CHAPTER TWO
IDENTITY AND SELF

“I” IS, AS MARTIN BUBER PUT IT, “THE TRUE SHIBBOLETH OF HUMANITY” (I and Thou, 115), but the word can be uttered in many different ways. Woolf’s novels inquire into the status of “I” as it is spoken by various characters in various contexts, and from this we may draw her concepts of identity and self, the distinction between which will emerge as we proceed.

Frequently, there is a moment in the novels when, with a feeling either of exhilaration or anxiety, a character is suddenly overcome by a sense of being unique, of being “I.” In The Voyage Out, that Rachel Vinrace has little sense of individual identity is emphasized from the start: she would “believe anything she was told, invent reasons for anything she said” (TVO, 31). Friendless, inexperienced, and sheltered, Rachel’s ordinariness is the most striking thing about her. She has had no social intercourse, and any impulse toward an individual attitude has been quickly suppressed by her father or aunts; she thus believes that “to feel anything strongly was to create an abyss between oneself and others who feel strongly perhaps but differently” (TVO, 34).

For Rachel, what can be called the experience of self-discovery is fascinating; prompted by Helen Ambrose, there comes a moment when she sees herself for the first time standing out against a background composed of all other people:

The vision of her own personality, of herself as a real everlasting thing, different from anything else, unmergeable, like the sea or the wind, flashed into Rachel’s mind, and she became profoundly excited at the thought of living.

“I can be m-m-myself,” she stammered, “in spite of you, in spite of the Dalloways, and Mr. Pepper, and Father, and my Aunts, in spite of these?” She swept her hand across a whole page of statesmen and soldiers. (TVO, 94-95)
Similar moments of "self-discovery" occur throughout the novels, and provide what could be called a first signification of identity: the encountering of myself, called "I," distinct from all others in the world, as continuous and unmergeable.

Immediately, however, a problem is raised for which the novels after Night and Day successively seek and offer solutions. Rachel's "vision of . . . herself" raises the question of who has that vision. It is not enough to say simply that the individual divides into a reflected and reflecting part. "I" is, for the most part, spoken as a received cipher for one being among others. The experience of self-discovery distinguishes the individual "I" from the faceless crowd that moves through all the novels, obliterating "I," sweeping people along en masse. This crowd is the background against which the experience of self-discovery stands out. To emerge from that background requires an effort, for it is easier to flow with the crowd, as Katherine Hilbery, the heroine of Night and Day, finds:

She stood fascinated at the corner. The deep roar filled her ears; the changing tumult had the inexpressible fascination of varied life pouring ceaselessly with a purpose which, as she looked, seemed to her, somehow, the normal purpose for which life was framed; its complete indifference to the individuals, whom it swallowed up and rolled onwards, filled her with at least a temporary exaltation. (ND, 465-66)

The problem I have referred to above is that of discovering what inspires the effort to rouse an individual's "I" to emerge from the crowd. The question is put simply in "An Unwritten Novel," a sketch written in 1920 as Woolf was planning Jacob's Room: "When the self speaks to the self, who is speaking?" (AHH, 21). There is a distinction between the voice of the "self speaking to the self" and the "I" that is uttered in the shared world of relationships between one identity and another. The status of "I" as the defining word of identity is thus complex rather than simple. In what follows I will describe the novels' inquiry into the nature and status of identity, and into the possibility of a unitary, autonomous self.

"There is," says the narrator of Jacob's Room, "something absolute in us that despises qualification" (143). In this novel that "it is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints,
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not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done—" (29) becomes almost a refrain. The narrative tone in Jacob's Room is inquisitive, uncertain; in its hesitancy can be seen a determination to inquire honestly into the human situation, a refusal to assume control and dictate a system into which life will be made to fit. That "life is but a procession of shadows," that we cannot know others (except as what Clarissa Dalloway will call "apparitions"), that there is no way of defining an individual—all this is affirmed. Jacob's Room sketches out the frame within which Woolf's investigations into the strange nature of human being take place:

In any case life is but a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows. And why, if this and much more than this is true, why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us—why indeed?—For the moment after we know nothing about him.

Such is the manner of our seeing. Such the conditions of our love. (JR, 70-71)

Such, it might be said, the conditions of her inquiry.

"Human reality cannot be finally defined by patterns of conduct," writes Sartre in Being and Nothingness; cannot, Jacob's Room suggests, be finally defined at all. The novel undercuts its own purpose by trying to create a unique character while at the same time admitting the impossibility of the project:

But though all this may very well be true—so Jacob thought and spoke—so he crossed his legs—filled his pipe—sipped his whisky, and once looked at his pocket-book, rumpling his hair as he did so, there remains over something which can never be conveyed to a second person save by Jacob himself. Moreover, part of this is not Jacob but Richard Bonamy—the room; the market carts; the hour; the very moment of history. Then consider the effect of sex— . . . But something is always impelling one to hum vibrating, like the hawk moth, at the mouth of the cavern of mystery, endowing Jacob Flanders with all sorts of qualities he had not at all—(JR, 71-72)

The individual is enmeshed in the influences, relationships and possibilities of the world, caught up in the movement through time and space, and so cannot be realized as one absolute entity. If there is a unique self to be identified—a "summing-up" of the
person—it must be separated from its intervolvement with the world. However, such an operation may well lead to nothing.

At the beginning of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa, recently recovered from an illness, delighting in a fresh day and the hustle and bustle of the West End, is undisturbed by the thought of her death. She will not say of herself “I am this, I am that” (11), preferring to see herself as a “mist” diffused among the familiar people and places of her life. “Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived” (*MD*, 11).

In this mood Clarissa is particularly susceptible to the fading away of individual identity that engulfment by the crowd threatens. Content to be part of the “ebb and flow of things,” her identity (“her life, herself” [12]) begins thinning away, spreading out further and further, until eventually no sense of “I” as an individual identity remains to her.

The crowd has absorbed Clarissa so completely that she can no longer say “I” and feel that she utters her own identity: “She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway, not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (*MD*, 13). “I” is Mrs. Richard Dalloway, just one more fashionable woman shopping in the West End. The importance of names should be noted here as they will be seen to be significant in the question of identity. “Dalloway” is, of course, not “really” Clarissa’s name but one imposed over her own by marriage; to be “not even Clarissa any more” means that the “I” she utters does not have, to her, the distinction of a unique individuality.

An interesting comment on the significance of names is provided by the scene in which Clarissa’s old lover, Peter Walsh, just returned from India, is seen following a pretty young woman. Having just left Clarissa’s house, where their meeting again after a long separation has aroused many painful memo-
ries for Peter, he fantasizes about this "ideal" girl he has glimpsed in the street:

Straightening himself and stealthily fingering his pocket-knife he started after her to follow this woman, this excitement, which seemed even with its back turned to shed on him a light which connected them, which singled him out, as if the random uproar of the traffic had whispered through hollowed hands his name, not Peter, but his private name which he called himself in his own thoughts. (MD, 59, my italics)

This unnamed name seems suggestive of an essence transcending mere identity; but here we are anticipating what must be more clearly explained. As a comment on this passage I will cite the following from Geoffrey Hartman's Saving the Text: "... for those who have a name may also seek a more authentic and defining one. The other name is usually kept secret precisely because it is sacred to the individual, or numinous (nomen numen): as if the concentrated soul of the person lodged in it" (125). There will be more to say about names later, but for now it is enough to note their function of providing one of the bases for identity. Names may serve to fix an identity, but they may not reflect what a person feels is his or her "true" self.

In Mrs. Dalloway the simple "I," with which Rachel Vinrace was seen to lay claim to an individual identity, gives way to more complex notions. Clarissa is engaged in what may be seen as a search for her ownmost identity: her recollections of childhood and an unresolved early love affair often prevent her from having a sense of continuity in her being. Memories dislocate her sense of a single identity by irrupting into her present life, so that she "would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that" (MD, 11).

When she returns home to discover that her husband, Richard, has been invited to lunch without her, Clarissa feels empty and lost: identity once more drains away, because she has not been included. To regain her sense of identity she detaches herself from the present and dips into the past, into her memories. As the sense of a rich relationship (with Sally Seton) and a moment of vision returns to her, the emptiness occasioned by her exclusion fills. She abruptly returns to the present, and "plunged into the very heart of the moment, transfixed it, there—the moment of this June morning on which was the
pressure of all the other mornings" (MD, 41-42). This circling of
the moment with all the other moments of life gives her identity
point and continuity. Memory thus plays a double role, both dis­
turbing and restoring the individual’s sense of identity; Clarissa
is able to fill the moment and regain her sense of identity, of
being someone in the world to whom things have happened; to
whom people have spoken; someone who has caused both
happiness and sadness. Her physical being also has a part to play
in this gathering together of herself. To see her own body gives
her some security; when she cannot see herself, the fading of
identity that she experienced in Bond Street is quickened; she
feels "invisible." On returning home, her image in a mirror joins
with memory as she reassumes (what is here specifically called) her self:

That was her self—pointed; dart-like; definite. That was her self when
some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she
alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world
only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-
room and made a meeting-point, a radiancy no doubt in some dull lives, a
refuge for the lonely to come to, perhaps. (MD, 42)

There is another “self,” the “she” who “alone knew” that this
assembly of elements is “composed so for the world only,” and
so “self” here is not unique, but a momentary resolution of scat­
ered attributes that saves Clarissa from a moment of despair.

The constitution of identity here takes place under the form
of a circle: the “I” at the center, named and founded in part on an
image of the body, holds in tension a circumstance of memo­
ries that pertain to that center; furthermore, memories involve
relations with others.

Identity, then, is not a “thing,” as Rachel Vinrace put it, but a
flux of sensations and attributes that can be drawn together by an
effort based on such a security-ensuring stimulus as the sight of
one’s own body in a mirror. Identity is made up of what Clarissa
later in the novel calls “apparitions.” In this instance it appears to
be an accumulation of reflections unified by a name. When there
are no acute stimuli, nor an available “base” for identity, it can
slip, as it does for Clarissa in the crowded street and for Peter
Walsh walking through London after his reunion with Clarissa,
which arouses a welter of memories: "The strangeness of standing alone, alive, unknown, at half-past eleven in Trafalgar Square overcome him. What is it? Where am I? And why, after all, does one do it? he thought" (MD, 58).

Thus far it is suggested that if identity is not to be the undifferentiated identity of the crowd, an effort must be made. Individual identity is, however, formed in a nexus of relationships and influences without which it cannot emerge from the background of the crowd. What initially stimulates the necessary effort is not clear, but we may say that there is a tension between the desire for autonomy, and the necessity, in forming identity, of both interrelationships with others, and the boundaries of space and time.

The party is a foundation on which Clarissa can rely for identity, but, we now know, it is possible for identity to be "composed so for the world only." Because "anybody could do it" (MD, 187), and because she feels she must act a part as a hostess, Clarissa once again feels that a "true" or "real" identity, her own "I," eludes her:

Every time she gave a party she had this feeling of being something not herself, and that every one was unreal in one way; much more real in another. It was, she thought, partly their clothes, partly being taken out of their ordinary ways, partly the background; it was possible to say things you couldn't say anyhow else, things that needed an effort; possible to go much deeper. But not for her; not yet anyhow. (MD, 187-88)

Even this late in the novel the sense of incompleteness in Clarissa's identity is still very strong; the "I" that she speaks in welcoming her guests does not satisfy her. She is still uncertain of what, or who, "herself" is; she still will not say of herself that she is one thing or another, a virgin in a narrow bed, or a smart London hostess.

Clarissa cannot feel herself as a single identity because she feels herself "everywhere; not 'here, here, here': . . . but everywhere" (MD, 168). Her "youthful theory" states what we have already seen to be the situation of identity: to know anyone "one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places" (MD, 168). All that appear in the world are "apparitions," but
there is another "unseen" part of us that can survive even death, by attaching to other people, haunting other places.

It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed (for all her scepticism), that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places, after death. Perhaps—perhaps. (MD, 168)

The problem of identity is intricately bound up with that of knowing others, and because relationships form such a constantly shifting and widening web of interconnections there is no way of isolating one identity. Clarissa suggests an "essence" that is somehow "truer" than the "apparitions" of it which are identities in the shared world. The novel does not attempt to analyze what this essence might be, but clearly the fact of death is significant in the experience that allows for its perception.

The double aspect of death as a completion and cutting off of being dominates Clarissa Dalloway's thoughts. On one level *Mrs. Dalloway* can be read as her coming to terms with her death. During the day of the novel Clarissa moves from the crowd's understanding of death (the supreme expression of which is war) to a grasping of the fact of her own death for herself. Death is the prime manifestation of the horizon of time in human being, and it is important in Woolf's thinking, as will become increasingly clear; eventually we must be concerned with her idea of temporality.

The news of a young man's suicide disturbs that identity "composed so for the world only" that Clarissa had assumed for her party. It is through others' deaths that our "experience" of death comes. The first time Clarissa thinks about her death (MD, 11) she feels it does not really matter, as she is fixed on the present moment. "Everyone remembered," she thinks, and to set herself apart she plunges into "this, here, now, in front of her." Against the thought of death as absolute, ending her delight in the present moment, she sets her belief that she will survive on the "ebb and flow" of things, persist in the memories of those who know her. Later in the book, her "theory of life"
recalls this belief, but for now her meditation springs from the loss of identity she suffers as she walks in the crowd up Bond Street.

That Clarissa is trying to recover an “image of white dawn in the country” reveals her more particular concern: the loss of time. Her quasi-mystical idea of death as transcending the limits of time is a turning away from the fact of death itself. The quotation from Cymbeline, that gently beats in Clarissa’s mind throughout the book, and forms one of the links between her and Septimus, puts her thoughts under suspicion for the dirge operates under a double delusion: Guiderius and Arviragus not only believe wrongly that Imogen is dead, but also that she is the boy, Fidele.

Clarissa is further allied with Septimus by imagining herself as a mist. His death leads her to think of death itself; the finery of her party is stripped away; “one was alone” (MD, 202). For the first time in the novel, there is a sense that Clarissa has reached some sort of plateau; the death seems to have led her to a transcendence of identities; she becomes simply “Clarissa.” The final lines of the novel—“It is Clarissa, he said./For there she was” (MD, 213)—endorse this sense (not stated) of completion, of unity.

That identity depends to a great extent on relationship, and that relationships are inevitably flawed (see next chapter), as Clarissa Dalloway feels, is an idea that we find in To the Lighthouse. The novel is pervaded by a bewilderment in the face of human relations and a longing for knowledge and intimacy. The question of how we can trust any of our feelings when each person presents to the world innumerable apparitions is still much in the writer’s mind, particularly expressed in the character of the artist, Lily Briscoe: “How then did it work out, all this? How did one judge people, think of them? How did one add up this and that and conclude that it was liking one felt, or disliking? And to those words, what meaning attached, after all” (TTL, 42). The failed relationships of To the Lighthouse are testimony to that unsatisfactoriness of our knowledge of others that Clarissa Dalloway complains of.

Lily Briscoe’s relationship with Mrs. Ramsay (presented
only from Lily’s point of view) makes explicit the implications of the characteristic yearning for intimacy: in effect, Lily wants to *be* Mrs. Ramsay, to know her in a way that would dissolve all difference between them:

What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into 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 it, 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? (*TTL*, 82-83)

Knowing that she cannot “know one thing or another about people, sealed as they were,” Lily Briscoe might be seen as a development from the hawk moth of *Jacob’s Room* that hovered at the entrance to the cavern of mystery (*JR*, 72). Lily is a bee, haunting “the hives that were people” (*TTL*, 83). This ghostly bee accepts the inevitability of ignorance, giving the novel its affirming character. Apparitions are all that we know, and they are endless: “One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with, she reflected. Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman, she thought. Among them, must be one that was stone blind to her beauty. . . . What did the hedge mean to her, what did the garden mean to her, what did it mean to her when a wave broke?” (*TTL*, 303-4). Even seen from everywhere, every experience understood, there remains missing that elusive “something absolute in us that despises qualification” (*JR*, 143): what I suggest might be the unnameable self, “the” Mrs. Ramsay, transcending all apparitions.

The “unseen part of us” that Clarissa Dalloway thought might survive death is given greater significance in *To the Lighthouse*. The “wedge-shaped core of darkness” of Mrs. Ramsay’s solitary reverie (*TTL*, 99) is a development of what Clarissa called “the unseen part of us, which spreads wide” (*MD*, 168), a suggestion that is supported by a close similarity of description:

. . . that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, . . . (*MD*, 168)

Our apparitions, the things you know us by, are simply childish. Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. (*TTL*, 100)
Just as in the previous novel, an invisible, spreading inner essence is posited which, it seems, is Mrs. Ramsay "herself."

This "wedge-shaped core of darkness" overcomes the boundaries of space and time ("Her horizons seemed to her limitless" [TTL, 100]) by not issuing in action. During this reverie it is emphasized that Mrs. Ramsay remains sitting upright in her chair, knitting. The being of this "core of darkness" is therefore put in question: to be is to live a body, subject to the passage of time and taking up so much space. If there is something that might be called self that does not share the modes of being so far established for identity, it will perhaps be impossible to actually describe.

I have spoken already of the need, expressed in Mrs. Dalloway, for a foundation for individual identity, and of the yearning for unity that is felt in the character of Clarissa. In To the Lighthouse, Mrs. Ramsay achieves a foundation and a unity by detaching herself from identity (as Clarissa seemed to when she withdrew from her party to the little room on hearing of Septimus Smith's suicide): "There was freedom, there was peace, there was, most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability. Not as oneself did one find rest ever, in her experience . . . but as a wedge of darkness. Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir" (TTL, 100). The question remains: what is left of an individual if she is abstracted from all involvements in the shared world of human relationships? Mrs. Ramsay's moment of solitude has about it an air of tending toward death; she seems to "triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity" (TTL, 100). However, Woolf was certainly no mystic escaping the world through contemplation; once again, her understanding of the fact of death is centrally important.

Mrs. Ramsay is not only looking inward; she looks at the beam of the lighthouse, concentrating on it until she "became the thing she looked at" (TTL, 101). In this reverie, in which "personality" is lost, control is relinquished and the identity of the crowd can creep back in, as it does in the religious platitude that so annoys Mrs. Ramsay when she utters it:

It will come, it will come, when suddenly she added, We are in the hands of the Lord.
But instantly she was annoyed with herself for saying that. Who had said it? not she: she had been trapped into saying something she did not mean. (TTL, 101)

She is trying to reach a level of security that is not provided by the world in which she lives as mother, wife, and protector. A deity is no comfort in a world in which "there is no reason, order, justice; but suffering, death, the poor" (TTL, 102). In what is, in effect, her search for faith, Mrs. Ramsay looks to a world of beauty, to be found in nature and "oneself": "It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to things, inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself" (TTL, 101). To glance back at Clarissa Dalloway's moment of solitude (MD, 204), it may be that her looking out at the sky (which "held something of her own in it") is an adumbration of Mrs. Ramsay's act of faith here. What emerges from these two novels is a deep distrust of human identity and relationships, and a yearning for something "secure" that is not found by escaping from the world, but that inheres in it. Those bases of identity—body, name, memory, relationships—are double-edged: they can not only help form identity, but can also disperse it.

It may be that the realization of the self in the sense of a person purged of all apparitions (identities) is not a general human possibility, but the potential is certainly described again and again in Woolf's novels in characters from Mrs. Dalloway to Lucy Swithin. Before continuing with this investigation of the question of identity and self, I wish to draw attention to Woolf's experience over the years from the inception of To the Light-house to the beginning of The Waves. Judith Kegan Gardiner has written that "because of the continual crossing of self and other, women's writing may blur the public and private and defy completion. . . . The implied relationship between the self and what one reads and writes is personal and intense." Many of the apparent obscurities of Woolf's fiction are illuminated by reference to her direct records of lived experience, primarily her diary. Certainly much more than a record of events, Woolf worked at her diary, sometimes rewriting parts of it, practicing
and playing with ideas that often reappear transformed in her fiction. The discussion of identity and self has led now to a sense of “something more to life” that might compensate for the inadequacies of “apparitions” and their relationships; the diary may help us find out more about this yearning.

Virginia Woolf began to make up *To the Lighthouse* early in 1925 (see *D*, e.g., 6 January, 14 May). Toward the end of that year her relationship with Vita Sackville-West became closer and more intense and was to continue so for at least three years. I wish in particular to draw attention to the experiences of two summers at Monk’s House, in Rodmell, Sussex, where Woolf lived from 1919. Both were recorded in her diary.

The first, in 1926, soon after writing the last pages of *To the Lighthouse*, echoes that experience of Mrs. Ramsay’s just discussed:

> These 9 weeks give one a plunge into deep waters; which is a little alarming, but full of interest. All the rest of year one’s (I daresay rightly) curbing & controlling this odd immeasurable soul. When it expands, though one is frightened & bored & gloomy, it is as I say to myself, awfully queer. There is an edge to it which I feel of great importance, once in a way. One goes down into the well & nothing protects one from the assault of truth. Down there I can’t write or read; I exist however. I am. Then I ask myself what I am? & get a closer though less flattering answer than I should get on the surface—where, to tell the truth, I get more praise than is right. (*D*, 28 September 1926)

The invisible, spreading something is given a name here: the soul. Two days later she comments on the experience, wishing to “add some remarks to this, on the mystical side of this solitude.” It is interesting that she is no clearer in her diary (where she might perhaps be expected to be more direct) than in the novel (assuming—as I do—that the diary and novel passages concern similar experiences). The “soul” still “despises qualification”:

> ... how it is not oneself but something in the universe that one’s left with. It is this that is frightening & exciting in the midst of my profound gloom, depression, boredom, whatever it is: One sees a fin passing far out. What image can I reach to convey what I mean? Really there is none I think. The interesting thing is that in all my feeling & thinking I have never come up against this before. Life is, soberly and accurately, the oddest affair; has in it the essence of reality. I used to feel this as a child—
couldn't step across a puddle once I remember, for think-
ing, how strange—what am I? &c. But by writing I don't reach anything. All I mean to make is a note of a curious state of mind. I hazard the guess that it may be the impulse behind another book. At present my mind is totally blank & virgin of books." (D, 30 September 1926)

The note she has written three years later encourages looking at the diary to help understand the novels' provenance and indicates the falsity of an approach to Woolf that proceeds along a line of logical development. Her thought circles backwards and forwards, creating webs of ideas, matrices of images.

It seems strange that she writes "life . . . has in it the essence of reality"; we might expect "life" and "reality" to be synonymous. However, 'reality' is a very special term in Woolf's lexicon and will be seen to be crucial in understanding her view of self and its place in the world. To bring 'reality' into sharper focus, let us turn once again to the diary.

Toward the end of the summer of 1928 Woolf wrote that she had had a busy time; it had been "a summer lived almost too much in public." She recalls previous summers spent at Monk's House in which she had had a "religious retreat." It seems very likely from what follows that she is remembering in particular the summer of 1926:

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

With this entry the "something abstract" is clearer: it is 'not-world,' 'not people,' suggestive almost of an absence. The "thing I see before me" that resides in the downs or the sky at once
recalls the experiences of Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay. In this abstract 'reality,' Woolf says she will rest—as Mrs. Ramsay wishes to rest (TTL, 100)—and continue to exist, as perhaps Clarissa means when she says of the "unseen part" that it "might survive" (MD, 168).

Woolf feels privileged to have this consciousness of 'reality' and is explicit about wanting to express it. Near the end of her life she wrote that the "shock-receiving capacity" to perceive 'reality' was what made her a writer.³ A little over a month after writing that passage in her diary, Woolf delivered two papers on "Women and Fiction" in Cambridge. These were expanded and published in 1929 as A Room of One's Own, where we find Woolf once more trying to explain 'reality':

What is meant by "reality"? It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable—now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech—and then there it is again in an omnibus in the uproar of Piccadilly. Sometimes, too, it seems to dwell in shapes too far away for us to discern what their nature is. But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. That is what remains over when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge; that is what is left of past time and of our loves and hates. Now the writer, as I think, has the chance to live more than other people in the presence of this reality. It is his business to find it and collect it and communicate it to the rest of us (165-66, my italics)

The question of whether there is an autonomous self apart from identity has led to the potential expressed in some of the characters of the novels and by Woolf herself in her diary, for apprehending a 'reality' that has no form or name in the world and that can only be experienced in solitude; a 'reality' that overcomes the horizons of space and time. This 'reality'—in Woolf's own words, "that which I seek"—will be the general focus of this study as it is the object of Woolf's faith, gradually conceived and expressed in her novels.

To the Lighthouse was published in May 1927, but even before then Woolf conceived Orlando, a book she wrote at high speed while The Waves simmered in her mind. Indeed, the two books seem to have shared, in a sense, one creative impulse
(see, e.g., a note made in 1933 against the diary entry for 14 March 1927). John Graham, writing on "The 'Caricature Value' of Parody and Fantasy in Orlando," puts well what I believe to be true of Orlando's development of Woolf's thoughts on self and identity: "Caricature can explore because it ignores the complexity of the total object and isolates only its relevant features, thereby allowing a sharper focus of attention than is possible in a full treatment. In many ways it can function for the artist as a refined sort of doodling, in which he 'feels out' the forms and designs of his more serious work." It is, nevertheless, generally agreed that Orlando gets increasingly serious; indeed, Woolf herself felt that what had begun as a "joke" did not end as one. The last chapter is greatly concerned with the heroine's identity and begins by musing on the difficulty of saying what "life" is. The Waves is prefigured at several points—e.g., 257: "Life? Literature? One to be made into the other? But how monstrously difficult!"

The tone of Orlando allows Woolf a directness that would be awkward in her other works. It should always be remembered in reading the book that it was an offering to Vita Sackville-West, and that it is "about" Knole and the Sackvilles in a much plainer sense than To the Lighthouse is about the Stephens. John Graham seems to have forgotten this when he complains, "By the time Orlando sits down in the long gallery of her home, she has become a distinctly credible aristocrat of the present age, down to the lavender bags, ropes, and name-cards which mark the passing of her private heritage into the public domain" (362). Orlando has become Vita, a metamorphosis that led to what Vita herself called "a new form of Narcissism." "I confess," she wrote, "I am in love with Orlando—this is a complication I had not foreseen." That the "joke" was for Vita above all is demonstrated by the fact that it ends emphatically on the twelfth stroke of midnight, Thursday, 11 October 1928—the day Orlando was published and, as Vita's letter records, "the day I was to have it." This is perhaps a way of solving that problem of "Life? Literature? One to be made into the other?" that a work like The Waves could not achieve.

Having gone up to London to shop, Orlando is beset by memories that dislocate her sense of identity in the present. Getting into her car, Orlando, who has "gone a little too far from the
present moment” (274), is vulnerable to a loss of identity caused by her failure to synchronize the different times that beat within her. To have an identity, it is suggested, there must be a sense of being in a present; also, identity appears to depend on coordinates of space. Motoring fast out of London, these coordinates of time and space are fragmented, and a “chopping up small” of identity occurs that, it is said, is like that which “precedes unconsciousness and perhaps death itself” (O, 276). As when Mrs. Ramsay slips into unconsciousness, there is a question as to the status of the person’s existence: if identity is “chopped up small” where is the person to be located? The passage suggests that such unconsciousness is a different mode of existence altogether from identity in the actual world; the approach to death might reveal that mode also.

Once in the country, the continuity of the visual impressions Orlando receives gives her a “base” on which to reestablish identity. Identity is, as we have already learned, a series of apparitions, and it is apparitions that Woolf refers to by “selves” in this context. Orlando is composed of many different “selves,” each having “attachments elsewhere, sympathies, little constitutions and rights of their own” (277): “How many different people are there not—Heaven help us—all having lodgement at one time or another in the human spirit?” (O, 277). There is nothing innovative about this view of human identity and, as the narrator says, “Everybody can multiply from his own experience the different terms which his different selves have made with him” (O, 277).

Orlando, however, seeks a particular identity, but this will not “come”; as she drives, her identities change. The problem of who it is that calls “Orlando?” and receives no answer is resolved by the introduction of the “conscious self, which is uppermost, and has the power to desire” (O, 279). Orlando is calling her “true self” which “some people” (“they”) say is made up of “all the selves we have it in us to be; commanded and locked up by the Captain self, the Key self” (O, 279). The “true self” of Orlando, then, is an amalgam of all her identities (according to “some people”). This at once introduces the problem of how unity can be achieved while the person lives through time; Orlando escapes the problem by being a fantasy.
It is only when Orlando ceases to call for her "true self" that she becomes it, and it is in this that I believe the "joke's" serious underthought is glimpsed. In the paragraph describing Orlando's coalescence into a "true self" can be detected tenuous similarities with those "key" moments in both Clarissa Dalloway's and Mrs. Ramsay's life, that have been described above:

The whole of her darkened and settled, as when some foil whose addition makes the round and solidity of a surface is added to it, and the shallow becomes deep and the near distant; and all is contained as water is contained by the sides of a well. So she was now darkened, stilled, and become, with the addition of this Orlando, what is called, rightly or wrongly, a single self, a real self. And she fell silent. For it is probable that when people talk aloud, the selves (of which there may be more than two thousand) are conscious of dissenverment, and are trying to communicate, but when communication is established they fall silent. (0, 282)

There is a similarity of mood between this moment and (particularly) Mrs. Ramsay's moment of sinking down to "being oneself." Probably the experiences are quite distinct, but it must be admitted that the moment of "being oneself" is characterized by solemnity, darkness, and peace. In Orlando the "true self" comes in silence, which suggests that it cannot be named. Communication (voices, naming) is the mark of apparitions; but in what sense can something exist without a name, an actual being in the shared world? "Nothing should be named lest by doing so we change it," says Neville in The Waves (59). It is only by naming, however, that anything can be known. The problem of knowing what the "real self" is' in Orlando is explicitly founded in the problem of language. If the "real self" that Orlando sought comes only in silence, it is presumably outside language, outside naming.6

That there is "an emptiness about the heart of life" (MD, 35) is a recurring point in Woolf's fiction; for Lily Briscoe, for example, the scene she is trying to paint suddenly becomes "like curves and arabesques flourishing round a centre of complete emptiness" (TTL, 275). If "self" exists, its mode of existence is not that of a named thing in the actual world. The transcendent nature of 'reality' has already been implied. What I wish to elaborate is the idea in Woolf's fiction of a preverbal space from which
human being arises (see TTL, 100). The "nothingness" it was earlier suggested the "self" might be (p. 24 above) will eventually be seen to be related to the modes of art in Woolf's aesthetic. In an essay of 1934, "Walter Sickert," Woolf wrote that maybe "there is a zone of silence in the middle of every art. The artists themselves live in it" (CDB, 191). Fundamental to Woolf's aesthetic is that these ideas must come to be felt in the reader's mind by "gathering fragments"; there can be no direct communication of self, of 'reality,' of nothingness. What we will eventually be led to is the strange notion of an absent presence, communicated in the act of reading.

Recent feminist criticism and speculative writing, in its discovery of women's experience, adds a further dimension to this issue, making Woolf's project, perhaps, seem less abstruse:

I know that when I write there is something inside me that stops functioning, something that becomes silent. I let something take over inside me that probably flows from femininity. But everything shuts off—the analytic way of thinking, thinking inculcated by college, studies, reading, experience. I'm absolutely sure of what I'm telling you now. It's as if I were returning to a wild country. Nothing is concerted. Perhaps, before everything else, before being Duras, I am—simply—a woman.

And then, blank pages, gaps, borders, spaces and silence, holes in discourse: these women emphasize the aspect of feminine writing which is the most difficult to verbalize because it becomes compromised, rationalized, masculinized as it explains itself. . . . If the reader feels a bit disoriented in this new space, one which is obscure and silent, it proves perhaps, that it is women's space. [dots in original]

For some feminist critics, the wild zone, or "female space," must be the address of a genuinely woman-centered criticism, theory, and art, whose shared project is to bring into being the symbolic weight of female consciousness, to make the invisible visible, to make the silent speak.

The "wild zone" that many women speak of (giving it various names) corresponds, I believe, to the empty center of Woolf's aesthetic. As will emerge, the apprehension of 'reality' is exclusive to women in the novels. This is not to say that it is only possible for women, but that women experience the world differently than men and experience it in such a way that silence and emptiness characterize their inward discourse.
This somewhat Shandean progression by digression is, I feel, valid in writing about Woolf as her art consistently defeats linear, discursive moves. The questions raised by the novels, that as readers we must attempt to answer for ourselves, stand in opposition to such thought as that of the early Wittgenstein, for whom "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (Tractatus, 5.6). The Tractatus (1908) concludes: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (7). In her novels Woolf realizes that although what is outside life is outside language, what is outside language is not necessarily outside life. There is a silence at the heart of life in her works, but it is not Wittgenstein's silence. The fundamental question addressed by the novels is whether there can be anything for us outside language; can the self be if its mode of discourse is silence?

Woolf could not pass over in silence that whereof we cannot speak, but hovered over it incessantly. The idea of silence and emptiness at the heart of life seems to me the constant field of her inquiry, but it is not until her last work, Between the Acts, that this concern is brought into the foreground. She may well have taken courage from a writer who, as Allen McLaurin has noted, "was so deeply implanted in her thought that his ideas seemed to be her own" (Virginia Woolf, 3). In his notebook Samuel Butler wrote:

The highest thought is ineffable; it must be felt from one person to another but cannot be articulated. All the most essential and thinking part of thought is done without words or consciousness. It is not till doubt and consciousness enter that words become possible.

The moment a thing is written, or even can be written, and reasoned about, it has changed its nature by becoming tangible, and hence finite, and hence it will have an end in disintegration. It has entered into death. And yet till it can be thought about and realised more or less definitely it has not entered into life. Both life and death are necessary factors of each other. But our profoundest and most important convictions are unspeakable.

Writing novels is, we might say, naming, however sophisticated, and this might go some way to explaining the sense of longing common in Woolf's fiction. In a way she writes against herself all the time by adopting a position in which she says her task is hopeless, her goal impossible, but her effort inevitable. It should not be thought that this is a Beckettian pose: Woolf's
work is, on the whole, strongly affirmative; yet it may be that she affirms through the recognition of nothingness.

Having arrived at this somewhat Humean view of identity, we will do well to look briefly at some of the issues it raises, as the deeper concerns of the novels have emerged. In *The Waves* Bernard is a sort of spokesman for this view of human being, feeling that his life is a series of acts (apparitions): "They do not understand that I have to effect different transitions; have to cover the entrances and exits of several different men who alternately act their parts as Bernard" (*TW*, 55). When he invites "poor Simes" to dinner, he thinks he will have attributed to him "an admiration which is not mine" (55). Bernard says that the admiration inferred is not *really* his, and yet by inviting Simes to dinner one apparition makes contact with another. Bernard knows only apparitions of Simes; life indeed seems to be a mere procession of shadows, as was suggested in *Jacob’s Room*.

Bernard is fascinated by the different apparitions he presents to the world, forever turning them around in his mind. The private Bernard—when "he" speaks to "himself"—is in a sense an internal apparition: "Underneath, and, at the moment when I am most disparate, I am most integrated" (55). "Bernard" to Bernard is merely the voice that speaks in him when he talks (as we all do) to himself. To conceive of oneself in this way is immediately to suggest duality—a "self" regarding a "self." We can say, then, that this (Bernard to himself) is not the "real self" because once communication is established, language has always already taken the "self" into its system of apparitions. If named, the "true self" would become an element of the novel, given a status, a being among others. It seems that there can be no such self in the light of what has already been said, because if it is to be absolute it escapes the limitations of time and space on anything in the world. Only nothing (no-thing) escapes those limitations (horizons).

Yet again and again, the novels enshrine privileged moments in which a self (or now, to be direct, a *soul*) is posited. What Woolf only very rarely called "soul" (e.g., in her diary, as referred to above, p. 33), and what I (and sometimes she) call "self" are both terms for that invisible "something" that is apart from all apparitions, that can transcend the horizons of space and
time, and that has its "being" in silence. Also, it has appeared so far, the self or soul has a special and uncommunicable relationship with an abstract 'reality' residing in the actual world.

The self cannot be constructed from identities; to Neville's (paradigmatic) question "Who am I?" (60), there can be no single answer: "As he approaches I become not myself but Neville mixed . . . with Bernard" (TW, 60). Likewise, Bernard is "mixed" with Neville: "Now that we look at the tree together, it has a combed look, each branch distinct, and I will tell you what I feel, under the compulsion of your clarity" (TW, 60). Others cannot tell us who we are because they see themselves in us, who see ourselves in them, and so on; there is such a mingling together of different identities that another can only give a version of us. Bernard knew this as a child: "But when we sit together, close, . . . we melt into each other with phrases. We are edged with mist. We make an unsubstantial territory" (TW, 11).

We can only think about ourselves through the medium of language; if there is a "real self" it cannot, as Orlando stated, be thought about.

As Bernard grows up, and the novel progresses, more and more fragments that have "Bernard" as their signature emerge: he is most himself to himself composed of many different parts, and so there is no one Bernard (no "what is called, rightly or wrongly" in Orlando "real self"). Bringing together his "shabby inmates," Bernard feels whole, but this wholeness is merely aggregation, not a divisionless synthesis. In Bernard is found an attitude to identity unlike any that has so far been described, because he welcomes his diversity; unity seems to repel him because he sees that wholes are illusions: "What am I? There is no stability in this world. Who is to say what meaning there is in anything? Who is to foretell the flight of a word? It is a balloon that sails over tree-tops. To speak of knowledge is futile. All is experiment and adventure" (TW, 84). Bernard, the writer, sees through the "veil of words," but rejoices in their capacity for giving at least a sense of wholeness to a world in which only apparitions can act: "I feel at once, as I sit down at a table, the delicious jostle of confusion, of uncertainty, of possibility, of speculation. Images breed instantly I am embarrassed by my own fertility. I could describe every chair, table, luncher here
copiously, freely. My mind hums hither and thither with its veil of words for everything” (TW, 84). Words fix as immutable a reality that is constantly changing, and by this naming provide a foundation for identity.

In the character of Bernard it is realized that identity cannot be fixed by the “I”; he does not know his identity as a unity, but never tires of describing its perpetual changes: “For there is nothing to lay hold of. I am made and remade continually. Different people draw different words from me” (TW, 96). As life continues Bernard becomes increasingly aware of how identity depends almost entirely upon circumstances. There are moments when a single identity dominates, under the influence of a particular event, such as when his proposal of marriage is accepted: “I, who have been since Monday, when she accepted me, charged in every nerve with a sense of identity” (TW, 80). In the street, in the crowd, he tries to shake off this enclosing singularity and let identity sink down, to become “like everybody else,” but this is impossible for one who so persistently reflects on his own identity: “One cannot extinguish that persistent smell. It steals in through some crack in the structure—one’s identity. I am not part of the street—no, I observe the street. One splits off, therefore” (TW, 82).

Identity closes off things as they are, for everything is experienced by a particular identity. Thus the world appears as an enormously complicated assembly of reflections, in which “I” exist only as the result of influences colored by other “I’s,” which in their turn are formed by reflection. Identity as a single, firmly grasped unity called “I” no longer exists: “To be myself (I note) I need the illumination of other people’s eyes, and therefore cannot be entirely sure what is my self” (TW, 83). From this fascinating doubt Bernard becomes yet another “I,” the “I” of his soliloquies, observing all the others. The world for Bernard becomes so familiar that eventually he no longer questions it, seeming to accept that “I” is never fixed: “We are all swept on by the torrent of things grown so familiar that they cast no shade; we make no comparisons; think scarcely ever of I or of you” (TW, 153).

To “explain to you the meaning of my life” (TW, 168), Bernard can only continue to tell stories, but “none of them are true” (TW, 169). Talking of his friends, Bernard tells his guest
(who must listen for all of us) how they have contributed to him, made him what he is (TW, 196, 199). As he tells his story, he emphasizes that he is merely fabricating (as already noted, Woolf often seems to write against herself): “Let us again pretend that life is a solid substance, shaped like a globe, which we turn about in our fingers. Let us pretend that we can make out a plain and logical story, so that when one matter is despatched—love for instance—we go on, in an orderly manner, to the next” (TW, 178).

To do anything but merely exist (like a tree) we must make up stories; as soon as we dip into the great bran-pie we alter it forever, but we pretend we have left it just as it was. Again the nothingness of an absolute self is implied. Bernard echoes the others’ soliloquies in the smallest details, showing that what is Bernard himself is indistinguishable from what is Louis, Jinny, Susan, Neville, or Rhoda—those others whose lives The Waves traces. Nevertheless, “if there are no stories, what end can there be, or what beginning?” (TW, 189). Bernard incessantly spins out words, because “it is the effort and the struggle, it is the perpetual warfare, it is the shattering and piecing together—this is the daily battle, defeat or victory, the absorbing pursuit” (TW, 191). Even as he says this, he sees through his “veil of words”: “The true order of things—this is our perpetual illusion—is now apparent” (TW, 193).

Bernard’s experience of the “world seen without a self” is an attempt to be in the world without any apparitions; to experience a moment of being from the position of the nothing that it has been implied “is” the self: “But how describe the world seen without a self? There are no words. Blue, red—even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting the light through” (TW, 204). Again, it is language that comes between knowledge and experience: only an apparition can speak to us, and only words can tell the story of the “world seen without a self,” which puts it among apparitions and so denies as it affirms.

The Waves exposes a gulf between language and reality, identity and self, that is rarely acknowledged in fiction. This, and the wider question it implies of the relationship between life and art, will be returned to below once the terms of Woolf’s
aesthetic have been established. Before that, however, the theme of relationship (upon which identity to a great extent depends) should be examined more closely. Identity is intricately bound up with embodiment, with perception, and with relationship.