

*Orsolya Frank:*

## EPISTEMOLOGY AND EXISTENTIAL THOUGHT IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S MATURE NOVELS<sup>1</sup>

Virginia Woolf is usually seen as a sophisticated upper middle class lady writer whose work is ethereal, poetic and highly detached, either beautiful or irritating, but in any case bearing little real relevance to the world at large as a social, political, constructive unit. What it was that still made her work part of the institutional canon is never really easy to understand against the background of such a general evaluation. Whatever relevance her work still has to real life is supposed to be either of an autobiographical or of a feminist nature, whatever novelty it brings to literature to be merely stylistic. She may have contributed to the reinvigoration of the novel form within the High Modernist movement but in fact little of the general philosophical application of that shift in literary paradigm is projected back into readings of her novels. In other words, the idea that Woolf's works be read as texts with a serious philosophical purport has only rarely emerged. This is partly due to the traditional divide between literature and philosophy in the Anglo-Saxon academic tradition and partly to the fact that Woolf's philosophical thought is not overt or professional, it does not use jargon, and her philosophical bearing is fundamentally non-English or anti-English.

One of the few indications that a philosophical reading or re-reading might be justified and necessary, came from a 1974 essay by Tony Inglis, called *Virginia Woolf and English culture* which Rachel Bolwby still found necessary to reprint in

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<sup>1</sup> This is the revised text of a lecture given at the Department of the Philosophy of Science, Sorbonne University, Paris, in February 1995.

the early 1990's.<sup>2</sup> Inglis sees European Modernism as basically an epistemological paradigm and highlights Woolf's weighty part in the philosophical statements that this movement made. In his lecture, which was, characteristically, addressed to a French audience, Inglis states that the reason for the insufficient philosophical evaluation of Woolf's work results from the nature of English culture itself, particularly its traditional insularity.

Another indication came from Michele Barrett's introductory essay to her edition of Woolf's *Essays, Assessments and Arguments*.<sup>3</sup> Here the sociologist Barrett analyses Woolf's stance within the feminist movement as part of a wider, coherent body of philosophical as well as social thought that Woolf developed in her novels and non-fictional writings.

The focus of my examination in this paper is on Woolf's ideas concerning the position and prospects of knowledge and understanding within the wider ontological pattern, as they develop in three of her mature novels, *To the Lighthouse*<sup>4</sup>, *The Waves*<sup>5</sup> and *Between the Acts*<sup>6</sup>. The interpreter's situation and the status of the following statements is especially difficult since we are discussing a body of work which on the one hand clearly warrants a philosophical reading but on the other does not rely on concrete points of reference, names, forces or schools within the philosophical profession. It is part of Woolf's mastery to protect the novel from any generic, stylistic or other aesthetical violation and yet to contain finely elaborated abstract ideas. But this also presents an abyss between text and reading over which the interpretative process becomes the walking of a tightrope. I walk it in the conviction that tightropes inevitably lead somewhere, from one firm endpoint to another.

Further caution follows from Eliot's statement, that "Poetry is not a substitute for philosophy".<sup>7</sup> I am hoping to do more than just comply with this: I am hoping to show that the valorization of dilettantism, of literature's own specific vision as opposed to philosophy's as it happens in *To the Lighthouse*

2 Tony Inglis: "Virginia Woolf and English Culture," in *Virginia Woolf*, ed. Rachel Bowlby (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 46-60.

3 *Virginia Woolf on Women and Writing: Her Essays, Assessments and Arguments*, Selected and introduced by Michele Barrett (London: The Woman's Press Ltd., 1979), pp. 1-39.

4 Virginia Woolf: *To the Lighthouse*. 1927; (rpt. London: Granada, 1977)

5 Virginia Woolf: *The Waves*. 1931; rpt. London: The Hogarth Press, 1963

6 Virginia Woolf: *Between the Acts*. 1941; rpt Oxford: OUP, 1992

7 T. S. Eliot: "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca" 1927; rpt. in T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), p. 137.

contains a meaningful warning addressed at professional philosophy in the form of anxious reflection coming from outside.

Virginia Woolf herself never studied philosophy, in fact she never went to school at all. All she ever learnt was to read and to write. Mrs Ramsay, the main female character in *To the Lighthouse*, also carries that ostentatious ignorance which is a strong motif in all of Woolf's novels. Her husband, Mr Ramsay, on the contrary, is not only a learned man but a philosopher, a professional and institutional philosopher, with all the necessary props, lectures, disciples, a career to consider and with an aura respected by all around him: he is the man whose task is philosophy. In the very set-up of the situation an opposition of knowledge and ignorance is stated which should make the reader suspicious.

The opposing dispositions of wife and husband reveal themselves very well in a close reading of the first one and a half pages of the novel. In a germinal form Woolf contrasts here two understandings of language, and two corresponding concepts of truth. From this little section it emerges that Mr Ramsay is an uncompromising champion of what he holds to be true. But his truth is one that does not accommodate metaphor, symbolic speech or exaggeration. His love of truth drives him always to clarify and simplify, he refuses to see the world as a context where everything carries a multitude of meanings, where languages and viewpoints build up into overlapping networks of significances. He refuses to understand what statements, gestures, tones connote. To him words mean their direct and first meaning and nothing else. He has no ear, for example, for the changes of meaning that take place while a sentence reaches from a mother's mouth to a little son's ear:

James Ramsay, sitting on the floor cutting out pictures from the illustrated catalogue of the Army and Navy Stores, endowed the picture of a refrigerator, as his mother spoke, with heavenly bliss. It was fringed with joy. The wheelbarrow, the lawn-mower, the sound of poplar trees, leaves whitening before rain, rooks cawing, brooms knocking, dresses rustling - all these were so coloured and distinguished in his mind that he had already his private code, his secret language, though he appeared the image of stark and uncompromising severity ...

(p. 9.)

Mr Ramsay is "incapable of untruth", and although he is proud of this, to Woolf this inability *means* inability, and untruth means a whole lot more than lying. Mr Ramsay's preoccupation with truth blinds him to the fact that *reality* is

built up of equal parts of truth and untruth and prevents him from examining his own notion of truth and recognizing the significance of the various forms of 'untruth'. His moral stricture springs from the same source as his tyrannical insensitivity and his everyday ineptitude, his existential inadequacy: from the need to reduce the complexity of life around him to handleable formulae. His aim is to schematise and regularise the chaos and complexity around him for practical purposes. The Faustian impulse of his science-based philosophy reveals itself when we notice that his abstractions and categorizations aim at conquering and subjugating things rather than gaining a genuine knowledge of them.

The critique he evokes seems to echo certain aspects of Nietzsche's criticism of the preceding tradition of Western philosophy. By referring to Nietzsche we have started a practice that we shall follow throughout the essay: that of naming points of reference in order to outline something like a philosophical *hinterland* to Woolf's ideas. This tentative treatment is invited by the sensitive interpretative situation that Woolf's novels engender. We cannot name concrete influences on the author, but we certainly pin down our reading with a set of associations from the history of philosophy that are evoked by and stand in timeless conversation with the ideas that are present in Woolf's own work.

The notions of truth and language outlined in the first passage of *To the Lighthouse* are extended in the further course of the novel. Woolf uses a set of emblems or trademarks which identify Mr Ramsay's philosophical affiliations. These sporadic instances are the closest she ever comes to revealing acquaintance with philosophical terminology. These references are accurate and well-placed in the overall philosophical network of the novel. The trademarks, dispersed through various parts of the novel are the following: the image of a table "when you're not there" (p. 26.), the subject-object relation (p. 26.), and a description of the way in which Mr Ramsay's mind works: like the keys on a piano or the sequence of the letters of the alphabet (pp. 35-36). The alphabet becomes the decisive image: its letters are the stages of a linear progress through which, step by tortuous step, human thought is working itself toward a definite end. If human thought, ruminates Mr Ramsay, has reached the letter P, and he were to contribute the letter Q, he would become famous and everlasting.

Woolf's terms of definition are loose enough to bring under scrutiny a whole wide tradition of European post-Cartesian or post-Baconian professional philosophy: the tradition that has created that loose popular notion of philosophy which lives in Mrs Ramsay's mind. This naive vision of the

philosophical enterprise and of the figure of the philosopher becomes the narratorial standpoint and the source of wisdom alternative to Mr Ramsay's. This choice of narratorial standpoint, too, smacks of irony from the first: and if it is ironical a reason must be sought for that position.

Woolf does not state whether the facts Mr Ramsay works with are speculative or empirical. We do not know whether his alphabetical or keyboard linearity is a series of inductive or deductive steps. But we do get a clear idea of *method*, in the sense in which both the above mentioned founding fathers of modern European philosophy used it. This is the notion of method which became an unquestioned assumption for European philosophy down to Husserl. Yet, before Husserl was ever born, Nietzsche dealt it such a blow of criticism, which discredited far ahead any unexamined use of the notion of method in philosophy. Nietzsche's critique, as wide as Woolf's if obviously more rigorous, was based on identifying the underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions of an entire tradition, nor was he the last one to identify a vast period of philosophy by its obsession with truth and with method.

The methodical phase of philosophy assumed, in broad terms, that the philosopher's first task was to construct an appropriate method for the search for truth, and then to follow it step by step without going wrong and, if this was successful, finally to access, possess and present the truth. Whether method as such was or was not the way to truth, whether the world itself also followed a method or not, whether we were indeed looking for truth or were doing something totally different, whether truth existed and finally to what end we wanted it, remained unasked questions. What Nietzsche started was not only the asking of these questions but a practice of asking always behind and beyond the intended statement, pushing through to the underlying assumption, the hind thought, the intellectual motivation: he planted the seed which grew up into branches as varied as deconstruction and hermeneutics.

The problem of method can be translated into a question about what we regard as philosophy and what we expect from philosophy. Mr Ramsay's stance seems nearer to the self-identification of 17th c. natural philosophy. It evokes a mathematical, scientific direction of questioning rather than any other. The ideal of method is itself quasi-mathematical: the corrects steps are steps of reduction leading through clearly defined stages to one or two simple figures which can be called the end result. The language of this tradition consists in processes of definition, categorization, reductions and transformations. It inevitably leads to

excluding, omitting or negating things which do not conform to the formula. The perpetual discrepancy between theory and practice is seen as a necessity for achieving the truth. In Bacon's view, for example, these irrelevancies amount to four major groups - the four types of idols, of irrational factors - which cover just about all of our human predicaments, from myth structures, through upbringing and social background, popular prejudices and figures of speech, to the very errors of philosophical reasoning. Only if we eliminate the effect of all these from our thought, can it be called clear thinking. This, however, is only possible in mathematics, logic, and perhaps in the natural sciences and it definitely prevents thought *about* these fallacies, about myth, about dreams, about socialization.

Descartes, too, comes in the *Regulae* to conceive of method as a way of reducing all problems to a comparison of a pair of proportions and, since he also managed to create the link between algebra and geometry, his initial existential impulse thus boils down to the comparison of two quadrangles. I need not point out just how much of the potential scope of philosophical questioning is excluded by an approach which, however badly I exaggerate, carries this kind of idea of truth and method.

Even if Woolf's work is given no more credit than a mere philosophical *mise en scène*, she seems to have felt that philosophy, as practised by the Mr Ramsays of professional philosophy, has turned thought into something detached from its original concern, human life. This has gone so far that even this observation or claim can only be made when clothed in the figure of a supposedly silly and uneducated woman. Mrs Ramsay sees what her husband is doing and makes her simple interjections of 'yes but', which are on the level of 'yes, but what of the poor?' 'what about suffering'? She thinks about her husband's personality, why he does what he does, how it fits in with the economy of his self-esteem, self-image, and what are the balances that enable him to pursue his obsession? It appears to her that philosophy has made thinking absurdly specialised and incommunicable, so much so that her children only have the strangest and vaguest notions of what their father actually does for a living. The figure of the philosopher, too seems to have become a clown: no one could be further from love of wisdom, original questioning and a desire for an understanding of existence in its depth, than this indulged and self-indulgent eccentric whose only endearing feature is that he instinctively admits his wife's superior understanding of the 'practical' things of life. Her questions are awkward, dilettante, and take no notice of boundaries between areas of thought. He, who is disciplined, trained

and truthful accepts all the basic rules of his trade without questioning, most importantly the vision of truth for which he has to search. In this he presages Percival of *The Waves*: the original Percival of the Arthur legends on whom he is based is called upon to go and look for the Holy Grail: he proves willing to die in the act, rather than ask questions about it. Through him the virtue of unquestioning loyalty as a traditional asset of hero-worship is put in a suspicious light. Mr Ramsay's idea of truth is very similar to Percival's vision of the Grail: they are both looking for a solid object which will make itself accessible at the end of a quest, a road or path, on condition that the hero takes the correct steps and does not go astray. Both of them believe that this truth exists as a solid, single, static entity, waiting for them to be found and possessed and, like a commodity, to be traded for fame or wealth or freedom from suffering.

In a passage in the middle part of *To the Lighthouse* Woolf summarises her view according to which this urge to search for order, perfection and finality is an illusion, the result of a human drive which lacks a metaphysical correlative:

In those mirrors, the minds of men, in those pools of uneasy water, in which clouds for ever turn and shadows form, dreams persisted, and it was impossible to resist the strange intimation which every gull, flower, tree, man and woman, and the white earth itself seemed to declare (but if questioned at once to withdraw) that good triumphs, happiness prevails, order rules; or to resist the extraordinary stimulus to range hither and thither in search of some absolute good, some crystal of intensity, remote from the known pleasures and familiar virtues, something alien to the processes of domestic life, single, hard, bright, like a diamond in the sand, which would render the possessor secure.

(p. 123.)

Mrs Ramsay's discontents and anxieties with regard to her husband have all these insights lurking in the background. Her criticism is not systematic or outspoken, it manifests itself in moods and ponderings filled with angst and concern. Yet as Mrs Ramsay's discourse develops, we sense more and more clearly a point of view, a set of values and questions specific to her, and potentially capable of challenging those of her husband. Her thinking, clearly favoured from a narrative point of view, is based on inclusion, expansion, the revision of boundaries between the true and the untrue, the philosophical and the domestic, the serious and the trivial. Through the vehicle of these epistemological insights

inherent in Mrs Ramsay's soliloquies, Woolf re-presents and re-announces an old and long-lost claim on philosophy, that of an engagement with human life.

The language of Mrs Ramsay's internal monologues is essentially different from the language used in relation to Mr Ramsay. Her entire predisposition is symbolic, she talks in a variety of ways which her husband considers untruthful. Her language requires interpretation and is itself always an act of interpretation. We need to recall the way in which the first sentence of the novel spread out into a whole fan of significances and distortions in James' mind. This idea is played out more explicitly in a passage about fifty pages later, in which Mrs Ramsay tells her daughter Cam to go and ask the cook whether their guests had returned from their walk:

... she had to repeat the message twice - ask Mildred if Andrew, Miss Doyle, and Mr Raley have come back? - The words seemed to be dropped into a well, where, if the waters were clear, they were also so extraordinarily distorting that, even as they descended, one saw them twisting about to make Heaven knows what pattern on the floor of the child's mind. What message would Cam give the cook? Mrs Ramsay wondered. And indeed it was only by waiting patiently, and hearing that there was an old woman in the kitchen with very red cheeks, drinking soup out of a basin, that Mrs Ramsay at last prompted the parrot-like instinct which had picked up Mildred's words quite accurately and could now produce them, if one waited, in a colourless singsong. Shifting from foot to foot, Cam repeated the words, 'No they haven't, and I've told Ellen to clear away tea'.

(pp. 53-54)

The importance of the residual, trivial, connoted elements is emphasised in more direct relation to philosophy in the example of the kitchen table. Lily Briscoe has asked James about his father's work. In answer to her question she is told to imagine something like a Platonic idea of a table. But the only thing she can conjure up in her mind is an image similar to Heidegger's poetical phenomenological description of the pair of peasant shoes in *The Origin of the Work of Art*: a particular kitchen table which at the same time contains its entire milieu, its history, its significance.

The repetition of this motif shows a fascination with the gap between abstraction and concretion. It suggests that there is no such thing as a pure fact or a pure statement without an added richness of connotations resulting from context, personality, memory. It is not possible to see something as if you were

not seeing it or to have a thought as if it was not thought by a particular 'you'. In Mrs Ramsay's world there is no sterile reduction to formulae, no separation between what is relevant and what is only the trivial debris of concrete life. Her vision is of something uncontainably rich, mobile, and endless. Her knowledge is a constant interpretation.

The point of view born out by Mrs Ramsay's questions and language is that of concrete existential reality. Her unanswered questions are so many embarrassments to the philosopher. In interpreting the lives and characters, the hopes, efforts and destiny of the people around her she constantly addresses life with direct questions which Mr Ramsay would say you cannot ask in philosophy. Even while she is serving mutton she ponders - to the great dismay of some critics - about the meaning of life. She has a definite vision of life in its finitude and in its returning qualities, features and structures: marriage, family, work, trouble and hardship, pain, loneliness, fear, courage. Her vision is framed by a horizon of death and contingency and the fallibility of reason in the face of them. These, too, Mrs Ramsay wants to make the objects of thinking. Her thought focuses on the trivial and through the trivial ascends to the ultimate beyond.

If her husband finds her questions wrong and sees no connection between them and his own profession, this is due to a long-standing division that the preoccupation with method had created in matters of thought. Phenomena are of two sorts: some are and others are not the stuff of philosophy. This separation had worked with amazing perseverance and Woolf seems to have felt that almost the whole of thinking about ourselves, all the 'women's thoughts' about why we live, how we live and what could we do to 'live differently', in other words all the existential questioning has been declared not the stuff of philosophy. There does not exist a language, she seems to claim, in which these questions can be seriously asked, there is not a scene in which this existential thinking could take place with any authority.

By pointing out this division in thought and gendering the two approaches as she does, Woolf also pioneered one of the most significant theoretical achievements of later feminist writing, namely, the need to break down the barrier in question, and thus make the trivial, the domestic, the private and the bodily accessible to theoretical reflection. This thought remained dominant throughout her thinking and was to assume a further dimension of significance in *Between the Acts* and in *Three Guineas*, two works which we will mention later.

It seems necessary that the sort of reflection on the project of professional philosophy contained in *To the Lighthouse* should come from outside of philosophy, that it should be tentatively made and clothed in an attitude of dilettantism and an ironic use of stereotyped female ignorance. Yet, as we have shown, it was carried through on the level of the epistemological implications of narrative techniques with great consciousness and rigour. The critique contained in *To the Lighthouse* and developed further in the other two novels in discussion may have been asking philosophy the impossible, but it was asking something that needed to be asked and that philosophers had also begun to ask in the wake of Nietzsche. It remains to be considered whether all aspects and consequences of this questioning have been borne out or whether Woolf's was one of the early voices in a modern trans-philosophical dialogue which is still in full vibration.

The tendency to revise our concepts of knowledge, the potentials of philosophical questioning and its relation to the existential sphere, implied a new notion of truth. This could no longer be solid and static, it could no longer be based on exclusion and reduction and a linear approach. It could no longer posit a truth which was simply accessible to a method. The new vision of truth seemed to be based on an endless flow of original questioning which takes the form of commentary and stays always within the neighbourhood of the most vital and radical existential questions. In its language it was to accept and even rely on forms of expression which were not governed by a mathematical ideal of verification but involved the forms of symbolic and paradoxical speech. One of its strong features was to be communication and communicability as opposed to the permanent communication crisis in which we find Mr Ramsay, Percival and the philosophical tradition that they are referential to. In one of her essays Woolf hails the philosophical predecessor to the type of truth that she invokes in the mature novels: Montaigne.<sup>8</sup>

Montaigne is attractive to Woolf because "it is impossible to elicit a plain answer" from him (p. 21). He gathers his truth from all sources, from life, anecdotes, trivia. He is suspicious of clever men and universal statements. His instinct is endlessly to expand rather than limit the scope of his thought and experience. He is a born outsider, his vision of life as incessantly changing and complex leads him to rely on an idea of personal autonomy of judgment and

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<sup>8</sup> V. Woolf: "Montaigne", in *The Common Reader 1933*. Rpt. *The Collected Essays II.*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966)

prevents him from joining his fellow-creatures in any kind of ideological commitment. He is not a teacher or a preacher, in the same way as Woolf claims elsewhere to be not a 'critic', merely a 'reader'.<sup>9</sup>

The notion of knowledge that Woolf finds emerging from Montaigne's essays emphasises an idea of a particular lively sense or tact or taste, a mobile ability of adaptation and adjustment. "Truth can only be known by the well-born soul - l'âme bien née" (p. 21). Truth is thus an existential predicament and not the result of following rules. The well born soul has only one rule which is not to lay down rules, as they are "mere convention, utterly unable to keep in touch with the vast variety and turmoil of human experience" (p. 23). Woolf learns from Montaigne that knowledge is not teachable, for it is a way of life: a constant exercise of an autonomous sense of judgment by "those who have a private life", who are guided by "another monitor, an invisible censor within, 'un patron au dedans' whose blame is much more to be dreaded than any other because he knows the truth. (...) This is the judge to whom we must submit, this is the censor who will help us achieve that order which is the grace of a well-born soul" (p. 23). This type of knowledge cannot be detached from the particular human being herself or himself. The idea that knowledge and convictions are inseparable from the total individuality of the thinker disappeared with Montaigne and was not heard of again until Nietzsche. It was the latter philosopher who first attacked as one of "the prejudices of philosophers"<sup>10</sup> the claim that correct rational thought follows a universally valid order and revealed the ways in which self-interest, psychological self-justification or socialist pre-conceptions determined the use of reason from person to person. In Montaigne's thought the separation of knowledge from life had not taken place. For him wisdom can take no other form but life wisdom, philosophy has no other dimension but existential philosophy. The vision of truth that he posits in the pursuit of life wisdom is similarly mobile and dialogic to Woolf's as represented in *To the Lighthouse* and in *The Waves*. Woolf emphasises the communicative element in Montaigne's thinking: "communication is health, communication is truth, communication is happiness". "To communicate is our chief business; (...) and reading, not to acquire

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9 V. Woolf: "How should one read a book?" in *The Common Reader: Second Series*. 1932., rpt. in Virginia Woolf: *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*, ed. Rachel Bowlby (London: Penguin, 1993)

10 Fr. Nietzsche: *Beyond Good and Evil*, Part One: On the Prejudices of Philosophers, trans. and ed. R. J. Hollingdale, (London: Penguin, 1973)

knowledge, not to earn a living, but to extend our intercourse beyond our own time and province" (p. 23). Truth is as rich as life, "for nothing matters except life; and of course order" (p. 22).

The two approaches to life and thinking represented in *To the Lighthouse* by Mr and Mrs Ramsay seem to act as complementarities rather than mutually exclusive alternatives in the first third of that novel. But we might suspect that the balance is precarious. Later on in *To the Lighthouse* this balance begins to erode and, as the opposition returns in varied forms in the later novels, it continues shifting, until in *Between the Acts* a cataclysmic state of imbalance sets in. This play between balance and disaster foregrounds another, a social and historical aspect already latently present in the initial theoretical problem.

Mr Ramsay's figure, the summary image of the dominant theoretical hegemony, is the product of a long process. His wife's cautious conservatism suggests that our value judgment of Mr Ramsay must not be simplistic: Mrs Ramsay admires men, her husband among them, because they negotiate treaties, rule India and run the country. By 'men' Mrs Ramsay identifies a particular social impulse as well as a particular way of thinking. This heroic but civilised stereotype of masculinity is the token of social order and legitimacy, the liveability of our lives in ordered patterns, the protection from chaos, the heroic effort of keeping at bay the forces of irrationality and destruction of which she is so acutely aware. The enlightened benevolence of men's actions is in many cases indubitable.

Woolf likes to think in sets of values connected by basic underlying ideas. Thus the philosophical ideas that lie at the basis of 'men's' thought and actions have their ramifications in other spheres. One of these, the ruling of India, is an old topos in English literature. Only in the period of High Modernism, however, did it become an acknowledged symbol of imposition without understanding, of false superiority, of unexamined oppositions of good and bad, order and disorder. The men who rule India impose their system of understanding on something whose own nature they do not bother to penetrate. They see, i.e. control, it as irrational and disordered. They can only do this by closing their eyes to a great part of that reality. The structure of this attitude is the same as we saw in the analysis of method-based philosophy. A similar idea also fuels men's efforts at running society 'for us': the belief that a social order based on a rational effort is possible, that society functions according to a finite number of rational laws which might finally lead to the perfect society. This belief, again, is only possible

by a separation of the rational from the irrational, by the exclusion of an element of chaos and contingency, by the reduction of reality to a number of formulae. Naturally, such reductions are necessary, they help create a semblance of a liveable-in society. By this ignorance and naiveté 'men' create something that 'women' can take for granted. At the same time Mrs Ramsay is full of misgivings: she sees the sterility and inappropriacy of men's activities, their blindness to 'the real questions', and she feels a strong foreboding that they are going to lose, that this blindness cannot buy them their goals - it is more likely to cause their undoing.

The complex of 'men's' hopes, convictions and aims, centering around reason, progress, science and, technology is clearly the continuation of the European tradition of the enlightenment which assumed one of its many versions in British Victorianism. Some of their ideas deserve an ironic intonation while others do not. The duality of acceptance and criticism in which Mr and Mrs Ramsay live is to a certain degree still the determining predicament of our life today. We reject the metaphysical and epistemological underpinnings of the enlightenment tradition. We have seen its dismal failure, and commentary on the nature and causes of this failure takes up a great part of 20th c. writing. At the same time we find it hard to posit aims other than those old Victorian, old enlightenment aims and we find it difficult to base these efforts on anything but the same, if somewhat more shaky, faith in reason. We carry on ambitious efforts to create liveable-in societies and even wider federations of societies, through rational effort; we perpetuate the idea of the systematic perfectibility of the human being and the value of positive knowledge by our education system, we take for granted the forward moving dynamism of progress in our everyday contact with technology, and associating life quality with the possession of material assets, we go on collecting and systematizing knowledge, we try and urge ourselves to make one co-ordinated global effort to save the ecological balance of Earth.

Woolf's vision of the search for perfection and order is complex: she sees it as necessary, beneficial up to a point, but harmful beyond that, doomed to failure, based on an illusion yet inevitably, fundamentally human. Mr Ramsay's missionary optimism keeps the world going, but the authorial voice takes the side of Mrs Ramsay's pessimism. It is implicit, and is reinforced in the cosmic visions of the following two novels, that the mission will fail but will always reawaken, that the pulsation of ambition and failure, the repetition of these cycles is in some

way the pre-destined course of human effort. In *The Waves*, the use of the temporal cycles and the rise and fall of the waves puts the ebb and flow of human effort is put on a cosmic footing, makes human nature seem but part of a universal rhythm.

The dichotomy of faith and misgiving and the relationship between the two conceptions of truth determine the structure of *To the Lighthouse*. The novel has a double ending, partly it suggests a state of balance, and partly a process of erosion which presages the destruction of the feminine mode of thought by the masculine.

The last lines are on a note of balance. The painter Lily Briscoe exclaims: 'I have had my vision', and completes a painting created to perfection by a stroke of symmetry. The couple themselves seem to be in harmony only as long as Mrs Ramsay is alive. But after the tenuous balance of the first part, W. W. I. takes place, Mrs Ramsay dies, their son Andrew falls in battle, and their daughter Prue, who promised to become heir to Mrs Ramsay's spirit, is also dead by the end of the middle section. Nobody is left to believe in Mr Ramsay any more. And in the final section Mr Ramsay destroys the lighthouse as a symbol.

Woolf said that the lighthouse was not a symbol *of* something: it was a focal point around which the book coheres, an image to unify the design. Generally, it is the function of a symbol to grasp and make permanent and communicable a complex of meaning otherwise fleeting and un-nameable. The choice of object for this function should not be accidental. A lighthouse is a source of light or illumination, and a point of orientation. It is an object on which people keep their eyes during their manoeuvres on the treacherous waters, something that gives guidance from afar. Mrs Ramsay admired it from the distance: it reminded her during the day's work of a certain dimension of thought and it served as an altar on which she laid these most intimate and profound thoughts. To the child James it meant an object of desire: a dream whose loss planted in him the first seeds of disillusioned adulthood. Eventually Mr Ramsay, to whom everything is an obstacle to overcome, resolves to conquer the lighthouse. In an atmosphere of after-ness, of ruin and desolation he decides to take James there, even though by now this is against the boy's wish. Mr Ramsay in fact turns the once desired dream journey into a voyage of hatred, incomprehension, irritation and disillusionment. Viewed from a direct closeness, the lighthouse is a heap of ugly grey stone. Going to the lighthouse does not give pleasure. It does not fulfil but rather extinguishes and desecrates the desire which it had engendered from afar: it turns out that the significance was in the distance itself, distance was part of the

adequate relation to the lighthouse. In a last and most typical act of incomprehension Mr Ramsay treads into the heart of the symbolism that carried all Mrs Ramsay's values and meaning. And, characteristically, this act of his, like all the others, is rooted in misconceived and unreflecting but definite benevolence.

The structure of desire and extinction, distance, respect and orientation which Mr Ramsay misunderstands is also inherent in the problem concerning the Victorian rationality which he represents.

The set of ideas of perfection which governed the rationalist project, both practical and philosophical, were eschatological ideals, their attainment would bring the suffering of humanity to an end. Because of a faith in perfectibility, in a finite form of truth and the total competency of reason and method, these ideas were inevitably presented as attainable, and implied a definite metaphysics of their own. This latter made it impossible to see these ideas of perfection as useful fictions, lighthouses to guide man on an ocean of necessary and unalterable imperfectibility. The direct and belligerent pursuit of these ideas at the cost of an ontological falsification, had to lead to their destruction. At the moment when culmination was expected, the ignored contingency and uncontrollable, irreducible superabundance of reality revealed itself and the treacherous inconsistency of supposedly linear progress became undeniable. The totality of this destruction is presented in *Between the Acts* where the continuity is established between the enlightenment project and the total collapse in W. W. II. In the sequence of *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves* and *Between the Acts* Woolf explores this continuity of distortion, giving due respect to the original notions but also providing an understanding which makes the process of disintegration seem inevitable. The three novels are built partly on a fluidity between the different strata such as creative technique, philosophical vision, social action and politics and partly on a continuous shifting of the relations of these along the chronological axis. In this sense history provided Woolf with an exceptionally intelligible stretch of time within which to create her oeuvre.

The unresolved tension at the end of *To the Lighthouse* sets the parameters for *The Waves*. This is the novel of the generation maturing in the early years of the 20th century which is determined by the shock of post-Victorian disillusionment and a vacuum of social or communal ideals. Thus it is not surprising that the book is almost entirely dedicated to developing the feminine model of truth on the level of six introspective individuals forming a small community. The role of art becomes highlighted as the scene of existential reflection and at the same time

the crisis of traditional art forms is indicated. The linear vision of civilization is replaced by cyclic movement, cognition is presented as an endless flow of all-inclusive dialogue, instead of a systematic occupation with a definite end. This vision relies on Mrs Ramsay's focuses: the sight of the ultimate through the trivial.

In *The Waves* there is no balance any more between faith and disillusionment. The mission of the Victorian world is represented by Percival. His friends, the other six characters, have a strong wish that he should triumph, but they also know with a great certainty that he must lose and are not surprised when after a period of hope he disappoints their expectations.

Percival's mission is threefold. On the plane of legend his task is to find the Holy Grail. On the symbolic level his mission is the cultural mission of the enlightenment. Finally, on the concrete narrative level, his task is part of the social mission of Victorianism: he must go and rule a district of India in the name of the British Empire. The cross-references between the three superimposed cultural strata multiply the possibilities for generating meaning. For example, a distancing mythological light is cast on the missionary consciousness of the Victorians and the clumsy image of the knight in armour lends the heroes of rationalism that naive cartoon-quality which always accompanies historical retrospection.

The Grail motif continues the line of ideas of perfection. It is the vessel of truth, a means to bring the long search for truth to a desired end; a guarantee of moral perfection as it can only fall into the hands of the sinless man; it is also a Christian symbol which brings to the world salvation and rest. Thus Woolf makes Christianity appear as perhaps only one among those structurally related ideas of perfection which became incriminated in *To the Lighthouse*, and which are based on an anthropomorphic urge for totality, unanswered by any real correlative. The use of a quest-myth and the narrator's position of disbelief in that quest re-evokes the philosophical search for a solid and all-perfecting truth. By referring to a myth it points at the atavistic roots and deep anthropomorphic nature of the ambition in question. It also indicates the way in which the search for truth has been mythologised and paradoxically substituted for a pursuit of happiness. On the level of myth, the hero leaves civilization and goes out into the wilderness in order to bring back salvation for the community. Here this structure is subverted, Percival, although his raw and naive heroism is viewed with nostalgia by the disillusioned, mature community, offers no promise of

salvation but those who remained seated at the round table experience moments of deep, though imperfect insight. Their nostalgia is directed at the communal nature of the heroic illusion: they are displaced, strictly private people whose insights and sensitivities only work within a small community. Their maturity is based on insights into imperfection, liminality, relativism, a radical intellectual realism. Their insights can never become the basis for the collective knowledge of a society, societies want heroes, aims, and promises. This is a recognition that already predetermines the structure of *Between the Acts*.

On the concrete and synchronic plane Percival's colonial mission recalls the social and cultural ramifications of the philosophical notions behind his quest. Percival is associated with the social reality of Victorian Britain simply by virtue of being the perfect public school boy. The British public schools were, and still are, private institutions of learning which function as vehicles of a social meaning and serve as the rite of passage to a privileged position in the British class system and establishment. Public school life, ritualised in its every aspect, is shown as already becoming uncomfortable for all the characters of *The Waves* except, of course, for Percival.

Colonial service, one of the habitual continuations of public-school education, was a method for disposing of not-too-bright upper-middle-class boys in such a way that they would not be under much mental strain and could still reap sufficient glory in the service of the empire. The offence to the colonised culture implied in this usage was no longer ignored by the time Woolf wrote *The Waves*. Percival's insensitive domineering attitudes as an Indian civil servant, as well as his satisfaction to remain a chessman in a game whose rules he does not question, recall Mr Ramsay's character. But in *The Waves* the representatives of Mr Ramsay's world even fail to run society, they even fail to rule India. The establishment becomes irrelevant, out of touch, it no longer carries the private person. It seems that the smug self-evidence of the contemporary social order, of the political imposition and the cultural superiority that it entailed also go under with Percival's heavy and graceless fall.

Percival is thus voiceless and unquestioning, his communication problems and his incomprehension are frequently emphasised. The six other characters form a circle of communication in which they canonise a different mode of thought. Their interrelated soliloquies unfold Mrs Ramsay's internal monologue about life into a wide stream of virtual dialogue. They address similar questions in a similar language. We can think back to Montaigne: in order to study the world,

these characters study themselves, to study life they analyze their own lives. For the reader there are six perspectives, six partial, shifting truths, six attempts to reach out and contain everything. The understanding which these characters achieve of their single individualities are so many tributaries to an endless flow of human understanding. To carry on in their widely inclusive fashion the speakers must forego systematization. This process of understanding can never become fixed and completed. There is no way to step out of it and formulate a repetition or a reproduction.

Philosophy, simply by virtue of being a written medium, has always assumed that it can place itself outside of reality in order to duplicate it, while truth, being solid and static, will wait and submit itself to reproduction. But if nothing is to be excluded, if selection is seen as falsification, because the unconscious aspects of selection are more informative than the text, if truth is seen as complex and kinetic, and if it is to be told in its fullness of connotations and significances, it becomes impossible to assume a position of retrospection. That totalization is always partial, secondary and false is a view developed in *To the Lighthouse* and taken for granted in the technique of *The Waves*, thus it remains alien to the figures of this novel.

This situation rests on a latent critique of the relation of subject and object - a philosophical tool actually mentioned in *To the Lighthouse* as one of Mr Ramsay's identifying trademarks. The principle of subject-object opposition assumes the separation of reality into an observing and reproducing subject, and a passive phenomenal world. This conceals a claim that the observing subject comes under different determinations from the rest of reality and represents a solid point outside of its universe. This principle also reflects the traditional assumptions of natural science, according to which scientists can place themselves outside of nature and penetrate into its regularities without contributing something of their personal self or disturbing the original state of the observed reality. The latent humanist assumption is obviously the essential separation of man from nature. In the writings of Woolf and Montaigne, to the contrary, the subject *is* the object of observation, man is the event. The individual is part of the flow of reality, member of all the cosmic cycles: observer and observed, event and its understanding are not separated. The ontological determinations are the epistemological predicaments. No other knowledge is available but existential knowledge.

Woolf believed that art-forms which uphold a claim to realism make a similar unfounded claim to external objectivity. The authors of these works - in one much-quoted essay Woolf calls them materialists - implicitly claim that they are in a position of subject and can capture their object, human life, human character, in an authoritative fashion. They express this claim in all their technical tools but, as Woolf claims, their works fail to fulfil their claim. We have already shown a number of ways in which Woolf revises her technique, drawing the creative consequences of the epistemological standing we have outlined. In fact the epistemological standing is revealed by technique and structure as much as by imagery and statement. By the frequent use of visual references to impressionist and post-impressionist painting she makes use of the results of a similar recognition in the visual arts.

It was a reaction against the dictates of pictorial realism, combined with rigid academism, that made painters openly assume an attitude of depicting personal visions of everyday objects incorporating their subjective associations, emotions or the more complex ideal significance of the object in its representation. By the use of impressionistic visual descriptions, Woolf is presenting a variation on the idea that she already used repeatedly in *To the Lighthouse*. The changes that affect visual reality in the process of perception are similar to the distortion of verbal statements in the process of perception, as we saw in the example of the message Cam gave to the cook. The ambition of artistic realism to present autonomous objects as they are when not observed by anybody i.e. without the admission of subjective perspectivity, is reminiscent of Lily's troubles when she had to imagine a table 'when you are not looking at it'.

A similar consideration had led Woolf in *To the Lighthouse* to substitute traditional dialogue with the analysis of the totality of meaning carried by statements which otherwise sound simple and functional. The characters in *The Waves* no longer even utter the words of traditional dialogue: the author records only the meanings they exchange, and not the words which they happen to choose in order to carry those meanings. The sustaining element of these characters is communication, none of their thoughts exists except in so far as it is addressed to one or more members of the small community. Meaning is constituted in communication, it cannot exist in isolation, only in a system of references, memories, sub-languages and symbols established through a period of time and usage. This ideal exchange of fully comprehended meanings is not just

talk, it is the scene where life can be made sense of without assuming an external standpoint.

This sense-making, as developed in *The Waves* and also in Mrs Ramsay's questioning, has its own utility: its aim is life itself, the self-understanding of the individual, the small and the large community, as part of a history, a family, a nation. It is a living understanding in which there pulses the constant tension of live choices, mysteries, challenges. The idea that knowledge is not there as an item of trading but as something to be had for its own sake, for the sake of life is perhaps the strongest element of the Montaigne heritage in Woolf's thinking. Montaigne seems to have been one of the last people to uphold a synchronic vision whereby life, its understanding, and the use of understanding take place at the same time. It seems that only an existential thought system based on synchronicity and finality as opposed to eschatological expectations, on a recognition of mortality and the unrepeatability of every moment of existence, and on the denial of another world can direct the floodlight of thought back onto this life. Only in this way can we achieve a representation of human life as the cause and the end, the merged subject and object of thought. The idea of salvation and of the attainment of perfection in another world, but also the notion of the human being whom science has freed from all suffering, discomfort or want in this world, imply a division between a real world of imperfection and the promise of something completed beckoning from a messianic land of beyond. The idea of perfection has gone through a number of transformations in Woolf's novels: the lighthouse, the letter Z and everlasting fame, the Holy Grail were all images which carried a belief in attainable perfection and transcendental gratification. What Woolf (and Montaigne) oppose to this is the need to accept transience and imperfection, irrationality and contingency as basic existential and epistemological predicaments which are not transcended but merely accompanied by the continuity of interpretative commentary through the ages, by the totality of history and tradition. This is of course a deeply this-worldly, non-Christian belief and it obviously goes contrary to that deeply eschatological philosophical tradition which based its ontology on a Christian model and usually found a way to accommodate Christian belief in its systems. It is also obvious that it is a demand which has been exiled into dilettantism by hundreds of years of philosophical practice and cannot be seriously pronounced within the quarters of professional theorizing.

In *The Waves*, living existential understanding is the only form of understanding endorsed. Theory has no part, understanding manifests itself in concrete occasions of communal happiness. These are the points which Woolf calls *moments*. They are existential events which unite a group of people in a shared existential insight and a simultaneous recognition of their community. These moments seem to arrest the flow of time, their characteristic is that they unexpectedly draw lines of accidental everyday motion and thought into a meaningful constellation. They are moments of symbol-generation. Woolf's returning phrase is 'to make of the moment something permanent'. These occasions of epiphany are part of a mode of thinking which has reckoned up its position of finality and transience. If our existence is not to have a perfected version in this or in another world, or a blueprint description in a book of philosophy, or a captured representation in 'the' story, then the chance to appropriate it and to penetrate into it is in the rare moments of vision that present themselves inside its flow.

The language which can deal adequately with reality according to this view, cannot be that of science since this assumes a notion of truth just discredited. If Woolf refers existential understanding to the sphere of art as she does in *The Waves*, this must be because art is the only form of expression which has no direct methodological preoccupation with logical verification, as it is completely fictional; which makes no claim to positive empirical reality or logical consistency, but is built instead on unreality, paradox, ambiguity, and yet claims to address the most vital questions presented by human existence. This is what makes Bernard, the artist, the exemplary commentator among the six characters of *The Waves*.

Although art is the par excellence existential understanding, Bernard is a failure. He cannot find the story that would tell it all - it seems no longer possible. Even art is in a crisis. The epistemological basis of traditional art forms has been rejected, but the new epistemological recognitions that took its place, the emphasis on complexity and fluidity, perspectivity and subtlety, do not allow the creation of a work of art as we have come to think of it; they create almost impossible conditions for modern art to work under. This is why Bernard cannot capture the truth in a story, a novel with a plot. At the time when art takes on itself the task to address seriously the questions that science and science-based philosophy have failed to tackle, and goes through a revision of its

epistemological underpinnings, it faces a challenge of complete renewal and cannot rely on a simple realistic story-telling tradition.

The insistence on art's truth value, such as we find in Woolf, came from a long tradition of romantic hermeneutics. Foremost among its appearances in this century was the central role it played in Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art*, which, supported by ontological analyses carried out in *Time and Being*, posited art as the scene for adequate existential understanding. One of the possible objections to this position, which also served as the foundation stone of Gadamerian hermeneutics, is the tremendous burden of expectation which it places on art which in its turn is going through a permanent crisis with regard to its epistemology, its criticism, its quality, its communicability and its audience. The other is that after the insights which lead to the discrediting of methodologically based philosophy and which directed our attention to art, the criteria for criticism of both literary and theoretical texts have become thoroughly relativist. In other words, the commentary of works of art and the parallelly continuing existential, critical, linguistic etc. commentary carry on producing an enormous body of theoretical writing which we are forced to judge on the principles of that theoretical hegemony which we had already discredited, i.e. on the basis of verification, logical coherence, etc. (It is also obvious that all writing at all times will have a layer of unexamined underlying assumptions.) This means that serious philosophical thought about those fundamental existential questions still remains unfounded and self-contradictory, and philosophy remains in the state of language crisis. Within the arch that leads from *To the Lighthouse* to *The Waves*, from the early outlining of the problem to the final collapse, the function of *The Waves* was to examine the prospects of the type of understanding that remained alone credit-worthy and desirable at the end of *To the Lighthouse*. The novel showed the merits of this understanding and also its impracticability as anything more than a private existential programme. It recognised that society at large will not base its intellectual life on radical philosophical recognitions: to demand that is to demand a degree of intellectual maturity which cannot be programmatised, it is equal to demanding that humanity go against its most deeply ingrained intellectual desires, archetypes or drives. This impossible imperative would be similar in structure to that which Nietzsche formulated when he revealed the necessary strategic lie inherent in our epistemological tradition and demanded that we bring this lie to the surface and live in its permanent critical consciousness.

The wider impracticability of the insights that Woolf's characters achieved on the level of the individual or the small community in the first two novels also explains why the cataclysm in the centre of *Between the Acts* was inevitable. The final degeneration of the rationalist paradigm is fitted into Woolf's cyclic vision of history: the crash of the optimism of the enlightenment is seen as the end of a historical cycle. *Between the Acts* openly thematises the rise of the National Socialist Party in Germany and its consequences up to that date, i.e. 1941. To this event Woolf reacted vigorously both in *Between the Acts* and in *Three Guineas*. The latter is a book of polemic in which she pioneers the recognition that attitudes of aggression and imposition habitually practised on the plane of private life, embedded in language and tolerated in supposedly non-political areas of social life directly foster grand scale political aggression such as we were to see in Nazi Germany.

The various levels of articulation, the artistic, philosophical, social and political are forged into a unit of meaning in the heat of the historical cataclysm. The collapse of the central tenets and stereotypes of their culture unites the characters in an almost un-called-for community: the times suddenly become historical, people and statements turn almost involuntarily from private into public. History uninvitedly descends on the individual, on art, on relationships. It becomes an important recognition that the happiness of a person is always embedded in the well-being of the larger community, since meaning and understanding are only created through communication, and the way to self-understanding, identity and self-appropriation necessarily leads through a detour to others. It is shown that the private existence even of the most self-contained person is connected in a multitude of unconscious ways to the life of the sustaining and communicating community. In other words the embeddedness within history - within the happiness or unhappiness of the community - is not something accidental and extraneous but something essential, personal and private.

The scene of essential understanding in *Between the Acts* remains art. In spite of Bernard's failure, *The Waves* ended with his apotheosis, his understanding defeated death. Here, too, the vision which art provides remains effective when everything says it should long be dead. Although it is past its sphere of effect, past its competency and without any hope of influence, although it is amateur and unoriginal, mere pastiche and fragments, it continues to yield a profound and

specific understanding, aesthetic pleasure and a sense of community, a sort of fusion and happiness.

The first sentence of the novel proves that *Between the Acts* is again a book for close reading, and one that has to be read with the rest of Woolf in mind.

It was a summer's night and they were talking, in the big room with the windows open to the garden, about the cesspool.

(p. 3)

It plays perpetually on the elements, ideas, tones, structures that were established in the oeuvre, it takes up old harmonies and allows each to deform into harsh, grotesque but meaningful dissonances.

Incongruity and subversion are the unifying formal principle of the book, they return on innumerable points of the imagery and the language. The end of the era means the break-up of the small community and of communication: "All is over. The wave has broken. Left us stranded, high and dry. Single, separate on the shingle" (p. 87).

The original opposition between the two types of understanding, indicated by the epistemological markers of Mr and of Mrs Ramsay, is resurrected in a diminished form in the grumblings of Lucy and Bart, an old pair of brother and sister. At a melancholy passage ending they conclude "So we must ... it's time to go" (p. 106). Their complementarity is an out-dated affair, the old balance is irrecoverable.

Yet Woolf clearly establishes Bart's lineage with Mr Ramsay and Percival through several means, his past rank in the Indian Civil Service being just one of them. Although Bart himself never recognises it, Woolf makes clear his responsibility for the political situation. In a central and recurring image of the book the borderline between man and animal disappears, Bart repeatedly gets merged or substituted with his dog or other sorts of beasts. The humanist tenet of man as a rational animal, as superior to and essentially different from nature, which Bart himself would typically uphold with pride, is overthrown and all the claims traditionally based on this superiority collapse in reaction. The barrier around the leisurely life of private people breaks down, from this point in time any small community engaged in a dialogue of self-understanding based on radical philosophical insight, such as figured in *The Waves*, appears as an absurd and displaced luxury. The natural surrounding with its message of raw 'live or die', the indifferent cows, the weather, and finally the German warplanes join in with

the cacophony of the stage play that the novel's genteel characters are trying to perform in the garden. If it seems odd that the war-planes descend as a natural disaster, we only need to think of the way in which Woolf established the constructive/destructive pulsation of human nature as part of the wider rhythm of the natural universe. If man is an animal, there is nothing that is not 'nature', man's supernaturality was an illusion. The planes are as indifferent to the meditative leisurely English as the thrush is to the caterpillar it destroys.

If the life of that civilization was a cycle which had to come to an end, a wave which had to break, man nonetheless precipitated its collapse. In the pageant, Woolf enumerates a number of cultural features which may have been instrumental in bringing on the final breakdown. Coming down to the level of recent social history, she gives a comprehensive and acid summary of all destructive aspects of the Victorian tradition. The stage becomes the scene of 'deconstructing' a number of clichés: the faith in the Victorian project which was respectfully endorsed by Mrs Ramsay, nostalgically indulged by the characters of *The Waves* is here drastically discredited. If we bear the previous novels in mind, these features are well known by now. They range from the aggression and false naiveté of the Empire through sexual repression and the all-pervading hypocrisy of genteel society and the Victorian family to the mention of scientific laboratories, technology, commerce and construction. The recognition of the connection, which we mentioned earlier, between the implications of widely different levels of action becomes topical again, but here the stress is explicitly on violence and the responsibility involved. By this time Woolf was past the explicit and polemical analysis of this point in *Three Guineas*.<sup>11</sup> It is also the explicitness and scope of the analysis in this work which might give ground to believe that Woolf was not totally unconscious when she displayed a structural and historical evolution between the most benevolent efforts of rationalism and the most destructive reaches of unreason in war. When she steps back from the cosmic determinism of the author to the social conscience of the humanist Englishwoman, the emphasis seems to be, besides responsibility, on the way in which a benevolent impulse has turned into its opposite without there having been a single noticeable point at which it left its supposedly straight track of progress.

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11 Virginia Woolf: *Three Guineas*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1947)

Woolf sees the cause for this unexpected transition in the fact that those who claimed a monopoly on reason have misunderstood the nature of reality and identified the rules of their method with the laws of the universe. It seems from the depiction of the Victorian stereotypes in the three mature novels that Woolf saw 'men', the representatives of this order, assuming a method which was useful in making society manageable but which meant the acceptance of a falsification, a trap, in which they had to take something false to be true because they wished that it were true, and acted as if it were true, and consequently shut themselves away from the genuine nature of reality. According to Nietzsche, thought went astray when the useful fictions of man's categories of reason were identified with the nature of reality. The moment of doom was that in which double vision failed, in which man's inability to accept split states of mind, unclear categories and liminal positions was overruled by archetypal dreams, by mythological thought, by a childlike want of certainty. According to this the first signs of disaster were epistemological, our failure was a failure of understanding. From Nietzsche's analysis a similar duality of determinism and responsibility emerges as from the novels of Woolf.

From the narratorial preferences and the analysis of the creative tools it seems that for Woolf, understanding meant a comprehensive vision of existential reality in its full complexity and contingency to which human beings can only relate through a permanent interpretative commentary. Woolf's insistence on linking the most trivial phenomena with the most ultimate questions can be unfolded into a challenge for philosophy: a challenge to return from its sterile alienation to man's pursuit of happiness through self-understanding. If we keep in mind the question concerning philosophy throughout the three novels, by the end of the cycle it also seems as if the philosophers' self-lie was responsible for a wider self-lie of a culture, it turned a blind eye to inconvenient aspects of reality and allowed or even precipitated the collapse of the civilization which carried it.

The three novels outline the vision which in Woolf's view is the alternative to such blindness: this is based on a language which allows a flexible and complex understanding and demands an acceptance of imperfection, liminality, this-worldly incompleteness. This will always remain a minority vision, a limited intellectual programme since it goes contrary to human nature. Mr Ramsay, Percival and Bart are determined by ideas of certainty, fixity, heroism, quest for perfection and transcendental gratification.

What we have described is a complex of meaning that emerges from the three novels when read with a certain set of questions in mind. These are in fact set by the novels themselves although they are by no means the only possible group of questions which can be followed through the texts. The questions and their examination are also supported by several other texts by Woolf. In the framework of meaning which emerges from this reading, the position of art, philosophy and the existential attitude of the individual can be re-formulated. If our reading of the three novels finally lands us in a situation which is defined partly by a universal determinism and partly by the intellectual responsibility of the individual, the only possible conclusion remains a solitary existential programme of continued original questioning. It is also clear from the novels that this programme will make almost impossible demands on the individual. It necessarily seems to guarantee a position of intellectual isolation and minority which lacks any firm foundations and any hope of lasting effect. What Woolf leaves us with is a sense of disaster which still does not invalidate the existential and intellectual mission whose parameters she had developed. Its very strength seems to be in its radical self-awareness and autonomy which allow it to continue in a predicament of impossibility.