . . . I still move. I still live. But who will come if I signal?" (TW, 137). To overcome this ontological depletion, she rouses herself to prepare a face to meet the faces that she meets; a face created by color, by the movement of the mechani-
cal world running smoothly and noisily about her (TW, 138). Ultimately, Jinny is a machine; she thrives in the world of technology and manufacture, for it seems that "they" are, as she is, engaged in prolonging the appearance of bodies, of erasing mind and emotion in favor of the mechanistic physical: "Look how they show off clothes here even underground in a perpetual radiance. They will not let the earth even lie wormy and sodden" (TW, 138).

Susan lives her body almost as completely embodied as Jinny, but differs in that there is in her make-up a sense of distance between consciousness and body. She lives through her senses (which are acute), accepting her body as the natural home of her being, as she is at home in the larger world of nature. As a child she develops a hatred of anything foreign to her native soil: the smells and regulations of school are anathema to her, as are the firs and mountains of Switzerland, where she finishes her education; this radical autochthony characterizes her throughout her life.

Jinny's kissing Louis, in the garden where the book opens (TW, 9), is an event that affects all the children. The jealousy it arouses in Susan makes her perceive acutely that her body is "short and squat." This childhood trauma leads her to feel excluded from the sexual adventures of others; she feels low, near the ground and the insects. This early body-image dictates the subsequent development of the way she lives her body.

Susan is uninterested in the artificial, the meretricious: "I do not want, as Jinny wants, to be admired. I do not want people, when I come in, to look up with admiration. I want to give, to be given, and solitude in which to unfold my possessions" (TW, 39). The idea of possession is central in Susan's character: by possessing all that is around her, and that her senses bring her evidence of, she can create her own world through her body. Her identification with sensory experience is so intense that she can believe herself to be what she experiences: "At this hour, this still early hour, I think I am the field, I am the barn, I am the trees; mine are the flocks of birds, and this young hare who leaps, at the last moment when I step almost on him." (TW, 70). In this can be seen the difference between the ways Susan and Jinny live.
their bodies. Jinny is a sexual being; Susan is formed entirely from the experience of her senses and the feeling that her body is like the "body" of the earth: warm in summer, cold and cracked in winter. At times, indeed, her identification with the earth tends toward a sort of unembodiment. This can be observed in a moment, the description of which makes it sound strangely like Bernard's experience of the "world without a self": "I think sometimes (I am not twenty yet) I am not a woman, but the light that falls on this gate, on this ground. I am the seasons, I think sometimes, January, May, November; the mud, the mist, the dawn" (TW, 71). The moment is short-lived, as the weight of her body, leaning on the gate, recalls her from her reverie; it serves to illustrate the point that embodiment is not static, but a flux, conditioning the way an individual experiences the world. Susan's embodiment is more complex than Jinny's from the start.

Sometimes Susan envies Jinny and Rhoda living in London; it seems to her that they are able to control the inexorable pressures of life. To others, Susan presents someone who "despises the futility of London" (TW, 85), but there is in her some longing for variation, for an escape from the unchanging routine of the seasons. At the farewell dinner-party where the six friends gather to say goodbye to their hero, Percival (who is leaving for India), Susan feels out of place; it is Jinny's territory. She gathers her "possessions," her fields and damp grasses, to protect her "soul" (TW, 87). In the way they live their bodies, Jinny and Susan oppose against each other the lives of city and country. Although both are very fully embodied, they are so in different ways. Susan has accepted her body with what seems, compared to Jinny's positiveness, almost resignation. Being embodied so completely, Susan is similar to Jinny in disliking words and taking everything at face value, but distinct from her in the discomfort she feels about her body in the setting of a city restaurant.

The position of nature as the source of the way Susan lives her body is usurped by her newborn child. It is of her body, as a tree is of the earth. She cradles it with her body: "... all spun to a fine thread round the cradle, wrapping in a cocoon made of my own blood the delicate limbs of my baby ... making of my own body a hollow, a warm shelter for my child to sleep in"
TW, 122). Her body, to her, assumes the contours of the land. This child is more than just another possession; it is an extension of her body: "'His eyes will see when mine are shut,' I think, 'I shall go mixed with them beyond my body'" (TW, 122-23). Her idea here is of what could be called a "physical transcendence" rather than a transcendence of the physical.

There is always in Susan a sense that to have to live a body is regrettable but inevitable. "I shall never have anything but natural happiness," she says, somewhat ambiguously, with her friends in London, quietly hinting that she feels she misses something: "It will almost content me." From her early experience of herself as squat and ugly she comes to be embodied in a way that causes her none of the tension of the unembodied, but also prevents her from realizing aspects of herself that she is made acutely aware of by her visits to London, particularly in Jinny's company.

This sense of unfulfillment weighs on her when her children are grown. She feels that she has reached the summit of her desires; she has planted and nurtured and brought to maturity part of her own body. With this completion, she begins to tire of her life: "Yet sometimes I am sick of natural happiness, and fruit growing, and children scattering the house with oars, guns . . . and other trophies. I am sick of the body, I am sick of my own craft, industry and cunning" (TW, 136).

Susan has been constrained by her early experience of her body; she has lived in harmony with the nature she felt close to as a child, but has never overcome a sense of loss, of not being able to grasp the "air-ball's string" of words that Bernard and the other city-dwellers seem to grasp with such facility. She has resigned will to reaction, imagination to sensory experience, and as she grows old she thinks perhaps her life has not been "real," for she has made no effort to oppose nature: "Life stands round me like glass round the imprisoned reed" (TW, 137). A more adventurous, more "real" (to her) Susan looks out from her "rather squat, grey before my time" body, through "clear eyes, pear-shaped eyes," and it is this Susan who withdraws her square-tipped fingers from Jinny's sight in the restaurant. Susan begins to detach herself from her body as she grows older, filled
with a sense of loss. For Jinny, the world of bodies is enough, but Susan sees beyond it.

At the final reunion of the six friends, at Hampton Court, Neville's self-confidence, bolstered by his qualifications, withers before Susan. In an effort to make her identity "crouch" beneath his, he tells her of the variety and vigor of his life, comparing it to Susan's seasonal routine. The difference in their lives is shown most clearly in the way they have lived their bodies. "I," says Neville,

"I took the print of life not outwardly, but inwardly upon the raw, the white, the unprotected fibre. I am clouded and bruised with the print of minds and faces and things so subtle that they have smell, colour, texture, substance, but no name. I am merely "Neville" to you, who see the narrow limits of my life and the line [body] it cannot pass. But to myself I am immeasurable. (TW, 151-52)

Susan's life is emblematized in her body, with which she now challenges Neville: her life has been solid, in huge blocks, not flickering and evanescent like his, because she has lived through her senses, through her body, and the body does not refine, does not chop things small with words: "My body has been used daily, rightly, like a tool by a good workman, all over" (TW, 152). With her body she demolishes the world of phrases: "I sit among you abrading your softness with my hardness, quenching the silver-grey flickering moth-wing quiver of words with the green spurt of my clear eyes" (TW, 153). However, Susan has perceived the restriction her embodiment entails, and the last words she speaks in the book sum up her sense of loss: "Still I gape . . . like a young bird, unsatisfied, for something that has escaped me" (TW, 165).

For those, like Jinny and Susan, whose way of living the body tends very much to complete embodiment, the world is not usually a threatening place. They are marked by a sense of security, of "belonging." This is not to say that embodied being is immune to doubt, but at least such embodiment provides an initial firm foundation for being. When the way the body is lived tends more toward unembodiment, the self's position in the world is altogether more precarious. Again, by description of two
examples, the other extreme of the scale of ways of living the body is illustrated.

**UNEMBODIMENT**

He had gone through the whole show, friendship, European War, death, had won promotion, was still under thirty and was bound to survive. He was right there. The last shells missed him. He watched them explode with indifference. (*MD*, 96)

Septimus Warren Smith, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, begins to tend toward unembodiment when he is urged by his employer, Mr. Brewer, to develop “manliness” (by playing football! [95]). When his friend Evans dies in battle, Septimus sees an opportunity to display his manliness to the world by showing no feelings. The Septimus that others experience is not at all identical with Septimus as he speaks to “himself.” R. D. Laing is instructive in understanding the nature of the dissociation in Septimus: “The individual is developing a microcosmos within himself; but, of course, this autistic, private, intra-individual ‘world’ is not a feasible substitute for the only world there really is, the shared world” (*The Divided Self*, 74). Septimus believes that the world, not he, has altered, and he must hold on to this belief for the security of his own being: “It might be possible,” he thinks, “that the world itself is without meaning” (*MD*, 98).

Septimus is not protected from the world by the defining line of his own body. His unembodiment leads him to experience his own being as terrifying and uncontrolled, for the medium by which the world can be kept at a distance seems not to be “there.” He feels that his body has been soaked away, “macerated until only the nerve fibres were left” (*MD*, 76). From this way of living his body comes his sense of being freed from the earth, able to look down from “the back of the world” on all mankind (*MD*, 76).

Septimus’s world initially depends, as each person’s does, on how he lives his body. His unembodiment frees him from the constraints of a normal physical body in his own perception; this
perception is in direct conflict with the world outside him, a world that makes no distinction between "him" and his body. Most of the time Septimus regards his body as an "other," as, for instance, when he melodramatically drops his head in his hands, making his wife, Rezia, send for help (*MD*, 100).

Throughout the novel, Septimus is largely unaware of his body as it appears to others in the actual world: "Happily Rezia put her hand with a tremendous weight on his knee so that he was weighted down, transfixed" (*MD*, 26). To him, his body is one more object in that world, bobbing up and down in the breeze along with the trees, feathers, and birds. Septimus's unembodiment causes a serious disjunction between his perceptions and those of others around him. In order to stave off the madness that Septimus feels this disjunction threatens him with, he translates his sensations into an inexpressible "religion" of which he is the prophet, and gives meaning to a world that he sees might well be meaningless.

If he was embodied he would have to feel, and thus have to face, primarily, Evans's death. Unembodied, he can create a solipsistic world in which "there is no death" (*MD*, 28). His body is in the world of death—"There was his hand; there the dead" (*MD*, 28)—and so he must abandon that body as far as he can. His sensations are given significance by his "self" (in Laing's sense of a "core" of being looking out of an alien body). Septimus must remain unembodied in order to live for himself; to live the body in this way, however, appears in the actual world as an aberration to be "cured."

In Septimus's world "there is no death," and so he reasons that he does not have to feel for Evans. The death of his friend and the demands on him to be "manly" have driven him to a state of extreme unembodiment. His omniscience ("He knew all their thoughts, he said; he knew everything. He knew the meaning of the world, he said" [*MD*, 74]) is necessary to him if he is to deny his body as a physical limit to himself. Again, the condition is described by Laing:

The hidden shut-up self, in disowning participation . . . in the quasi-autonomous activities of the false-self system, is living only "mentally." Moreover, this shut-up self, being isolated, is unable to be enriched by outer experience, and so the whole inner world comes to be more and more
impoverished, until the individual may come to feel he is merely a vacuum. The sense of being able to do anything and the feeling of possessing everything then exist side by side with a feeling of impotence and emptiness. (The Divided Self, 75)

Woolf conveys the hopeless paradox of Septimus's position with telling psychological insight; he is trapped between the extremes of omnipotence and eternal suffering:

Look, the unseen bade him, the voice which now communicated with him who was the greatest of mankind, Septimus, lately taken from life to death, the Lord who had come to renew society, who lay like a coverlet, a snow blanket smitten only by the sun, for ever unwasted, suffering for ever, the scapegoat, the eternal sufferer, but he did not want it, he moaned, putting from him with a wave of his hand that eternal suffering, that eternal loneliness. (MD, 29)

The world that Septimus tries to escape from is represented by the doctors, Holmes and Bradshaw, by Mr. Brewer, and even to some extent by his wife, Rezia. They try to make Septimus take notice of "real things." Such attention would necessitate embodiment for him, and thus feeling and recognizing death. The insistence of the actual world drives Septimus further into unembodiment. Holmes and Bradshaw treat the body, but Septimus, as he lives his body, cannot be touched by them. "But even Holmes himself could not touch this last relic straying on the edge of the world, this outcast, who gazed at the inhabited regions, who lay, like a drowned sailor, on the shore of the world" (MD, 103).

Just before his suicide, Septimus is alone with Rezia; he is calmed by the shimmering patterns of sunlight on the wall, but the peaceful atmosphere is shot through with intimations of his imminent death (MD, 153-54). Carefully, Septimus, drawing calm and courage both from the sights and sounds of nature, and from Rezia's stability, begins to take stock of his surroundings: "But real things—real things were too exciting. He must be cautious. He would not go mad" (MD, 156). He begins to move away from unembodiment, to "re-embody" himself through vision (primarily). When he closes his eyes, however, the world he has been carefully approaching, one item at a time, disappears. Alone, he feels that his world (that is, the world of his unembodied self) has gone forever—he is stuck with the sideboard and
the bananas, which undermine his vision by their mundaneness, deny what he considers the truth. With what must be understood as a supreme effort, Septimus resolves to face "the screen, the coal-scuttle, and the sideboard" (MD, 160). He has begun to come back to his body, but the sound of Holmes—"human nature" (MD, 155)—on the stair, forcing his way in, reminds Septimus of that world that drove him to unembodiment and torment. Holmes and Bradshaw "mixed the vision and the sideboard" (MD, 163), his unembodied being and his appearance in the actual world; such people see with a single vision only, and yet have power over others. Septimus is now moving toward embodiment and sees vividly that he is subject to the doctors, and that what he thought was an omnipotent being has in fact no authority, no autonomy, in their world, the actual world.

Rationally, the only possibility for his embodied self is suicide, for it is the only way he can preserve his autonomy as embodied. Rezia understands why Septimus kills himself, having come to understand the way the world represented by Dr. Holmes tramples on those who do not fit in it. The union of Rezia and Septimus in opposing the single vision of Holmes (and thus Rezia's understanding of Septimus's act) is implied by an image both share. As Septimus begins to recover from his anguish, his torments are all "burnt out, for he had a sense, as he watched Rezia . . . of a coverlet of flowers" (MD, 157). After his death Rezia is calm, feeling like "flying flowers over some tomb" (MD, 165).

At the furthest extreme of unembodiment of all Woolf's characters is Rhoda, in *The Waves*. The gulf between what she calls "myself" and the body by which she is recognized in the world is wide and deep; her isolation is emphasized from the start of the book. She is more alone than her closest friend, Louis, who is also predominantly unembodied, but can at night "put off this unenviable body . . . and inhabit space" (*TW*, 38). Rhoda does not have the imagination that partly rescues Louis from his uncomfortable relationship with his body; she suffers in every situation. It is only near the end of the book, at the reunion at Hampton Court, that she has taught her body to "do a certain
trick" so that she will appear to have overcome her terror of the leaping tiger of society.

Rhoda is thrown into the world by a body she hates and tries to avoid: "That is my face," said Rhoda, 'in the looking-glass behind Susan's shoulder—that face is my face. But I will duck behind her to hide it, for I am not here. I have no face. Other people have faces; Susan and Jinny have faces; they are here. Their world is the real world" (TW, 30-31). What makes Rhoda's position in life impossible, more painful than that of Septimus, is her understanding that the world of the embodied is, as she puts it, the "real" world, the world in which actions have effects, objects weight. The reflection of her "real" face shows her the actual world that has her in its grip, rather than her private fantasy of the swallow and the pool, which she can control. Always, though, Rhoda is trapped by her need for others, the need to replenish her dreams with figures from that world populated by those who are at home in their bodies. Louis, her ally in unembodiment, understands her position: "We wake her. We torture her. She dreads us, she despises us, yet comes cringing to our sides because for all our cruelty there is always some name, some face, which sheds a radiance, which lights up her pavements and makes it possible for her to replenish her dreams" (TW, 86). She longs for "lodgement" (TW, 94); that is, for a home in the world that her body does not provide. By copying others she hopes to share some of their ease, to "light my fire at the general blaze of you who live wholly, indivisibly and without caring" (TW, 94).

Rhoda does not deny her body entirely, as she knows that she must live it in some way as a living being: "Alone, I often fall down into nothingness. . . . I have to bang my hand against some hard door to call myself back to the body" (TW, 31). Her feeling of being "committed" to life, in the sense of being committed to prison, springs from the tension inherent in the way she lives her body. She does not want to die, but cannot be at home in her body, and so lives in a twilight between life and death. As the book progresses, Rhoda slips further into unembodiment; her increasing dissociation from her body is a strand of the book's overall movement as definite as the passage of the
sun through the sky, or Jinny’s ageing: “Month by month things are losing their hardness; even my body now lets the light through; my spine is like soft wax near the flame of the candle” (*TW*, 32-33).

The ambivalence in Rhoda’s way of living her body is seen in her attitude to night and sleep. Going to bed, she must stretch her toes to touch the rail to assure herself of the world and her being in it. The night invites sleep, and Rhoda fears that if she sleeps she will lose the already slight hold she has on her body and never come back to it; yet to relinquish her body and enter the world of dreams is a solace for her: “Out of me now my mind can pour. I can think of my Armadas sailing on the high waves. I am relieved of hard contacts and collisions. I sail on alone under white cliffs” (*TW*, 19-20). As she falls asleep, however, the panic of losing identity overcomes her; she feels waters closing over her and struggles to emerge from them by recognizing the objects around her: “Oh, but I sink, I fall! That is the corner of the cupboard; that is the nursery looking-glass. But they stretch, they elongate... Oh, to awaken from dreaming! Look, there is the chest of drawers” (*TW*, 20).

Rhoda does not want to give life up, and knows she must “live” her body, but because she can never feel “at home” in that body, her unembodiment is extreme and her tendency toward dissolution, against which she struggles less and less effectively, eventually overcomes her will to live. The “thin sheet” of her childhood bed can no longer save her. At the extreme pitch of her despair, Rhoda echoes Septimus Smith’s fear of falling into the sea or into flames (*MD*, 155), and his bitter observation that “once you fall... human nature is upon you” (*MD*, 154): “After all these callings hither and thither, these pluckings and searchings, I shall fall alone through this thin sheet into gulfs of fire. And you will not help me. More cruel than the old torturers, you will let me fall, and will tear me to pieces when I am fallen” (*TW*, 158-59). Also like Septimus, Rhoda exhibits that feeling of omniscience and omnipotence that Laing notes as characteristic of the unembodied self in its retreat from the actual world: “Yet there are moments when the walls of the mind grow thin; when nothing is unabsorbed, and I could fancy that we might blow so
vast a bubble that the sun might set and rise in it and we might take the blue of midday and the black of midnight and be cast off and escape from here and now” (*TW*, 159).

A crucial moment in Rhoda’s life demonstrates her realization of the inevitability of living her body, a realization that is the source of constant anguish to her:

Also, in the middle, cadaverous, awful, lay the grey puddle in the courtyard, when, holding an envelope in my hand, I carried a message. I came to the puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell. I was blown like a feather, I was wafted down tunnels. Then very gingerly, I pushed my foot across. I laid my hand against a brick wall. I returned very painfully, drawing myself back into my body over the grey, cadaverous space of the puddle. This is life then to which I am committed. (*TW*, 46)

Recalling this experience, Rhoda states, “Unless I can stretch and touch something hard, I shall be blown down the eternal corridors forever” (*TW*, 113). Rhoda is, in Laing’s words, “guilty at daring to be, and doubly guilty at not being, at being too terrified to be” (*The Divided Self*, 157). She is saved from “chaotic nonentity” by the brief security her sense of being in a body provides. It is, however, the fact that she stretches unembodiment as far as possible that leads to her clutching at the experience of her bodily senses for a sense of being at all. Eventually—we must assume from Bernard’s report—Rhoda no longer made the effort to draw herself “across the enormous gulf” into her body (*TW*, 113).

The four characters discussed—Jinny, Susan, Septimus, and Rhoda—are at either extreme of a scale of what I have called “at-homeness” in the body. All the other characters of the novels fall between these two extremes in terms of their embodiment or unembodiment, which is more or less emphasized. The question of the way the body is lived must precede any account of self precisely because human beings *live* their bodies as their foundation in the world. That Woolf saw the body as lived rather than merely as a given environment for a shadowy self is an indication of her intentions in the creation of character.

Having seen that the body is not taken for granted, the next
step in describing the context of Woolf’s inquiry into human being is to investigate what is meant by “I,” the mark of a particular identity and that perspective from which even the most unembodied may speak.