CHAPTER THREE

OTHERS

To be is to be with others, just as it is to be in time, and to "live" a body. It is in relationships with others that the possibilities and limitations of human being are realized, and it is against the background of others that individual identity stands out. The most typical relationships of Virginia Woolf's novels are between two people only; there is, of course, interest in the "party consciousness," but the most frequent relationship is between two: husband and wife, parent and child, lovers, friends, meeting with a stranger, an old and a young person, male and female—these are the most common foci. All Woolf's work is concerned with knowledge, or the impossibility of knowledge; in relationships, knowledge can only be gained from communication, and it is this aspect of relating to others that is featured most prominently. "Communication is health; communication is happiness" (MD, 104), but it is also deeply unsatisfactory. The world that emerges from Woolf's first two novels is one in which any relationship that is not an illusion seems quite impossible: "In what can one trust? Not in men and women. Not in one's dreams about them. There's nothing—nothing, nothing left at all" (ND, 163).

There is not a broad spectrum or variety of types of relationship in Woolf's novels. The inward-looking tendency of most of the characters precludes any view of society at large, but to write of that would, in any case, be to write of the crowd. Relationships presented in the novels are often deeply flawed, marked by a strong sense of the inadequacy of communication and the hopelessness of love. Against this, as we might expect, is a counter-movement: life is endlessly exciting, offering fresh possibilities at every moment: "Every time the door opened and fresh people came in, those already in the room shifted slightly; those who were standing looked over their shoulders; those who were sit-
tent stopped in the middle of sentences. What with the light, the wine, the strumming of a guitar, something exciting happened each time the door opened. Who was coming in?" (JR, 109).

The characters of *Jacob's Room*, as Leonard Woolf noticed, are all ghosts; their contacts form "spiritual shapes" that shift and splinter, never enduring. A mood Woolf recorded in her diary seems to dominate the novel: "Why is life so tragic; so like a little strip of pavement over an abyss" (D, 25 October 1920). The diary mood is directly reflected in the novel: "What does one fear?—the human eye. At once the pavement narrows, the chasm deepens" (JR, 80).

Above it was said that apparitions are all that can be known in the actual world. In this novel the effect of this on human relations is pervasive: "Nobody sees anyone as he is . . . They see a whole—they see all sorts of things—they see themselves" (JR, 28-29). Life surrounds us as a network of "wires and tubes"; letters pass, telephones ring, visits are made—as they are throughout all the novels—but all this communication serves to cover the emptiness of being unable to know others as "I." Language contaminates: for example, Jacob must not say that he loves Clara Durrant: "No, no, no . . . don't break—don't spoil"—what? Something infinitely wonderful" (JR, 70); and, we may add, unnameable. *Jacob's Room* reflects the "blowing this way and that" of life; relationships are fleeting, observed obliquely by the shifting narrator. Relationship is marked by a longing for unspoken intimacy; not that silent understanding that grows up between a husband and wife from habit, that Woolf referred to as early as *The Voyage Out*, but a more perfect knowledge of others. Jacob's encounter in Greece with Sandra Wentworth Williams is an image of the nature of relationships: "For she could not stop until she had told him—or heard him say—or was it some action on his part that she required? Far away on the horizon she discerned it and could not rest" (JR, 158). The horizon moves perpetually as one moves toward it, and so it is in relationships: they are characterized by a yearning for an impossible communication. This part of *Jacob's Room*—his trip to Greece—is heavy with the sense of life's transience and a thought felt throughout Woolf's works that nothing remains of relationships. The "metaphysical"
desire to escape the bounds of physical life is implied in Jacob's gift to Sandra of the poems of Donne:

They had vanished. There was the Acropolis; but had they reached it? The columns and the Temple remain; the emotion of the living breaks fresh on them year after year; and of that what remains?

As for reaching the Acropolis who shall say that we ever do it, or that when Jacob woke next morning he found anything hard and durable to keep forever? (160)

The failure of relationships, specifically of love, to "make of the moment something permanent" continues to be an important theme in Mrs. Dalloway. One of Clarissa's most vivid memories is of her youthful passion for her friend Sally Seton, and an occasion on which Sally kissed her. This special moment is significantly imaged by Clarissa as the receiving of something tangible: "And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it—a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up, which, as they walked (up and down, up and down), she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling!" (MD, 40). This "religious feeling" is a momentary experience of that perfection of relationship that is longed for in the novels. It cannot persist in the actual world, but passes as all moments do. The feeling does, however, remain in Clarissa's memory, a mode of being that overcomes spatiotemporal horizons. The diamond is a symbol of unity (not just in this novel); it is recalled when Clarissa "points" herself at her mirror (42). The moment with Sally is destroyed when Peter Walsh intrudes (throughout the novels men—Mr. Ramsay, Bart Oliver—will intrude on moments of "wholeness" and harmony experienced by women, shattering them). The moment is, though, the source of Clarissa's longing for a perfect union. Possessed by that wonder at simply being at all that is a feature of all the novels, Clarissa wishes to combine people, in an effort to create a whole she can only imagine: "Here was So-and-so in South Kensington; some one up in Bayswater; and somebody else, say, in Mayfair. And she felt quite continuously a sense of their existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom?" (MD, 134-35). Her judgments remain
"superficial . . . fragmentary," yet if she can put the fragments together she feels a gestalt may be formed.

The desire to combine with others is not confined to Clarissa; the provincial diners at Peter Walsh's hotel have a "desire, pulsing in them, tugging at them subterraneously, somehow to establish connections" (MD, 175). Peter Walsh, taken into the little world of the Morris family for a moment, feels contentment in the seeming wholeness of their relationships. The family is a system that sustains life over the "abyss." Similar to it is "that network of visiting, leaving cards, being kind to people" (MD, 86) that is Clarissa's way of sustaining life, of creating a complex over the emptiness she feels lies at the heart of things. Such complexes form, break, and reform perpetually: strangers glance at one another, or are united by perceptions (as in the episodes of the mysterious car and the skywriting aeroplane), but only momentarily. The horizon of time prevents wholes from forming, prevents the perfection of relationship because identity is always in flux. Wolfgang Iser has written interestingly on this in a chapter on "Self-reduction" in The Implied Reader:

Past and present can never be completely synthesized. Every incipient systematization is refuted by time, which as a new present exposes the ephemeral nature of any such synthesis. But it is only through subjectivity itself that time takes on its form of past, present, and future; the self is not the passive object of this process, but actually conditions it. With which of its states, then, is the self to be identified? Is it that which existed in the circumstances of the past, is it that which it is at this moment in the present, or is it simply that force which constantly creates new connections and time relations but which, at the same time, constantly plunges every one of its visible manifestations into the maelstrom of change? The self is essentially incapable of completion, and this fact accounts both for its inadequacy and its richness. The knowledge that it can never be completely in possession of itself is the hallmark of its consciousness. (144-45)

The desire for pattern that is so strong in Woolf's fiction is a desire to overcome the disruption of time; circling backwards and forwards in memory is the form of her art, a mental challenge to the linear progress of time.

To Rezia Warren Smith love "makes one solitary" (MD, 27), and to Clarissa love is a "monster"; and yet love combines, and in the first flush of passion seems to transcend the reflecting apparitions of everyday life. Clarissa scoffs at Peter being "sucked
under in his little bow-tie,” but “in her heart she felt, all the same; he is in love. He has that, she felt; he is in love” (MD, 50). Whatever its status, love has the power of widening the pavement over the abyss, but only for a moment. Marriage weaves a cocoon round Clarissa in which she can “crouch like a bird and gradually revive” (MD, 203). She understands that Richard wishes to tell her that he loves her without his speaking (although his bunch of roses operates in the same way as words [130]), but in their silence Richard and Clarissa are closed to each other.

Whether we feel that we know nothing about others (as Sally Seton feels), or that we know everything (as Peter), relationships are characterized by a lack, by a pointing-up of our ultimate aloneness. Mrs. Dalloway is greatly concerned with communication and with relationships through time; memory affects present relationships and alters those of the past. As in Jacob’s Room, there inheres in the book a longing to make a definite statement about a life that seems so amorphous.

Clarissa has an inherent desire to combine, in the hope of somehow discovering a revelatory order to the world. As this hope is perpetually defeated, the combinative instinct doubles on itself: her parties become “an offering for the sake of offering, perhaps.” Peter wonders why he does as he does (MD, 58); there are no answers for him, only a drive to combine. Left too long in solitude, one’s sense of individual identity begins to slip. The urge to combine, then, is in order to see one’s “own” reflection, basing one’s own identity on the fact that one is with others. At the close of the novel, Clarissa cannot bear solitude in the little room for long; “but she must go back. She must assemble” (MD, 205, my italics).

As a theme, relationship in To the Lighthouse is complex, although a sharply delineated pattern, with Mrs. Ramsay at the center, is discernible. The relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay is largely unarticulated, and yet it is in a way the source of the moods and rhythms of the novel. Mrs. Ramsay is the prime exemplar of the female’s combining powers and influence; more, even, than Clarissa, she has “that woman’s gift, of making a world of her own wherever she happened to be” (MD, 84-85).
Mrs. Ramsay, sitting in the window, is aware of a "scale of sounds pressing on top of her"; from the sounds of men talking, children playing, and waves breaking she weaves a fabric as she sits knitting her stocking. If one of these elements changes (e.g., the men stop talking), the pattern she perceives as life flowing on its natural course is disturbed; she suddenly perceives the beating of the waves as ominous. The sound of the sea is the base of the rhythmic pattern she perceives as she sits with James; it has a double aspect, therefore, of comfort and threat.

In the Ramsays' marriage is seen once more the impossibility of reaching another's solitude: Mr. Ramsay wants to protect his wife, but "he could not reach her, he could do nothing to help her" (7TL, 104). Men standing in a mysterious accord with "the laws of the universe," Mrs. Ramsay accepts that her husband's "great mind" must feed on hers, shadowing it as if his mind were a giant hand blotting out the sun: "So boasting of her capacity to surround and protect, there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by" (7TL, 63).

The seventh section of "The Window" is almost entirely concerned with Mrs. Ramsay's sense of "the inadequacy of human relationships, that the most perfect was flawed." Her solitude is broken into by the effort of combining, leaving her depleted and dejected, uncertain of her own being. Aware of this, she must still create, combine, and offer, making matches because she sees potential in the union of two people for something whole and lasting.

Marriage still is an unsatisfactory compromise in which one person—invariably the woman—must sacrifice her own wishes to serve her partner's shortcomings. The remoteness of Mrs. Ramsay's reverie "pains" her husband because he feels she does not need him. He is mistaken, however, for she wishes upon herself his draining demands: "That was what she wanted—the asperity in his voice, reproving her." For anyone to see that he needed her would upset Mrs. Ramsay's idea of how the world is, a concept against which her children quietly rebel.

That love cannot overcome human separateness is emphasized by Lily's desire to "make her and Mrs. Ramsay one." Lily Briscoe unifies the Ramsays with a label: "So that is marriage, Lily thought, a man and a woman looking at a girl throwing a ball"
(TTL, 114). Near the end of the book, Lily thinks back on her previous visit (TTL, 305) and realizes that there can be no way of simplifying their relationship. It is in her memory of Mrs. Ramsay’s silence that Lily comes to understand the imperfection of human relationships. Silence is not passive in Woolf’s work; it questions language; silence “communicates” in its own mode.

Mrs. Ramsay sat silent. She was glad, Lily thought, to rest in silence, uncommunicative; to rest in the extreme obscurity of human relationships. Who knows what we are, what we feel? Who knows even at the moment of intimacy, This is knowledge? Aren’t things spoilt then, Mrs. Ramsay may have asked (it seemed to have happened so often, this silence by her side) by saying them? Aren’t we more expressive thus? (TTL, 264-65)

It is worth noting that in the holograph draft of the novel, Lily relates this silence specifically to relationships between women: “Aren’t we at any rate women <better> more expressive silently gliding high together, side by side, in the curious dumbness, which is so much to <their> ones taste than speech”.

Families, as is seen in the earlier novels, produce tensions of loyalty in their members. Ralph Denham, in Night and Day, has to wrest every moment of his privacy from the grasp of the family system; a desire to be alone is regarded with suspicion. Mr. Ramsay arouses extremes of passion in his children; their loyalties are divided not only between their mother and father but between each other and their parents. Though Cam, sailing to the lighthouse with James and their father, loves him for his eccentricity, she also hates his tyranny, which “poisoned her childhood.” Her affection finds no voice because her detestation of his insouciance always rises up to counter it. Cam is in a position similar to that Lily experienced with regard to William Bankes: how can one ever say it is liking or disliking one feels if opinions about a single person so conflict? James, too, hates “the twang and twitter of his father’s emotion” for it “disturbs the perfect simplicity and good sense of his relations with his mother” (TTL, 61).

Despite this, Mr. Ramsay is a heroic figure, even for James. On the journey to the lighthouse, James sees him as a personification of “that loneliness which was for both of them the truth about things” (311). The ultimate solitude of individual being is
once again realized in silence. There is a constant yearning for
communication—when James is praised by his father, Cam sees
immediately that his indifference is only feigned—but when
contact is made, nothing endures; the moment passes to reassert
essential loneliness: “What do you want? they both wanted to
ask. They both wanted to say, Ask us anything and we will give it
you. But he did not ask them anything” (TTL, 318).

Lily’s opinion of marriage is familiar from the preceding
novels: “She need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not un­
dergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution” (TTL,
159). And yet, despite this feeling that “there is nothing more
tedious, puerile, and inhumane than love,” and that women are
worse off for it than men, most people, especially, thinks Lily,
most women, see love as “beautiful and necessary.” This tension
characterizes the attitude to love in the novels. Without love “life
will run upon the rocks,” but with it “she would never know him.
He would never know her.” Combination and creation wreath
an illusion around the emptiness at the heart of people, but
without that there would be no life. Only the mind speaking the
novel sees the emptiness within: “All of them bending them­selves to listen thought ‘Pray heaven that the inside of my mind
may not be exposed,’ for each thought, ‘The others are feeling
this. They are outraged and indignant with the government
about the fishermen. Whereas, I feel nothing at all’ ” (TTL, 146).

As before, Woolf’s diary can help to relate the fictional
world to that of lived experience, filled as it is with her musings
on relationships. There are two passages that I wish to examine,
both of which can be related convincingly to the mood of Mrs.
Dalloway, although they were written some years later. That
sense of something tangible that Clarissa felt she received in
Sally Seton’s kiss is yearned for throughout the fiction. Lily Bris­
coe, in To the Lighthouse, longs for Mrs. Ramsay after her death,
feeling that perhaps if she could demand it with enough force,
“beauty would roll itself up; the space would fill; those empty
flourishes would form into shape” (TTL, 277).

Human relationships in Woolf’s fiction are characterized by
a lack, a sense that the longed-for knowledge of another can
never be achieved. Woolf records this feeling in her diary: “Eddy
has just gone, leaving me the usual feeling: why is not human
intercourse more definite, tangible: why aren't I left holding a small round substance, say of the size of a pea, in my hand; something I can put in a box & look at? There is so little left" (D, 8 August 1928). The sense of life's transience so prevalent in the fiction I would suggest stems from Woolf's own experience. This long reflection in her diary, for example, expounds thoughts that are familiar from as early as The Voyage Out (where Rachel Vinrace feels people may be patches of light crossing the surface of the world [TVO, 358]), and which become more and more central from Jacob's Room onwards.

Yet these people one sees are fabric only made once in the world; these contacts we have are unique; & if E. were, say killed tonight, nothing definite would happen to me; yet his substance is never again to be repeated. Our meeting is—but the thread of this idea slips perpetually; constantly though it recurs, with sadness, to my mind: how little our relationships matter; & yet they are so important: in him, in me, something to him, to me, infinitely sentient, of the highest vividness, reality. But if I died tonight, he too would continue. Something illusory then enters into all that part of life. I am so important to myself: yet of no importance to other people: like the shadow passing over the downs. (D, 8 August 1928)

The image of human relationships as a series of apparitions, each reflecting others, is familiar in the fiction. It is the fact of living through time, being thrown into a life that tends only toward death, that gives Woolf her sense that other people are ephemeral and unknown, and yet that they are the only hope of covering over the emptiness at the heart of life. To survive through time, a relationship must live in the memory, but there it will be altered, given a shape other than that which it has in the actual world because the modes of being in memory cannot be bound by time in the same way as those of life in the "present." This, too, Woolf records: "And what remains of Eddy is now in some ways more vivid, though more transparent, all of him composing itself in my mind, all I could get of him, & making itself a landscape appropriate to it; making a work of art for itself" (D, 8 August 1928). A work of art—especially a novel—is the creation of a world within the actual world, a revelation of the possibility of a mode of existence not bound by the spatiotemporal horizons of actual life.

Lily Briscoe creates with the fragments of her memory:
"Going to the Lighthouse. But what does one send to the Lighthouse? Perished. Alone. The grey-green light on the wall opposite. The empty places. Such were some of the parts, but how bring them together?" (TTL, 228). Lily likens her memories to works of art, trying to recreate her past in the present. In the modes of art it may be that the curves and arabesques of memory can coalesce to "make of the moment something permanent"; certainly the life of the actual, shared world of human relationships alone does not offer this possibility.

Almost a year later, Woolf again wrote in her diary of life's empty center, seen in moments when the illusion of relationship fails. There is an exact homology between the entry in the diary and a passage in Mrs. Dalloway where Peter Walsh suddenly feels that his life is unreal. Standing alone in London (54f.) he is overcome by a sense that because Clarissa refused him, his life has been meaningless, merely a habit forced on him by the flow of time.

As a cloud crosses the sun, silence falls on London; and falls on the mind. Effort ceases. Time flaps on the mast. There we stop; there we stand. Rigid, the skeleton of habit alone upholds the human frame. Where there is nothing, Peter Walsh said to himself; feeling hollowed out, utterly empty within. Clarissa refused me, he thought. He stood there thinking, Clarissa refused me. (MD, 55)

Peter's "looking rather drearily into the glassy depths" (55) is exactly recalled in Woolf's diary in an entry made on returning from a trip to France in 1929:

And a sense of nothingness rolls about the house; what I call the sense of "Where there is nothing." This is due to the fact that we came back from France last night & are not going round in the mill yet. Time flaps on the mast—my own phrase I think. . . . Time flaps on the mast. And then I see through everything. Perhaps the image ought to have been one that gives an idea of a stream becoming thin: of seeing to the bottom.3 (D, 15 June 1929)

To live (in a positive, transitive sense) is a matter of effort in Woolf's eyes. Identity is formed partly by relating with others, and thereby a sense of purpose is bestowed on life; relationship widens the strip of pavement over the abyss. However, the shadows that we grasp at are known to be illusory, in the sense that
they are impermanent and cannot share in the individual "I" of each human being:

Now time must not flap on the mast any more. Now I must somehow brew another decoction of illusion. Well, if the human interest flags—if its that that worries me, I must not sit thinking about it here. I must make human illusion—ask someone in tomorrow after dinner; & begin that astonishing adventure with the souls of others again—about which I know so little. (D, 15 June 1929)

If identity in solitude fails so abruptly, something must be found to "anchor" oneself in the world. It is from the ambivalence of her attitude to human relationships that the need arises in Woolf to find a faith in something apart from those apparitions. This faith, though, is not always available, and at such times despair at the ultimate nothingness of existence, unrelieved by philosophical or religious comforts, takes over.

As in all the novels, in The Years the door keeps opening and people keep coming in. If we stop to wonder why we bother to combine and create, to talk and to smile with strangers or loved ones, to feel jealousy or hatred, it seems it is to deny the loneliness and intensity of solitude, to diminish the forces of life: "But one wants somebody to laugh with, she thought. Pleasure is increased by sharing it. Does the same hold good of pain? she mused. Is that the reason why we all talk so much of ill-health—because sharing things lessens things? Give pain, give pleasure an outer body, and by increasing the surface diminish them" (TY, 379). Such sharing, though, is "a bit of a farce," as Peggy Pargiter realizes when she talks with a young stranger at the family party that concludes the novel:

She had heard it all before. I, I, I—he went on. . . . But why let him? she thought, as he went on talking. For what do I care about his "I, I, I"? Or his poetry? Let me shake him off then, she said to herself . . . . She paused. He noted her lack of sympathy. He thought her stupid, she supposed. "I'm tired," she apologised. "I've been up all night," she explained. "I'm a doctor—"

The fire went out of his face when she said "I." That's done it—now he'll go, she thought. He can't be "you"—he must be "I." She smiled. For up he got and off he went. (TY, 389)

The fault of the failure does not lie entirely with the young man, nor with Peggy, but with the structures of convention within
which their contact is made; these structures are enshrined in language. Silence is forbidden by convention, but silence can not become the covering over that language is. When silence gapes—“the immense vacancy of the primeval maw”—we must rush to fill the gap: “Somebody has to say something or human society would cease” (TY, 408). Communication is used not to reveal but to conceal the abyss, dispelling silence but preserving the illusion of relationships:

It’s no go, North thought. He can’t say what he wants to say; he’s afraid. They’re all afraid, afraid of being laughed at; afraid of giving themselves away. . . . We’re all afraid of each other, he thought; afraid of what? Of criticism; of laughter; of people who think differently. . . . [in original] . . . That’s what separates us; fear, he thought. (TY, 447, my italics)

Thus far, this account of Woolf’s view of identity and relationship has revealed the horizons within which human beings must inevitably proceed: the limitations of embodiment; of living through time; the constant dispersing of unity; the lack of a tangible center. From a deep dissatisfaction with relationship and communication arises a drive to find meaning in solitude. Solitude, however, is repeatedly seen to reveal the nothingness of the ultimate possibility of non-being. To find a secure meaning seems an insoluble problem, at least in the context of the actual world of time and death. If there is any possibility of transcendence, it will be realized in a mode of being totally other than that of the actual world.

Again and again, the movement toward such transcendence in Woolf’s fiction begins with a radical questioning of actual life:

She was alone with Eleanor in the cab. And they were passing houses. Where does she begin, and where do I end? she thought. . . . [in original] On they drove. They were two living people, driving across London; two sparks of life enclosed in two separate bodies; and those sparks of life enclosed in two separate bodies are at this moment, she thought, driving past a picture palace. But what is this moment; and what are we? The puzzle was too difficult for her to solve it. She sighed. (TY, 360)

With the conditions of her inquiry into human being outlined as they have been, it would appear that Woolf’s work is profoundly pessimistic. However, her fiction does offer the opportunity for transcendence. We should now gather some of the
hints that have appeared in discussing identity and relationship and focus on the development of Woolf's aesthetic. Her idea of 'reality' cannot be grasped without an understanding of the transformative modes of her art, in which the paradigm of the "empty center" forms a link between the worlds of lived experience and of art in the formal structuring it receives in her fiction.