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Reality and Virginia Woolf

1

On a winter evening in London, two women come into a boot shop, accompanied by a dwarf. The women smile with rosy benevolence and tell the shop girl that they have come to find shoes for "this lady." "This lady"—the dwarf—looks around with a sullen expression on her face: she resents her escorts' charity and yet, unable to venture out alone, she has no choice but to submit to the insult of their help. The shop girl pushes up the little stand and the dwarf unlaces her boot.

Here an odd thing happens. Rather than being humiliated by the attention of the shop girl and the stares of the clientele, the dwarf thrusts her foot proudly onto the stand, as though demanding that everyone look. For her foot is beautiful, fully grown and perfectly proportioned, arched and aristocratic. She looks down on it with triumph and satisfaction. Contemplating her foot, she forgets all else, and believes herself, for the moment, beautiful. Now she will give herself over to the ecstasy of trying on shoes. Suddenly full of self-confidence, she will order the shop girl about; she will try on pair after pair; finally, she will lift up her skirts and do a little dance before the mirror, pirouetting wildly across the floor, craving to be noticed. A word of praise from the shop girl sends a flare of ecstasy over her face. She would stay in the shop forever. But her escorts have other lives to lead and finally succeed in ushering her out of the store. As she goes out the door her happiness fades, her knowledge returns, her shoulders fall. She is a dwarf once more.

Virginia Woolf's fictions are rimed with the grotesque. It is the frost left by the blast of life. In "Street Haunting," the 1927 essay which contains the story of the boot shop, the narrator leaves the shop after the dwarf, only to find that the streets, which seemed

charming before, are cloaked in a new atmosphere—the penumbra of the dwarf, which makes everything twisted, absurd, and deformed. She sees two bearded men, apparently brothers and both stone blind, coming down the street, "supporting themselves by resting a hand on the head of a small boy between them." She sees "the stout lady tightly swathed in shiny sealskin; the feeble-minded boy sucking the silver knob of his stick," and passes "the humped body of an old woman flung abandoned on the step of a public building with a cloak over her like the hasty covering thrown over a dead horse or donkey." Wherever the eye falls it meets an image of grotesque proliferation. In *Mrs. Dalloway* there is the battered old woman, like a rusty pump, "with one hand exposed for coppers and the other clutching her side," croaking songs of love and springtime by the Regent's Park Tube. In *Between the Acts* there is the upper-class stockbroker Giles Oliver, who walks across a field and sees a snake curled in the grass,

> choked with a toad in its mouth. The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die. A spasm made the ribs contract; blood oozed. It was birth the wrong way round—a monstrous inversion. So, raising his foot, he stamped on them. The mass crushed and slithered. The white canvas on his tennis shoes was bloodstained and sticky. But it was action.

The line between the comical and the disgusting is often obscured in these moments: one thinks of the tobacconist dressed as Queen Elizabeth, artificially gigantic, draped in satin, in a cape "made of cloth of silver—in fact swabs used to scour saucepans." And they are often most unsettling where they are least expected. In *The Waves*, the birds swooping and hopping in the garden suddenly become interested in the garden floor, in the mass of vegetation where worms crawl and dead matter is corrupted in new forms.

> Down there among the roots where the flowers decayed, gusts of dead smells were wafted; drops formed on the bloated sides of swollen things. The skin of rotten fruit broke, and matter oozed too thick to run. Yellow excretions were exuded by slugs, and now and again an amorphous body with a head at either end swayed slowly from side to side. The gold-eyed birds darting in between the leaves observed that purulence, that wetness, quizzically. Now and then they plunged the tips of their beaks savagely into the sticky mixture.

Woolf's fascination with the grotesque—with forms and bodies cramped, swollen, decomposed; with life and death in startling juxtaposition—serves local ends, in both her fiction and her essays, and does not always lend itself to generalization. At times it ripens into allegory and produces the pig's skull in *To the Lighthouse*. At other times it remains dense and particular, and recalls Thomas Browne's half-anguished, half-gleeful enthrallment to the mad inventiveness of nature. ("He collected coins," as Woolf wrote, "kept maggots in boxes, dissected the lungs of frogs, braved the stench of the spermaceti whale, tolerated Jews, had a good word for the deformity of the toad, and combined a scientific and sceptical attitude towards most things with an unfortunate belief in witches." Her catalog reminds us that Woolf herself, as a child, was with her siblings an avid collector of moths.) One thing that may be said about Woolf's grotesques is that they are always physical: even when the source of deformity is mental, it always reveals itself through some mortification of matter. She writes in her diary of a group of mental patients encountered on a path: "every one in that long line was a miserable ineffective shuffling creature, with no forehead, or no chin, & an imbecile grin, or a wild suspicious stare." (And concludes, chillingly, "They should certainly be killed.") These grotesques often have the intensity of nightmare, but their source is almost never in the minds of Woolf's characters; they are almost always incarnate. They are seen by others, and hence have the potential to be subjectively interpreted or exaggerated, but they are real—they have substance, like the red carnation seen by seven people in *The Waves*, "a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution." This is interesting to note for a number of reasons, not least because the vivid extremity of these material forms calls attention to something still more important, and yet much more easily missed, in Woolf's fictional world. It is full of solid objects.

The point may seem trivially obvious, but it actually bears repeating. The books are full of *things*. It is important to remember this, because the popular impression of Woolf, and the impression given by much criticism, is that her fiction is somehow formed from pure thought, and that reality in her fiction is inevitably represented by the incandescent, liquid and aerial images in which she tends to stress the motions of thought in time. Yet the sheep's jaw Jacob sleeps with, the boots in which Mr.

Ramsay takes such childish pride, the Moor's head swinging from the attic rafters in *Orlando*, are only among the more memorable articles in a robustly detailed world, a world strewn with abundance. One of the chief pleasures of reading Dickens is also present in Woolf: the pleasure of watching people interact with their possessions, the pleasure of seeing what people do with things. There is an odd sympathy between Mr. Ramsay's boots and Mrs. Gamp's bandboxes; and the easy largesse of detail with which Dickens gives us Mr. Dolloby's pipe, which Mr. Dolloby stands on its head by the doorpost before he goes into the shop, is echoed in *Jacob's Room* by the paintbrush of Charles Steele, suspended over the canvas, trembling "like the antenna of some irritable insect." Woolf learned from Dickens how character can be found in the way people use and handle objects. She saw for herself how objects can interfere and interact with thought, how things, not feelings, are thought's most common concern. In the novels thought is always taking off from an object or running up against one. Objects preoccupy thought in the abstract (Andrew's shorthand for Mr. Ramsay's metaphysical work: "Think of a kitchen table when you're not there"), reveal inner attitudes (the "compound of severity and humour" with which Mr. Ramsay flicks water from a sprig onto his young son's leg), and distract the progress of thought from its course, the way Bernard finds, in *The Waves*, that his grief for the dead Percival has been interrupted by a newspaper headline announcing the divorce of a famous actress. The world we see is subject to our mental states, but our mental states are subject to the crowded, fantastic, and unpredictable outside world.

The moment we begin to stress the fact of the physical in Woolf—her gargoyles, her odd details, her endlessly surprising everyday objects—an eccentric, hybrid, semi-Victorian figure begins to emerge. We see a writer whose innovations in portraying consciousness create not the open space and light with which she is associated, but a world of dark corners perpetually being filled by branching entanglements of reality and thought. We recall that Woolf's father, Sir Leslie Stephen, was a famous Victorian intellectual, and that his first wife was Thackeray's daughter. (Woolf's mad half-sister Laura, a fixture in Woolf's childhood before she was finally institutionalized, was Thackeray's grandchild.) We recall that many of Woolf's characters are

caricatures—the touching and comical relationship between Betty Flanders and the Captain in *Jacob's Room* is a small and scarcely noted triumph in her fiction—and we recall the glazed cadence of her sentences, slick with Victorian residue. We recall how thoroughly the essays chronicle her obsession with the literary and the historical past. The innovative, the feminist, the radical Bloomsbury modernist recedes, and we see the reader of George Eliot and Thomas Browne, of Coleridge and the Elizabethans, who attended Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee at the age of fifteen, in 1897, and recorded the event in her diary. We see nineteenth-century London. We have discovered the shadow of a Dickensian Woolf.

2

We are wrong, of course. For the reading is too emphatic; it ignores too much. Woolf herself saw experience as "a semi-transparent envelope, or luminous halo, surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end." No one is going to mistake the writer of those lines for Anthony Trollope. No one will see in her grotesques the obscene Rabelaisian relish lavished by Joyce. And yet the notion of Woolf as a writer of grotesques and odd details is interestingly corrective, for these elements, though not central to her work, are present in her work. We tend to ignore them, but we are wrong to ignore them. There is a sense in which we have lost the habit of reading Woolf through. Our expectations confound our eyes. We expect a certain method, a certain effect, something to do with a luminous halo, and it lights up when we see it. When we see its opposite, the sentence goes dark, and we silently exclude it. We see "Austen"; we muffle "Byron" in a blanket. Our insistence on evanescence, consciousness and diaphanous impressionism distorts the book that forms in our minds, like the slight misimpression on the pottery wheel that tilts the eventual cup. Many new readers of Woolf are left cold by the novels and warm only to the funny and malicious caricatures in the diaries: it is possible to detect in this progress an easing into the unmistakable, a relief from the strain of misreading. The very covers of her books—with their lit-up women's

faces, their shafts of light passing through the brim of a hat or the gauze of a sleeve; with their deep, still backgrounds, the color of bruised fruit; with their supple textures, softly sueded like the petal of a flower—quietly introduce the emphasis into our reading.

Part of the blame for this excess of impression may be attributed to the inclusion of Woolf in a certain idea of Bloomsbury modernism which is never as interesting as she is—the recognizable stereotype in which young men in straw boater hats read Anaxagoras aloud on the picnic blanket, paint decorative still lives of fruit baskets, and make overtures to one another while the young women are having epiphanies in the blue half-light among the escallonia blossoms. Woolf's social life may have involved her in that world, but her art has very little to do with it, and when she occasionally depicts it in her writing (at certain points in *The Voyage Out*, for instance) she almost invariably does so with humor. Another part of the blame surely falls to feminist literary criticism, which, when it has ventured from the political to the aesthetic, has tended to focus on patterns of imagery in her work which are thought of as traditionally feminine: again, light, water, clouds; the shifting and shapeless forms with which Woolf counters rigid patriarchal stabilities. This fractional reading has been reinforced by critics who, eager to oppose the feminists on general grounds, accept their reading of Woolf's qualities, then attack her for possessing them. But most of the blame for the popular perception of Woolf must fall to Woolf herself, for having so vividly represented her own personality on the page. For the popular conception of her personality is oddly incompatible with the more robust strain present in her work.

Woolf's character, as the popularity of her diary testifies, has proved of irresistible interest. It has been aerated in a foam of interpretation. Scholars, actors, biographers, novelists, critics, musicians, film directors, marketing executives—even choreographers have produced their versions of her, and the versions of course range widely. The popular conception is therefore merely an area of maximum overlay; it is thus necessarily limiting. The ethereal, snobbish, neurasthenic Mrs. Woolf who results from the general compilation (she was sexually abused! went mad! committed suicide! the subheads cry—one imagines her in a loose fringed shawl caressing a cup of tea, with her eyes not quite in

focus) has proved curiously salable, though she is still capable, especially in England, of provoking hysterical loathing. She is beloved in America. It is easy to imagine the popular Woolf writing Mrs. Ramsay. But it is almost impossible to imagine this fragile, mystical creature writing the rude comedy of the dwarf with beautiful feet.

For her own part Woolf was deeply interested in the question of what made a personality; it was part of being interested in herself. It was also part of being interested in reading, in writing, and in the past. She is preoccupied with the idea of biography, autobiography, the lives of obscure women, her own life. She wishes to contest the distinction separating biography and the novel, and writes fictional biographies between her more serious novels. "In fact," she writes in a letter, "I sometimes think only autobiography is literature—novels are what we peel off, and come at last to the core, which is only you and me." And of course she is one of literature's great diarists. She represents her difficult narrative method, with the heavy demands it lays upon the reader, as a personal inevitability; she is incapable, she says, of writing any other way. Her novels' relative plotlessness, too easily confused with formlessness, seems to encourage the idea that they are pure expression, like the song of Keats's nightingale, a full-throated ease of inspired self-disclosure. And yet the mature novels are all strictly formal—indeed, their success or failure depends on whether their experimental forms can deploy Woolf's fictional gifts and compensate for her weaknesses—and Woolf is of all writers the one most scrupulously determined to keep her own personality, however absorbing it might have been, out of her fiction. "Sydney comes in & I'm Virginia," she tells her diary in 1922; "when I write I'm merely a sensibility."

When, in 1920, she has the idea for *Jacob's Room*, her first concern is how she will keep "the damned egotistical self" from invading its pages, and how she might "provide a wall for the book from oneself." The writers for whom she reserves her highest praise are those, like Shakespeare and Jane Austen, whose work is free from the taint of personal concern. She finds *Ulysses* a failure because Joyce's ego is constantly impinging on the book. Impersonality, not personality, is the goal of her narrative consciousness. She wishes to be true for her what Coleridge (who considered authorial impersonality a criterion of genius) wrote

of Shakespeare: "It is throughout as if a superior spirit more intuitive, more intimately conscious, even than the characters themselves, not only of every outward look and act, but of the flux and reflux of the mind in all its subtlest thoughts and feelings, were placing the whole before our view; himself meanwhile unparticipating in the passions."

Coleridge writes of the "alienation" and the "utter *aloofness*" of the poet's feelings. For Woolf, Shakespeare's mind is "unimpeded" by the merely personal. His mind does not remain aloof from the page, it enters the page and is absorbed in it, because it is not blocked by the ego. This is an important distinction, for although there is a tendency to combine all modernist doctrines of impersonality together and roughly annex them to "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Woolf's will resist the comparison. For her impersonality is not the extinction of personality, it is the diffusion of the self into the work. The self which is active, awake, insistent on its own concerns, will throttle the mechanism and impede the clarity of art, but the self which is responsive, unconscious, and content will embody its thought in art, and sink into every page. We know nothing about Shakespeare, she writes, but we sense him everywhere in his work. We are forever about to discover him; we are forever missing him. Kierkegaard describes an artist who, asked to paint the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea, painted the entire wall red, and explained that the Israelites had just gone across, and the Egyptians drowned. Shakespeare is always disappearing beyond the margin and beneath the page.

In an essay called "Personalities," Woolf writes:

> These great artists who manage to infuse the whole of themselves into their works, yet contrive to universalise their identity so that, though we feel Shakespeare everywhere about, we cannot catch him at the moment in any particular spot. . . . The people whom we admire most as writers, then, have something elusive, enigmatic, impersonal about them. . . . In ransacking their drawers we shall find out little about them. All has been distilled into their books.

3

For a novelist, the question of distilling one's own personality into one's books is closely connected with the problem of por-

traying character. Bernard, the novelist in *The Waves*, finds his personality so vast and contradictory that the moment he asks "What am I? This?" he must answer, "No, I am that." And yet in the presence of other people he begins uncontrollably inventing stories to explain them, gives them little settings and histories, imagines what they are thinking, and longs to know them in detail; he is "impatient of solitude." Woolf envisions character as a will-o'-the-wisp whispering in the novelist's ear—"Catch me if you can"—and then speeding away, leading the writer on a long chase through the novel. Character is the motivation and the goal of fiction. On this point Woolf is in rare agreement with Arnold Bennett, who wrote, "The foundation of good fiction is character-creating and nothing else." One cannot portray character and portray oneself at the same time—this is Woolf's reservation about Charlotte Brontë. Personality is what must be vacated for character to come into existence. And yet if a writer succeeds in catching the will-o'-the-wisp she will go on existing, elusive and transformed, in the character she has created.

Woolf's method of character-creating is, of course, her distinctive innovation as a writer. It is why we read her books, and why some people prefer not to read her books. For the fragmentary, free-floating method she uses in all her mature novels (*The Years* is a partial exception) can be both exhilarating and frustrating; it reverses a habitual process in the reader's imagination, and forces the reader to build the idea of a character from the inside out. Woolf's odd attentive prose, which never portrays thought directly, but rather acts as a kind of ambiguous indirect discourse moving with the turns of thought, requires an extraordinary act of sympathy on the part of the reader, who is called on to construct a human being around a fleeting vision of consciousness. It would be wrong to say that a conventional novelist asks us to know his characters and Woolf asks us to become her characters, because we never really inhabit the mind of a character in Woolf; we merely observe it intimately, conscious all the while that we are watching someone else. A more conventional novelist—Tolstoy, say—introduces us to his characters, tells us what they look like, shows us what they do, perhaps inflects his prose to give us a sense of their moods or what they think, a sense just as we might have if we were in a room with them, and could receive all the silent hints from looks and acts that come to us more directly in real life than in the novel; we imagine knowing

Oblonsky just as we might know a person in real life, and Oblonsky becomes "real" to us because we can imagine him as someone in the world, roughly as we imagine an absent acquaintance. The way we know a Woolf character is very different from this. While always keeping separate from the character, we know more about the progress of her thoughts, more about her inner life, than we could ever perceive about someone in real life, and we are required, with the advantage and the burden of that knowledge, to supply from our own imaginations more about the external person than we would ever have to supply in real life. We cannot imagine Mrs. Ramsay as someone in the world, because we have seen Mrs. Ramsay in a way we could never see anyone. And yet, somehow, Mrs. Ramsay seems real to us. The imagination turns out not to be restricted by experience. Woolf's achievement, in part, is to have discovered a new capability of the imagination. We are able to move through the storm of shifting subjectivities in *The Waves* or *To the Lighthouse* and understand that the world may be like that. And we are able—this is partly how we know the world may be like that—to withdraw, and to watch Mrs. Ramsay holding the partly knitted stocking against James's little leg to see if it is the right size. We are able to take pleasure in the sight. The physical detail both reveals character and places us in the world. We never go unmoored into purely abstract consciousness.

The great contradiction in Woolf's method is that her portrayal of the inner lives of characters, by showing that all experience is individually conditioned and that every object is seen differently by everyone who looks, implies that the subjective is inescapable, even as her primary act as a writer is to claim objective knowledge of the workings of other people's minds. To extend herself into her characters she must escape her own personality, but the result of the extension is to question whether such an escape is possible. The contradiction may be resolved, perhaps, by pointing out that Woolf's characters are not real people, but only inventions of her own subjective consciousness, and hence mere demonstrations. But to collapse the categories in this way, to yield everything to the subjective, is to ignore an urgency that is always present in her work, from the method of her fiction to the obsession with memoir in the essays. For her characters, like their writer, are constantly trying to get beyond their own minds, to know something real about each other and

about the world. Hence (to take only *To the Lighthouse*) Mr. Ramsay's metaphysics, Lily Briscoe's painting, Mrs. Ramsay's close and sympathetic attention to the needs of other people. Woolf's characters are always trying to look into each other the way we are looking into them. Woolf's mystical impulse is often noted; her occasional apprehensions of a pattern behind reality, typically coming before or after times of mental instability, her sense that her episodes of madness were in some way transcendental (a whirring of wings in the brain, she called it, and said that it had done for her instead of religion), and her famous comment about "the mystical side of this solitude"—"how it is not oneself but something in the universe one's left with"; "One sees a fin passing far out"—have made the mystical undercurrent a commonplace in thinking about Woolf. But mysticism can be thought about in stages. The first stage may be not to transcend the world, but simply to reach it, to get beyond the self in discovering the real world. In "The Mark on the Wall," the 1917 story in which Woolf began to develop some of her new ideas about fiction, the narrator sees a speck on the wall that she has not noticed before, and spends several pages essentially free associating as she tries to guess what the mark might be. The mark becomes an emblem for the susceptibility of reality to the subjective consciousness; and yet at the end of the story, before discovering what the mark really is, the narrator reflects that she likes to look at it, because it is a real thing, something separate from herself:

> Here is something definite, something real. Thus, waking from a midnight dream of horror, one hastily turns on the light and lies quiescent, worshipping the chest of drawers, worshipping solidity, worshipping the impersonal world which is proof of some existence other than ours. That is what one wants to be sure of.

She is always trying to be sure. She is always trying to unravel what Coleridge called the "intimate coalition" of subject and object. Hence the emphasis on communication in her books, and the emphasis on artistic inspiration as a flash of objective vision. She is always trying to get beyond herself. Woolf's notion of diffuse impersonality is not merely a theoretical condition for artistic creativity; it is the beginning of a mystical idea, an attempt to escape the cell of self-knowledge, a longing for real things.

The great risk, of which Woolf was aware, is that it is also a

longing for death. For the desire to escape one's personality and be diffused in a wider reality, whether the world of objects or the pages of a novel, is partly a suicidal wish (she drowned herself in the river! the subheads cry). The moments in Woolf's fiction of diaphanousness, iridescence, liquidity, the moments in which solidities become permeable or formless—one thinks of the clouds heaping up and tumbling down in "On Being Ill"—are generally identical with those in which Woolf explores the instability and changeability of identity. To see the world erase and transform itself makes her think that the self can be erased and transformed, too, as in the extraordinary passage at the end of "The Moment: Summer's Night" in which she imagines the wind as a horse, then imagines herself riding it, then imagines herself becoming it, until the lines separating self, wind and horse have slipped beneath the surface and disappeared.

But if there is something suicidal in Woolf's emotional attraction to this kind of loss of self, there is also something deeply readerly about it. Woolf, of course, is one of literature's great readers; was substantially self-educated in her father's Victorian library; read Coleridge as a teenager; studied Greek. There is an ideal of the sympathetic imagination that passes from eighteenth-century moral philosophy into nineteenth-century literary criticism, which holds that an effort of imaginative sympathy makes it possible for the mind to break through the barrier that separates it from its object, and, for a moment, to inhabit the object in an act of whole identification. This ability then becomes the writer's most important faculty and is in a sense the natural instinct of the poet. "He had only to think of any thing," as Hazlitt wrote of Shakespeare, "in order to become that thing, with all the circumstances belonging to it." "If a Sparrow come before my Window," Keats wrote, "I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel." In entering an object outside the self, the imagination is able to perceive the inmost nature of the object with an intensity and a fullness that reason cannot match; but the absorption of the mind in what lies outside the self necessarily requires the self to be, at least temporarily, extinguished. This is what Keats meant when he wrote that "Men of Genius have not any individuality, any determined Character." It is a mystical, impersonal aspiration, almost always associated with literary creativity, and it accords deeply with Woolf's sense of

character, inwardness, and impersonality in fiction. Not surprisingly, the older idea is most frequently employed in describing Shakespeare, the writer Woolf most admires, and whose unimpeded clarity she is most apt to praise. It is for Shakespeare that Keats coins the expression "negative capability," Shakespeare who prompts Hazlitt to write that "He was nothing in himself, but he was all that others were." Hazlitt continues:

> When he conceived of a character, whether real or imaginary, he not only entered into all its thoughts and feelings, but seemed instantly, and as if by touching a secret spring, to be surrounded with all the same objects, 'subject to the same skyey influences,' the same local, outward, and unforeseen accidents which would occur in reality.

The same conception of a high Shakespearean selflessness extends backward in time through Coleridge and Elizabeth Montagu; the poetic ideal of self-annihilation in the service of the sympathetic imagination is found in Alexander Gerard, Lord Kames, and Shaftesbury, for whom its ideal practitioner is Homer.

It is doubtful that Woolf explicitly based her ideas on Shaftesbury, or even on Coleridge or Keats. But the past is always echoing.

4

The past echoes, because she never stops reading the past. Woolf's critical essays make up a considerable part of her achievement, and a considerable contribution in the history of criticism. It is not true that the essays are superior to the novels, but they have a sustained perfection that the novels do not match. The novels are not always consistent; Woolf's two great weaknesses as a writer of fiction, her difficulties with dialogue and with dramatic tension, cannot always be hidden, in the first place, or dodged with feigned indifference, in the second. The third part of *To the Lighthouse* is too explicit and cannot keep pace with its suddenly accelerated symbolism; it is too skittish of missing profundity, and so makes us swallow profundity whole. *The Waves* is often too lavish with its own devices, and puts forth such a lushness of vague imagery that it sometimes recalls, in the strangest way,

Flaubert's *Temptation of Saint Anthony*. But the essays have no similar weaknesses. Here Woolf is in complete control.

The pleasure of the essays is so great that we might read two dozen of them before it occurs to us how curiously indefinite their conclusions often are, how simple many of their arguments. We are told, perhaps, only that education may be important to the novelist, or that the Russians are great writers; and yet we emerge with a feeling of unusual completeness and certainty. We have been, we feel, through a process; we have been taken through a process in which something has been changed, a process whose very action is humane. In proving her simple propositions Woolf adjourns to a line of reasoning in which, while the appearance of conventional continuity is maintained, the stress is slipped a little off its object. It falls, as she might say, here a little to the left, there a little below, with the result that the mind is made to work with scarcely any perception of effort in an unfamiliar way; some extinguished portion of the mind lights up, and an idea is apprehended in a new and unexpected way. In some of her more idiosyncratic essays, especially the great meditations on reading ("Reading," "On Being Ill," and "Street Haunting") the essentials of the process are exaggerated and hence made fully evident. But the visible development of an essay like "On Being Ill" is invisibly present as a kind of submerged structure beneath her more conventional essays. The emphasis is always on the conditions that affect the operation of the mind.

In her extraordinary essay "Reading," written in 1919 but not published until after her death, Woolf writes her most lyrical treatment of the close and painful connections between literature, reality, and the self. The scenes of the essay shift over a sustained double metaphor of history and discovery. It begins with a speaker, Woolf's surrogate, a girl apparently in early adolescence, reading on the lawn of a great Victorian home—possibly Talland House, the Stephen family's summer retreat during Woolf's childhood and the source for the setting of *To the Lighthouse*. As the girl reads, she holds the book against the late summer background, so that the lines on the page seem to be printed directly on reality: "instead of being a book it seemed as if what I read was laid upon the landscape not printed, bound, or sewn up, but somehow the product of trees and fields and the hot summer sky, like the air which swam, on fine mornings, round

the outlines of things." She lies on the lawn all day, reading Elizabethan family histories and Hakluyt's chronicle of voyages of discovery. Then (it is an extraordinary thing in an essay called "Reading") she puts down the book. It is too dark to read. The past has so swollen in her that the books she has looked in feel ripe to the touch. While their parents are busy with dinner, she and her siblings venture out into the forest, in the deep dark, to go hunting for moths. Their journey, like that of the Elizabethan explorers, is portrayed as a voyage beyond known things, into "the gloom of the unknown." Kept together only by the fine thread of light from the lantern, they penetrate into the forest, where they see insects in the lantern light that remind them of sea creatures crawling on the ocean floor. At last they reach the place where, about an hour earlier, "several pieces of flannel soaked in rum and sugar had been pinned to a number of trees" to attract moths. In the lantern beam they see moths on the traps, their probosces "deeply plunged, and as they drew in the sweetness, their wings quivered slightly as if in ecstasy." They tap the drunken moths into the poison jar. At last they find a huge moth with "great underwings of glowing crimson" who is so extraordinary that they cannot bring themselves to kill him. He flies away, and they must force themselves to go to the furthest tree out, which seems to stand "on the very verge of the world." There they find the scarlet underwing, "astride a vein of sweetness, drinking deep." This time they capture and kill him, and then they return home through the forest. In the light of the next morning things seem different, and the girl needs a new kind of reading material. She takes up Sir Thomas Browne, a writer who, she says, began the great process of inner discovery, the voyage into the self.

The speaker of this essay first reads about discovery in Hakluyt's chronicle, then ventures out to make her own exploration, where she discovers the moths. (She has also read family chronicles, and her narrative of the journey into the woods is itself a moving recollection of hunting for moths with her siblings.) She is then prepared to read the writer who, in the "dark world" of the soul, "was one of the explorers; the first to talk of himself." The chronicle of discovery in the world is transformed into an act of discovery in the world, which in turn affects the girl so that she chooses to read a chronicle of internal explo-

ration. This will no doubt be transformed in a similar way; as the essay concludes, Woolf writes that Browne achieves a kind of beauty that "leaves in the mind a desire to impart; some offering we must make." The essay, of course, is the offering. In this way are writing and reading, reality and self-consciousness, bound up.

In the intimate and disturbing sexual grotesques of the moths, plunging their tongues into the viscous sweetness that will guarantee their deaths, we see the union of Woolf's opposites. The moth—ancient symbol of the soul—is both incandescent and hideously mired in flesh. It contains at once the horror and delight of matter, and the horror and delight of death. Its greedy mortality is not only a metaphor (as in one sense it is) of sexual awakening; for the moth is also in the position of a consciousness in the world, which, to take in what it wishes to take in, must act to its own annihilation. If these reflections look like pieties, we must also remember the vulgar substance which the moth desires to drink. (And that *The Moths* was the working title of *The Waves*.) In this light we may appreciate the accuracy of Woolf's most impressionistic and poetic language—"The train draws across the fields lop-eared with smoke"—which evokes pictures of the world that are instant and exact. We may appreciate her refusal to abandon novelistic detail even in her most transcendent moments—the inscrutable Mr. Carmichael, rising like an ancient pagan god at the end of *To the Lighthouse*, clutches in his fist a trident which is "only a French novel." We may see in Woolf's grotesque and absurd elements, as in the inwardness of her characters, a difficult flight, not from the world, but to it. Reality is outside, waiting to be written and waiting to be read.