CHAPTER SIX
‘REALITY’

THUS FAR I HAVE BEEN MORE CONCERNED WITH THE ACTUAL CONTEXT within which Woolf’s sense of a special ‘reality’ is felt than with the nature of that ‘reality’ itself. The apprehension of a numinous ‘reality’ has usually manifested itself as a yearning for transcendence of the world of time and death on the part of a particular character, or a suggestion in the narrative structure of an abstract “gap” in actual life that cannot be directly referred to in language, but is certainly a potential experience of human being. ‘Reality’ was something particular to Woolf that she felt she (and other writers) could better apprehend than most people. Her solitary experiences in Sussex were religious in character (“The country is like a convent. The soul swims to the top.” [D, 2 August 1924]). In this and the following two chapters, the nature of Woolf’s sense of “something more” to life will be elucidated.

In her fiction, and in numerous essays and sketches, Woolf vacillates between faith in a meaningful world and a sense of life’s absurdity, of a world in which human beings are blown aimlessly about. This tension in the work has been noted already several times; it is mapped in great variety in all her writing, in imagery, thought, form, theme, and conception. There is a desire to be lyrical, to find and interpret meaning (in the sense of finding some base on which life can stand), to answer the questions repeated by many characters with an affirmation of purpose; against this works a profound pessimism that believes human effort to be a sham, a pretence that saves us from an abyss of nothingness, bottomlessness. Another of those summer diary entries, made at Rodmell, illuminates the two sides of the conflict in Woolf’s thinking:

And so I pitched into my great lake of melancholy. Lord how deep it is! What a born melancholic I am! The only way I keep afloat is by working.
Directly I stop working I feel that I am sinking down, down. And as usual, I feel that if I sink further I shall reach the truth. That is the only mitigation; a kind of nobility. Solemnity. I shall make myself face the fact that there is nothing—nothing for any of us. Work, reading, writing are all disguises; & relations with people. Yes, even having children would be useless.

Well all this [planning The Waves] is of course the "real" life; & nothingness only comes in the absence of this (D, 23 June 1929)

The struggle between faith and despair is the heart of Woolf's thought, the impulse behind her fiction: it arises from the question of the nature of "human centrality" which, Georges Poulet writes, is "essentially religious" (Circle, 95).

There is the sense in Woolf's work (the work of an avowed atheist) of an immanent beyond: "By conviction an atheist perhaps, he is taken by surprise with moments of extraordinary exaltation" (MD, 63). Pressing on the world of the novels is a mystery, glimpsed only in fleeting moments, in solitude. Although she describes the endless modalities of human being, it seems to me that Woolf's effort is at the same time to express her perception of a 'reality' that transcends all modalities and gives them their being. This abstract 'reality' is not bound by the spatiotemporal horizons of actual human life, but is distinguished from mysticism by its rootedness in lived experience.

Her ideas of 'reality' and the soul can, though, readily be construed as theological; indeed, it is difficult to speak of the import of the novels if words such as "spirit," "visionary," and "mystery" are not secularized (which requires a considerable mental effort). In those extracts from her diary kept at Rodmell that have already been quoted, a religious tone that is unavoidable when she writes of 'reality' and the soul is very evident.

There is an opposition in Woolf's thinking between the symbolical, inclusive, intuitive, and nondiscursive mode of thought that seems particularly female, and the masculine style of rationality and logic, which tends to exclude. It is this counterbalancing that prevents her thought from being merely mystical, rooting it firmly in actual experience. The roots of this fundamental opposition may be found in her early life. Leslie Stephen, who married into the heart of the Clapham Sect, was one of the leading agnostic thinkers of his time—a time when
agnosticism was a widely-held position, supported by Darwin’s theories. Woolf later wrote of her frustration at the lack of “imagination” in her father and his agnostic friends. This dryness was inherited by the young men of her own circle of friends; “the fourth generation of the Clapham Sect,” as Noel Annan calls them did, though, reject the moral code of their forebears.

In “Old Bloomsbury” (ca. 1922) Woolf wrote that “Moore’s book had set us all discussing philosophy, art, religion” (MOB, 168). In The Voyage Out, Helen Ambrose takes Principia Ethica on the Euphrosyne, reading as she embroiders “a sentence about the Reality of Matter or the Nature of Good.” Despite the mockery of Apostolic fervor in her first novel, the Cambridge friends of Woolf’s youth were an influence hard to ignore. The significance of G. E. Moore to those who surrounded Woolf in the years following her father’s death can be assessed from the following remarks:

The tremendous influence of Moore and his book upon us came from the fact that they suddenly removed from our eyes an obscuring accumulation of scales, cobwebs, and curtains, revealing for the first time to us, so it seemed, the nature of truth and reality, of good and evil and character and conduct, substituting for the religions and philosophical nightmares, delusions, hallucinations in which Jehovah, Christ, and St. Paul, Plato, Kant, and Hegel had entangled us, the fresh air and pure light of plain common sense. (Leonard Woolf, An Autobiography; 93)

It was exciting, exhilarating, the beginning of the renaissance, the opening of a new heaven on a new earth, we were the forerunners of a new dispensation, we were not afraid of anything. (Maynard Keynes, My Early Beliefs in Rosenbaum, ed., The Bloomsbury Group: 52)

Keynes also provides a clue as to why Woolf may have been repelled by Moore’s ethics:

Like any other branch of science, it was nothing more than the application of logic and rational analysis to the material presented as sense-data. Our apprehension of good was exactly the same as our apprehension of green . . .

If it appeared under cross-examination that you did not mean exactly anything, you lay under a strong suspicion of meaning nothing whatever. (ibid., 54, 56)

Bishop Butler provides Moore’s epigraph to Principia
**Ethica:** “Everything is what it is, and not another thing.” As an epigraph to what I understand as Woolf’s “philosophy,” and against Moore’s, we might set this:

So that was the Lighthouse, was it?

No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other was the Lighthouse too. (772, 286)

The Moorean universe, endorsed by such as Russell and Keynes, is continually questioned by the novels. The actual world is the context in which apprehension of the numinous occurs, suggesting that reality—the nature of which was plain enough to Leonard Woolf—is to be questioned deeply. Moore’s system, to Woolf, was one more attempt to cover over the emptiness at the heart of life. Philosophies and religions for the most part attempt to order life; they do not explore it as her art does, with recognition of the nothingness that human being opposes and yet ultimately succumbs to. From her perspective on human experience, Woolf quickly arrives at the paradoxical character of human being that inspires the invention of unifying systems. From *The Voyage Out* onward, she sees religion as a deadening restriction that cuts people off from the very “invisible presences” (*MD*, 138) it pretends to reach. In an early essay, “Reading,” she lamented the enclosure of thought by faith in an external deity:

What, one asks, as considerations accumulate, is ever to stop the course of such a mind, unroofed and open to the sky? Unfortunately, there was the Deity. His faith shut in his horizon. Sir Thomas himself resolutely drew that blind. His desire for knowledge, his eager ingenuity, his anticipations of truth, must submit, shut their eyes, and go to sleep. Doubts he calls them. “More of these no man hath known than myself; which I confess I conquered, not in a martial posture, but on my knees.” So lively a curiosity deserved a better fate. (*CDB*, 173)

A God makes the world one and indivisible, but denies the curious antinomies of the actual experience of human being, falsely reconciling them, and providing a means of escape from the ultimate horizon of death through the consolation of eternal life.

Pascal wrote of the human situation as being like that of a man who wakes on a desert island, not knowing where or when he is (*Pensees*, 88). This man, Georges Poulet remarks, is “not without a tragic resemblance to the Heideggerian or Sartrian be-
ing,” and the moment is mirrored also at the beginning of Proust’s *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu* (*Circle*, 33). The fading away of the sense of individual identity is a familiar experience in the novels that has been noted several times. Wonder at simply being at all is the starting point of Woolf’s exploration of the human situation: “She was next overcome by the unspeakable queerness of the fact that she should be sitting in an armchair, in the morning, in the middle of the world. Who were the people moving in the house—moving things from one place to another? And life, what was that? . . . She was overcome with awe that things should exist at all” (*TVO*, 145). Thrown into the world like dice (*MD*, 15), each individual must somehow come to terms with the fact of being: “Then (she had felt it only this morning) there was the terror; the overwhelming incapacity, one’s parents giving it into one’s hands, this life, to be lived to the end, to be walked with serenely; there was in the depths of her heart an awful fear” (*MD*, 203).

The radical astonishment at simply being that many of Woolf’s characters display is also recorded in the author’s diary at several points. It is in *Mrs. Dalloway* that the apprehension of an abstract ‘reality’ is first strongly felt. The entire day of the novel is circumscribed by an aura of mystery that promises a revelation that will console Clarissa (in particular) in her perception of the “emptiness about the heart of life” (35). The “inner meaning” is only almost expressed, but it is enough to sustain Clarissa’s faith in life and renew her efforts to find a solid purpose in it. Woolf, as I have suggested (p. 97), is in the position of the “solitary traveller” of Peter Walsh’s dream. Despite our inability to know anything absolutely or to reach any resting-place in our actual lives, we continue to hover at the entrance to the cavern of mystery, making up the stories that become religions and philosophies.

There is an entry in the diary—made early in the composition of *To the Lighthouse*—in which Woolf records her own wonder at being, and also writes very directly about her special sense of ‘reality’. It is particularly interesting in the light of what was said in chapter 2 about Clarissa and Mrs. Ramsay’s experiences of the soul, to note that ‘reality’ is apparently synonymous with “beauty”: 
As for the soul: why did I say I would leave it out? I forget. And the truth is, one can’t write directly about the soul. Looked at, it vanishes: but look at the ceiling, at Grizzle, at the cheaper beasts in the Zoo which are exposed to walkers in Regents Park, & the soul slips in. It slipped in this afternoon. I will write that I said, staring at the bison: answering L. absentmindedly; but what was I going to write? . . .

. . . I enjoy almost everything. Yet I have some restless searcher in me. Why is there not a discovery in life? Something one can lay hands on & say “This is it?” My depression is a harassed feeling—I’m looking; but that’s not it—that’s not it. What is it? And shall I die before I find it? Then (as I was walking through Russell Sqre last night) I see the mountains in the sky: the great clouds; & the moon which is risen over Persia; I have a great & astonishing sense of something there, which is “it”—It is not exactly beauty that I mean. It is that the thing is in itself enough: satisfactory; achieved. A sense of my own strangeness, walking on the earth is there too: of the infinite oddity of the human position; trotting along Russell Sqre with the moon up there, & those mountain clouds. Who am I, what am I, & so on: these questions are always floating about in me; & then I bump against some exact fact—a letter, a person, & come to them again with a great sense of freshness. And so it goes on. But, on this showing which is true, I think, I do fairly frequently come upon “it”; & then feel quite at rest. (D. 27 February 1926)

This entry brings to mind both Clarissa’s tending to the sky above her house (MD, 204) and Mrs. Ramsay’s seeking a world of beauty in nature (TTL, 101); and, again, the state of rest is achieved.

There is also an echo here of an essay on "Montaigne" which was written during the composition of Mrs. Dalloway (in 1924). The mystery of life seems intimately bound up with the mystery of self as an absolute, conclusive center. In the essay Woolf writes of the soul, saying it is “all laced about with nerves and sympathies which affect her every action”; none, however, know “how she works or what she is except that of all things she is the most mysterious, and one’s self the greatest monster and miracle in the world” (CR I, 96). Behind this rather playful essayist’s tone can be detected the overriding concern of the novels, which surfaces at the essay’s conclusion:

But, as we watch with absorbed interest the enthralling spectacle of a soul living openly beneath our eyes, the question frames itself, Is pleasure the end of all? Whence this overwhelming interest in the nature of the soul? Why this
overmastering desire to communicate with others? Is the beauty of this world
enough, or is there, elsewhere, some explanation of the mystery? To this
what answer can there be? There is none. There is only one more question:
“Que sais-je?” (CR I, 97)

“Movement and change are the essence of our being” she wrote
in the same essay (CR I, 90); the circular movement of the con-
cclusion is typical also of the novels. The circle, as Poulet amply
demonstrates, is the form under which thinking about self (as
absolute) or God inevitably takes place.

An unobtrusive moment in To the Lighthouse reveals the
scope of Woolf’s thought and exemplifies much of what has
been discussed so far; it can be taken as a paradigm of the
movement between center and circumference as which the ten-
sion between faith and despair might be imaged.

One of the Ramsay children, Nancy, broods alone over a
rock-pool, then raises her eyes to look across the sea to the ho-

rizon (118-19). Her sense of vastness and littleness recalls an
important fragment of Pascal’s entitled Disproportion of Man
(Pensées, 88). The contrast between human being and nature
has been given significance from The Voyage Out onward (es-
pecially noticeable in that first novel are the shifts of horizon and
perspective occasioned by the setting). In that contrast Pascal
finds the medium by which one can, in the words of his chapter’s
title, make the “transition from knowledge of man to knowledge
of God” (Pensées, 87). To understand the human situation, says
Pascal, is to despair: to escape from this despair we must pass to
knowledge of God. “Nature is an infinite sphere whose centre is
everywhere and circumference nowhere. In short it is the great-
est perceptible mark of God’s omnipotence that our imagination
should lose itself in that thought.” (89). Virginia Woolf does not
roof in Nancy’s thought with a similar recourse to a deity, but
faces the conception of all human being reduced to nothingness
when set against infinity. Nancy is “bound hand and foot” be-
tween the two extremes, and, as Pascal writes, trembles at being
suspended between “these two abysses of infinity and nothing-
ness” (Pensées, 90). Still following Pascal, Nancy contemplates
these marvels in silence: “So listening to the waves, crouched
over the pool, she brooded.”
For, after all, what is man in nature? A nothing compared to the infinite, a whole compared to the nothing, a middle point between all and nothing, infinitely remote from an understanding of the extremes; the end of things and their principles are unattainably hidden from him in impenetrable secrecy.

Equally incapable of seeing the nothingness from which he emerges and the infinity in which he is engulfed. (*Pensees*, 90)

The ineffable meeting-point of the two extremes, of center and circumference, is for Pascal God: God, then, is a sign for the unattainable. Woolf cannot reconcile the opposites to a unity in this way; she acknowledges the tension, but does not seek the easy resting-place of a deity. "God," to her, is a convenient way of leaping over the limits of language and thought, an imagined transcendence that does away with the anguish and rapture of the search for 'reality.' She is at once close to and far away from a thinker like Pascal: the movement is identical but at the crucial moment she refuses to place her trust in a mystery, to leap out of human being into mystical faith; her thought explodes in tension, does not rest in faith in a supernatural agency. Pascal, again, voices the fundamental concerns of Woolf's art when he writes:

Such is our true state. That is what makes us incapable of certain knowledge or absolute ignorance. We are floating in a medium of vast extent, always drifting uncertainly, blown to and fro; whenever we think we have a fixed point to which we can cling and make fast, it shifts and leaves us behind; if we follow it, it eludes our grasp, slips away, and flees eternally before us. Nothing stands still for us. This is our natural state and yet the state most contrary to our inclinations. We burn with desire to find a firm footing, an ultimate, lasting base on which to build a tower rising up to infinity, but our whole foundation cracks and the earth opens up into the depth of the abyss. (*Pensees*, 92)

Pascalian anguish is countered in the novels by the thought that it is this very hopelessness that makes human being so exhilarating and unique; it is the journey over the abyss that gives life purpose, the restless seeking after 'reality.' While Pascal stays on the human plane, his thought and that of the novels exactly correspond; he is, as most are, lured away from the human by the "essentially religious" character of human centrality. The mind that speaks the novels allows itself no resting-place from which to view human being, and thus the basic question is restated by the very form of the art. The free-spinning mind can never con-
clude, can never create a whole because wholeness can arise only from a fixed point: there can be no center to infinity or nothingness and so all wholes are illusory. Pascal writes that man can never know the whole of which he is a part; he assumes there is a whole because he has faith in his God; Woolf is not so sure.

The moments of "rest" that Woolf records in her diary, and that such characters as Mrs. Ramsay experience, are but brief glimpses of the rich potential of human imagination that cannot be sustained in the actual world. The novels (and diary) display Pascalian dread in the face of an irresolvable problem, but they never give in entirely or permanently to that dread: their joy is in being able to achieve that state of dread or anxiety. In the movement to despair, hope is renewed; a wavelike rhythm that informs all the novels.

That "philosophy" with which Woolf is engaged in Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse is extremely abstruse. However, in Orlando its lineaments can be discerned with a clarity that, though lacking the poetic force of the other works, is helpful in unravelling their more complex moments. Orlando shares Clarissa Dalloway's feeling of surviving after death by absorption in the "ebb and flow of things" (MD, 11): "She, who believed in no immortality, could not help feeling that her soul would come and go forever with the reds on the panels and the greens on the sofa" (O, 285). This soul, then, bears no resemblance to the Christian idea of the immortal breath of God informing human life. It is what might be described as the "faculty" that apprehends beauty in the world (which, it was noted above, p. 100, seems almost synonymous with 'reality').

Toward the end of the book, Orlando looks down the long tunnel of time that her life has been, but the shock of realizing herself in the present moment, as the clock strikes, instantly dissolves her memories. She is suddenly gripped by tension, for "whenever the gulf of time gaped and let a second through some unknown danger might come with it" (287-88). From that moment when "the whole of her darkened and settled" (282), we should understand that she is "one and entire" (288) and for the first time experiencing time as a passage toward death. It is clear
from what follows that the abstract 'reality' Woolf records her experience of, that Clarissa senses in the sky, and that Mrs. Ramsay gleans from nature, is intimately related to the effort of overcoming the shock of the present experienced as a passage to inevitable death.

Blinking her eyes in a moment of faintness, Orlando shuts off the visible, and "in that moment's darkness . . . was relieved of the pressure of the present":

There was something strange in the shadow that the flicker of her eyes cast, something which (as anyone can test for himself by looking now at the sky) is always absent from the present—whence its terror, its nondescript character—something one trembles to pin through the body with a name and call beauty, for it has no body, is as a shadow without substance or quality of its own, yet has the power to change whatever it adds itself to. (O, 289, my italics)

Here we have the familiar contours of that paradigmatic experience of Woolf's fiction: this abstract, insubstantial "shadow" (or beauty, or 'reality') is nameless; it is a quality absent from the present like that apprehended in the sky (see MD, 204) in which the soul finds rest; it is a transcendence of the passage of time. This "beauty" is an ordering quality, giving shape to experience, composing what Orlando has seen into "something tolerable, comprehensible" (O, 289), or, it might be said, into pattern. Throughout the oeuvre a state of rhythmic rest gives rise to the psychic perception of pattern: Clarissa sewing, Mrs. Ramsay knitting, Lily painting, Lucy Swithin "one-making"—these women perceive a pattern behind daily life, a harmony that contrasts with male methodolatry, theorizing, and system-making. Rhythm, rest, and loss of identity, silence, darkness, and namelessness are the common features of this primary experience in the fiction and are common to "self-awareness" and apprehension of 'reality.'

In the darkness of the mind in solitude is a pool "where things dwell in darkness so deep that what they are we scarcely know" (O, 290). The style of Orlando (see above, p. 36) enables Woolf to come directly at ideas in a way that would seem strained in another work. It is in this "part furthest from sight" where things are unnamed (O, 290) that the "shadow" of beauty is received, becoming a pool that reflects all that is seen. What
she describes is a sort of psychic sight that apprehends not objects but their "beauty": the thing itself; the beauty of the world that cannot be fixed with a name. In this state, of the apprehension of the numinous, art and religion arise, those efforts to overcome life in time. The actual objects of the visible world remind Orlando of the present, and thus, a tension is introduced between the actual and the transcendent world of beauty. This tension is necessary if mysticism is to be avoided. The danger of the tendency to mysticism is described in *Mrs. Dalloway*, in that passage about the "solitary traveller": "Such are the visions which ceaselessly float up, pace beside, put their faces in front of, the actual thing; often overpowering the solitary traveller and taking away from him the sense of the earth, the wish to return, and giving him for substitute a general peace" (*MD*, 64). The complacent contemplation of nature and the dangerous mysticism it can lead to will be the focus of the next chapter. Orlando experiences brief moments in which she seems to live her memory, but she is constantly anchored in the actual world of time by the visible world around her (*O*, 291).

In darkness, when the myriad details of actual life are obscured, it is easier to "see" "where things shape themselves and to see in the pool of the mind now Shakespeare, now a girl in Russian trousers" (*O*, 294). 'Reality' is not bound by the particular, named world, and yet inheres in that world. The possibility of transcendence that Woolf offers is not an *actual* possibility, in the sense that it cannot share the modes of being established for identities in the actual world. The being of that abstract 'reality' that Orlando perceives in darkness, that Clarissa feels in the sky, and Mrs. Ramsay tends to in nature, is evidently intimately bound up with the question of the temporality of human being, to which we must now turn.