

## NATURE AND THE REALITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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### *Introduction*

The term 'realism' has been used in many different ways<sup>1</sup>. Thus, rather than assume or state a particular sense of the term to be used in this discussion of Virginia Woolf, we shall here consider her work in the light of various epistemological problems arising from a philosophy which for both intrinsic and historical reasons seems relevant to her life and work - the philosophy of G.E. Moore. Our exploration of the particular form of realism to be found in Virginia Woolf's work will therefore lead us to consider problems of philosophy, literary criticism and techniques of fiction. We can, for the sake of convenience, discuss the philosophical aspects first. These in turn divide into questions of epistemology and of metaphysics but this paper will concentrate on the former since, it is hoped, a fuller understanding of the writer's metaphysics - the view of reality she attempts to embody in her writing - will emerge through the discussion of the epistemological and critical problems which preoccupied her. For, as we suggest here, this question of the nature of reality resolves itself in Virginia Woolf, into a constant exploration of the relation between, and the relative status of, consciousness and that which is external to consciousness.

### *Philosophy and Sensibility - G.E. Moore and Virginia Woolf*

The movement away from a direct concern with metaphysics characterizes the philosophy of an age of scepticism, and of the Twentieth century. It is clear in the emphasis of some writers

on epistemology, science, linguistics and psychology, and in the work of Moore, Russell, Ayer and Sartre, whilst writers of fiction like Conrad and Kafka seem to express, at most, a nostalgia for metaphysics rather than asserting seriously its possibility. But the trend is not an inevitable consequence of a Zeitgeist: there is clearly something metaphysical - in a philosophical as well as a critical sense - in the work of T.S. Eliot, which is absent in Virginia Woolf. We suggest also that this is not solely a matter of temperament but also of philosophical influence. The relation of Eliot's work and thought to that of F.H. Bradley is now almost as well documented as that of Woolf to Moore<sup>2</sup>, and the positions of the two philosophers can be described, without controversy, as, respectively, Idealism and Critical Realism<sup>3</sup>.

Moore's eschewal of metaphysics is reflected equally in his method. Thus in "The Nature and Reality of Objects of Perception"<sup>4</sup> - as its title suggests, essentially a refutation of idealism<sup>5</sup> - the argument operates not in opposition to metaphysics but through a theory of epistemology and of perception.

The discussion of Moore's epistemology in this paper, however, is not intended to suggest any simple relation of influence to the work of the novelist<sup>6</sup>. S.P. Rosenbaum<sup>7</sup> suggest an alternative relation:

*Philosophically, G.E. Moore influenced Virginia Woolf more than anyone else, but in addition to this direct influence... Moore's philosophy is also representative of the intellectual milieu in which Virginia Woolf was born and bred. Many of the ideals and ideas in or underneath Virginia Woolf's novels were shared by Moore with... Leslie Stephen, McTaggart, Roger Fry, Lewis Dickinson, and Bertrand Russell.*

It does seem that parts of the Bloomsbury group at least were as receptive to Moore's epistemology as they were to his ethics<sup>8</sup>. However, we shall be less concerned here to establish a direct link between the philosophy and the novels than to use the former as a tool of our analysis of the latter.

Virginia Woolf's novels can be seen as the response of a particular temperament to various implications and problems arising from Moore's philosophy and in this light are easier understood than through a study of the resulting fiction.

Passmore suggests that aspects of Moore's philosophy itself are explicable as a reaction to the implications of Idealism: Moore, he writes,

*never lost his sense of wonder and relief at being able to believe in the Reality of the everyday world; and he was determined not to be driven out of his hardly-won Paradise<sup>9</sup>*

- thus Moore's insistent common-sense realism. It has been shown, however<sup>10</sup>, that not only Idealism but also empiricism itself, together with its emphasis on the sole reality of the external, material world leads to a dead-end of solipsistic scepticism, by insisting that only the external world has reality yet failing to establish any valid relation between this world and that of consciousness. What Moore attempted was the attribution of reality to both worlds<sup>11</sup> thus avoiding the sceptical and solipsistic implications of empiricism made clear in the account of Hume's philosophy given by Virginia Woolf's father:

*All our knowledge is framed out of 'impressions' and 'ideas', ideas being simply decaying impressions. The attempt to find a reality underlying these impressions is futile, and*

*even self-contradictory. We are conscious only of an unceasing stream of more or less vivid feelings... The belief that anything exists outside our mind, when not actually perceived, is a 'fiction'. The belief in a continuous subject which perceives the feelings is another fiction... Thus reality is to be found only in the ever-varying stream of feelings, bound together by custom, regarded by a fiction or set of fictions as implying some permanent set of external or internal relations,... The old bonds which held things together have been completely dissolved. Hume can see no way, to replace them, and Hume therefore, is a systematic sceptic.<sup>12</sup>*

It is worth quoting this passage at some length since it gives a good account of what is often considered<sup>13</sup> as Virginia Woolf's own view of reality. Having suggested, however, that it is this view which Moore seeks to destroy we shall suggest also that the effort of the novelist's work is to escape it and its implications. We can add that Moore's effort was to a certain extent successful from the point of view of logic and common-sense but not from that of a temperament which both tended towards and feared such scepticism. Before considering what Virginia Woolf made of the problem, therefore, we must look more closely at the relevant aspects of Moore's argument.

Moore insists on the reality of both consciousness and its object, attacking the Idealist identification of the two:

*We have then in every sensation two distinct elements, one which I call consciousness, and another which I call the object of consciousness. This must be so if the sensation of green, though different in one respect, are alike in another: blue is one object of*

*sensation and green is another, and consciousness, which both sensations have in common, is different from either*<sup>14</sup>.

Moore's dualism of consciousness and its object does, as he intends, suggest the real, independent existence of the latter<sup>15</sup> but if the object can exist independently of consciousness so can the latter exist in the absence of the object: we can imagine things which are not externally present or receive false information from consciousness concerning this external reality. The two may be united in an act of correct perception, but there is still no means from within consciousness of testing the accuracy of its sensations.

Given this weakness, to argue, as Moore does, that to have a sensation is already to escape from the prison of our own consciousness, is to evade the real problem since although we must be aware of something, it is not necessarily something *outside* our consciousness. Moore's later appeal to common-sense<sup>16</sup> is perhaps the only way out of this labyrinth of scepticism and yet it is not only something of an intellectual abdication, but must also fail to satisfy the temperament of one inclined, albeit against his will, not to common-sense but to solipsism. We can note here, and the point will be more fully discussed later, that Virginia Woolf rejects the appeal to common-sense and attempts a solution of the problem from within one or more subjectivities.

Leaving, for a moment, the problem of the real existence of the external object we must add that Moore's realism makes any conclusion as to its true nature equally problematic. For if the object of consciousness<sup>17</sup> is both real and distinct from consciousness of it; and if the latter is in itself an adequate escape from subjectivity, then conflicting accounts of the object can no longer be reconciled through the notion of subjective

distortion and interpretation. There is not a "Real" object and a cluster of images of it, but a paradoxical fragmentation into equally valid 'realities'<sup>18</sup>. This feeds both the novelist's temperament which delights in the plenitude of the external world, and the sceptical distrust of the basic assumptions of consciousness. Consciousness - subjectivity - introduces both richness and innaccuracy yet consciousness - imagination - also introduces order into the chaos of plenitude. These polarities are central to Virginia Woolf's work.

Finally a further inadequacy of Moore's philosophy - although not strictly speaking a matter of epistemology - must be noted. To establish the real existence of the object is to say nothing of its significance, its value. Moore himself makes it clear in *Principia Ethica* that value arises only in the presence of consciousness: for example

*It seems to be true that to be conscious of a beautiful object is a thing of great intrinsic value; whereas the same object, if no one be conscious of it, has certainly comparatively little value, and is commonly held to have none at all.*<sup>19</sup>

Moore thus recognizes the distinction between existence and significance and we shall see that it is the significance of the object in its relation to consciousness which is an important for Virginia Woolf as its mere existence.

It is, then, the relation of object to consciousness - following Moore's division of the two - which is the most pressing problem. Even this question, however, remains largely unproblematic so long as the notion of consciousness held is one which emphasises its receptive, perceptive faculty. But once we

allow the notion of a creative activity - imagination - the problem returns. Neither is this concept of the imagination incompatible with literary realism: it is, rather, the basis of 'conscious' as opposed to 'conscientious' realism<sup>20</sup>.

*Here realism is achieved not by imitation, but by creation; a creation which, working with the materials of life, absolves these by the intercession of the imagination from mere factuality and transfigures them to a higher order<sup>21</sup>.*

This was the way Virginia Woolf not only thought about, but experienced consciousness

*But how entirely I live in my imagination; how completely depend upon spurts of thought, coming as I walk, as I sit; things churning up in my mind and so making a perpetual pageant, which is to be my happiness<sup>22</sup>.*

And yet this internal activity - and thus the fiction it produces - is nourished by external objects and events:

*I saw British canoes, and the oldest plough in Sussex 1750 found at Rodnell, and a suit of armour said to have been worn at Seringapatam. All this I should like to write about, I think<sup>23</sup>.*

In the words of another writer, "Eventually an imaginary world is entirely without interest<sup>24</sup>. For Virginia Woolf, and her characters<sup>25</sup>, the loss of relation between consciousness and its external objects is insanity. Thus from a period of nervous illness she draws the conclusion:

*Never be unseated by the shying of that  
undependable brute, life, hag-ridden as she is  
by my own queer, difficult nervous system<sup>26</sup>.*

But this loss of relation is a constant threat if, as Moore also suggests, value lies only with consciousness which is separated from external reality. The danger is that the latter becomes only the occasion for the reveries of consciousness and otherwise largely redundant. Thus in "The Mark on the Wall"<sup>27</sup> the mark itself is merely the starting-point for a chain of thought which moves further and further away from it -

*How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new  
object.*

And yet the object itself is not redundant but serves a psychological need:

*Indeed, now that I have fixed my eyes, upon it,  
I feel that I have grasped a plank in the sea;  
I feel a satisfying sense of reality.*

Moore, in insisting that value enters a situation only with the consciousness of it, recognizes also<sup>28</sup> that if consciousness is incorrect in its perception or interpretation of the external reality, that value may be diminished or destroyed. Similarly for Virginia Woolf, imagination may be false and, as such, loses value: the "Unwritten Novel"<sup>29</sup> remains unwritten because untrue: the fantasy constructed bears no relation to the real "Minie". That Virginia Woolf is entirely unable to believe, with Keats, in Adam's dream - "he awoke and found that it was true" - suggests that the need to grasp and believe in the reality of things - of 'life' - is not here simply the "nostalgia for the object" or the



demand of a solipsistic temperament to touch something real outside itself<sup>30</sup>. Its true cause will be considered later. First, though, we must mention the opposite danger present in the emphasis on the reality not of consciousness, but of the object.

For there is a constant tension between the nostalgia for the object and the fear of it - life remains an "undependable brute." The object, the world external to the individual consciousness is both a threat to the integrity of the self, and chaos which challenges the demand of consciousness for some comprehensible order and its power to create such an order. From this viewpoint other subjects become objects:

*Two resolute, sunburnt, dusty girls in jersey and short skirts, with packs on their backs, city clerks or secretaries, tramping along the road in the hot sunshine at Ripe. My instinct at once throws up a screen, which condemns them: ... But all this is a great mistake. These screens shut me out. Have no screens for screens are made of our own integument; and get at the thing itself which has nothing whatever in common with a screen. The screen-making habit, though, is so universal that it probably preserves our samity. If we had not this device for shutting people off from our sympathies we might perhaps dissolve utterly; separateness would be impossible. But the screens are in excess; not the sympathy.<sup>31</sup>*

The tensions are clear here<sup>32</sup> as they are in the case of Septimus Warren Smith whose insanity is a loss of reality and who is yet destroyed by the 'Reality of Sir William Bradshaw',<sup>33</sup>.

The threat of the chaos of fact to the demand for order - the social and Aesthetic unity of Mrs. Ramsay's dinner-party threatened

by the world of uncompromising fact as embodied in Tansley - suggests that behind this tension of the desire and fear of "the thing itself" lies another oscillation between the will to unity and to separateness:

*I want to sink deeper and deeper, away, from the surface, with its hard separate facts<sup>33</sup>.*

The constant co-existence and occasional conflict in Virginia Woolf's fiction between an effort to penetrate below the surface to the subjective experiences and inner processes of her characters, and the residual naturalism - as, for instance in the description of Mrs. Ramsay's *Boeuf en Daube* - can now be seen as a consequence of an attempt to heal the dichotomy of subject and object noted as the main problem arising out of Moore's epistemology. Two factors are involved here. The first concerns the writer's view of the nature of reality, the second her concern with the nature and reality of consciousness.

As to the first point, having noted that both isolated consciousness and brute fact appear incomplete, we can suggest that an adequate account of reality implies a unity of the two. We can say of Virginia Woolf, as Beckett says of Proust<sup>34</sup> that she

*understands the meaning of Baudelaire's definition of reality as 'the adequate union of subject and object.'*

We can see this in her own definition of 'reality':

*What is meant by 'reality'? I would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable - now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps*

*some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech - and then there it is again in an omnibus in the uproar of Piccadilly. Sometimes, too, it seems to dwell in shapes too far away for us to discern what their nature is. But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. This is what remains over when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge; that is what remains of past time and of our loves and hates. Now the writer, as I think, has the chance to live more than other people in the presence of this reality. It is his business to find it and collect it and communicate it to the rest of us<sup>35</sup>.*

Reality, then, is not the series of random impressions or objects but it is to be found there - that is, through an act of perception. It is not the "skin of the day" but what remains in memory and consciousness; and it is the writer - who both observes and creates - who is most fully aware of and familiar with it.

If reality lies in the fusion of subject and object, value and fact, then it follows that the sense of reality is threatened as soon as either one of these is called into question. We have seen the importance of contact with the external reality, we must also suggest now that the reality of consciousness itself may be in doubt. One surprising lacuna in Moore's epistemology - surprising in view of his conclusions concerning ultimate value in the *Principia* - is his failure to say anything about the nature or processes of consciousness itself - what he in fact emphasises, is its 'transparency'<sup>36</sup>. Such a notion of consciousness, however, reduces it to a mere receiver of impressions which constantly modify it. The continuity of a particular consciousness - of the self - thus becomes, as in Stephen's account of Hume's philosophy

quoted earlier, a 'fiction': This is certainly a notion of consciousness of which Virginia Woolf was aware:

*The mind receives a myriad of impressions - trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel<sup>37</sup>.*

But its consequence is the destruction of the fusion and interaction of consciousness and its objects from which reality emerges. The individual, his separateness, is thus destroyed through the pressure of external reality - like Septimus:

*Naked, defenceless, the exhausted, the friendless received the impress of Sir William's will<sup>38</sup>.*

In "The Lady in the Looking-Glass"<sup>39</sup> the individual is finally seen as a hollow shell around a vacuum.

*She stood naked in that pitiless light. And there was nothing. Isabella was perfectly empty.*

And a similar idea underlies the imagery of vacancy in *Jacob's Room* - a book enacting the search for a particular consciousness, a particular personality. There is, however, an alternative way of looking at these aspects of the work which suggests the inadequacy of this notion of consciousness. For consciousness does not merely receive impressions, it also - as "An Unwritten Novel" and "The Mark on the Wall" suggest - creates its own fantasies, whilst the apparent vacuity of another individual may be only apparent, the result of his opacity to other subjectivities. Thus throughout *Jacob's Room* we see all those who know Jacob making conjectures as to his 'character': It is only from the position of the reader -

or the writer - that we see the inadequate and fragmentary nature of these conjectures, and this is a consequence not of the emptiness but of the complexity of Jacob<sup>40</sup>. The reality of consciousness, of the self, is thus preserved but in the process we have been brought back to the old problem of the separation of consciousness and its object - of the inner and outer realities, and now with the further complication of a separation between consciousness. To see Virginia Woolf's attempts to overcome these problems we must turn to her theory and practice of fiction

### *Fiction and Reality*

The problem of the relation between consciousness and its objects becomes, in the discussion of fiction, the critical problem concerning the relation between the creative, imaginative activity of the novelist and the material from the world about him on which this works. This latter relation, for Virginia Woolf, is not one of imitation - that is to say, her realism is 'conscious' rather than 'conscientious'. This is made clear in the essay "Phases of Fiction"<sup>41</sup> in which she suggests that the 'Poets' give a more complete picture and sense of reality than do the 'Truth-Tellers'. Yet if we are to say that Virginia Woolf is a poet, we must also add, as does E.M. Forster<sup>42</sup> that

*She is a poet, who wants to write something as near a novel as possible.*

The point is that she does write novels and not poems, the reason being that the novel is both the genre most open to the richness and contingency of life<sup>43</sup> and yet, in its formal aspects, also satisfies consciousness' demands for order. Virginia Woolf's constant aim was to realize both these potentialities of the form:

*What I was going to say was that I think writing must be formal. The art must be respected. This struck me reading some of my notes here, for if one lets the mind run loose it becomes agnostic; personal, which I detest. At the same time the irregular fire must be there...<sup>44</sup>*

In writing *The Years* this duality was brought home to her:

*Anyhow, in this book I have discovered that there must be contrast; one strata or layer can't be developed intensively, as I did I expect in The Waves, without harm to the others,*

*It struck me tho' that I have now reached a further stage in my writer's advance. I see that there are four dimensions: all to be produced, in human life; and that leads to a far richer grouping and proportion. I mean: I; and the not I; and the outer and the inner<sup>45</sup>.*

Fiction, then, may offer a solution, a model for the relation of consciousness and external reality. Before discussing this more generally, however, we shall first consider various attempts within the fiction to establish such a relation.

Some of the early stories - "Blue and Green," "The String Quartet," and "A Haunted House," for example - are merely impressionist studies, attempts at rendering the myriad sensations and processes of consciousness. Yet, as we have seen, once the notion of the transparency of consciousness is rejected, such sketches can no longer be held to do justice to the reality of the external object. On a larger scale even *The Waves* - as Virginia Woolf herself suggests in the passage quoted above - tends to negate the objects and events of the external world through their

absorption into the consciousness of the book's characters; even the death of Percival is distanced and diminished by its presentation solely through this medium. The rendering of consciousness alone, then, leads to an incomplete and distorted picture of reality: and this, as "The Mark on the Wall" suggests is not merely because of consciousness' power of autonomous fantasy. It is also related to the fact that each consciousness - each "Centre of self," to use George Elliot's phrase - is the centre of a different reality, different because perceived differently. We have seen already how this fragmentation of reality follows from Moore's epistemology. In "Kew Gardens" it is taken to extremes through the fiction of rendering a snail's consciousness of the world and events around itself - its reality. But even within the sphere of human life we see in this story how each pair or group of figures moves in its own particular world. The problems of abstracting from this multiplicity of worlds the 'true' nature of external reality becomes even more acute for the novelist since, however much Moore and others may insist that this reality does *exist* independent of perception, it cannot be *described* without the intervention of consciousness. Description becomes one more 'screen' erected against reality:

*But how describe the world seen without a self? There are no words. Blue, red, - even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting the light through<sup>46</sup>.*

Thus the attempt to render the naked "thing in itself" is bound to fail: it does not only in the "Time Passes" section of *To The Lighthouse* where the description of change in the house and its surroundings are interspersed with, and can be said to exist for the sake of, bracketed information about the characters of the book;

but also in the italicized sections of *The Waves*. Here the insistently metaphoric character of the writing<sup>47</sup> indicated the consciousness that perceives, interprets and describes.

Yet, of course, to say that description, that consciousness is a 'screen' to reality is a fallacy since the notion of reality we have already underlined insists on the presence of both object and consciousness. Virginia Woolf's attempts to render the external world in the absence of consciousness may correspond to Moore's refutation of 'to be is to be perceived' and of course the external world must exist independently if its relation to consciousness is to be effective, but it is something of an aberration from the body of her fictional theory and practice. Thus Bennett and Galsworthy are criticized as materialists not only for their emphasis on sheer imitation but also for failing to include consciousness in their picture of the world.

*I believe that all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite. I believe that all novels, that is to say, deal with character, and that it is to express character.... that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved.*

*"... for Mrs. Brown is eternal, Mrs. Brown is human nature,... there she sits and not one of the Edwardian writers has so much as looked at her. They have looked very powerfully, searchingly, and sympathetically out of the window; at factories, at Utopias, even at the decoration and upholstery of the carriage; but never at her, never at life, never at human nature."<sup>48</sup>*

Yet the consciousness to be described is not that of the novelist: it is the reality of Mrs. Brown "imposing itself on another person" that lies at the genesis and the heart of the novel and this independent reality must be constantly recognized - as it is not in "An Unwritten Novel." We return, then, to the problem of how one consciousness - now that of the writer - is to transcend its own limits and not only recognize the reality but perceive the



nature of another consciousness.

The relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay suggests one solution: the barriers between selves are broken down by an intuition guided by love:

*She knew then - she knew without having learned.<sup>49</sup>*

Yet there remains both an element of opacity - even to his wife - in Mr. Ramsay, the recognition of which is, paradoxically, one aspect of her love:

*Not for the world would she have spoken to him, realizing, from the familiar signs, his eyes averted, and some curious gathering together of his person, as if he wrapped himself about and needed privacy into which to regain his equilibrium, that he was outraged and anguished<sup>50</sup>.*

More damaging, is the limitation of this love and hence of this intuition - thus Mrs. Ramsay cannot respond so sympathetically to Charles Tansley whose character differs from her husband's less intrinsically than as a result of his worldly position and failure. There is, furthermore, a residue of egotism - and whether this is actual or a result of Virginia Woolf's failure in realization, the effect is the same - in Mrs. Ramsay's consciousness of herself as both spiritual and organizing centre of the group.

A more adequate connection between consciousness and others is suggested in the comment on Mrs. Brown:

*... for Mrs. Brown is eternal, Mrs. Brown is human nature, Mrs. Brown changes only on the surface.*

Whether or not we accept this notion of a common and eternal human

nature<sup>51</sup> we can see its appeal for a consciousness wishing to reach others yet feeling itself trapped in its own circle, and we can see its importance as both ideological and structural principle in a novel like *Mrs. Dalloway*. This principle is outlined in the novelist's own comment on the book:

*I should say a good deal about The Hours and my discovery: how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters: I think that gives exactly what I want: humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect and each comes to daylight at the present moment<sup>52</sup>.*

The real connection between Mr. Dalloway the society lady and Septimus Warren Smith the shell-shocked ex-clerk is not the fortuitous surface conjunctions of their lives - the cloud advertising, the Prime Minister's car and the chimes of Big Ben - but is intrinsic to the depths of their consciousness<sup>53</sup>. The more superficial - and, it must be admitted, contrived connections are not, however, redundant since they constitute an attempt to relate two of the "dimensions" of human life - the inner and the outer.

The suggestion of an underlying unity of selves is more successfully realized, however, through its counterpointing with superficial differences: thus in *Between the Acts* the individuality, indeed, animosity, of the characters is emphasised whilst the pageant itself - that is, art - demonstrates a unity through time and across social class. Thus the sudden placing of a mirror on the stage implicates the audience in the show, and the lives, they have been watching;

That it is here art which reveals this indicates that for the imprisoned consciousness writing itself may provide a therapy. Virginia Woolf's criticism of Joyce is relevant here (and not its accuracy but its implications for her own effort in writing concern

us):

*But it is possible to press a little further and wonder whether we may not refer our sense of being in a bright yet narrow room, confined and shut in, rather than enlarged and set free, to some limitation imposed by the method as well as by the mind. Is it the method that inhibits the creative power? Is it due to the method that we feel neither jovial nor magnanimous, but centred in a self which, in spite of its tremor of susceptibility, never embraces or creates what is outside itself and beyond?*<sup>54</sup>

In writing, the dissolution of the barriers of consciousness - as experienced by Bernard<sup>55</sup> - becomes not the loss but the transcendence of the individual consciousness, the reality of which is asserted by its own activity in the creative process of writing. The validity of its connection with the "not I" is given not by any crude form of verification but by the sense of expansion and liberation of one consciousness into others, and of a satisfying order achieved through the interaction and collaboration of consciousness and its objects. Thus in *Between the Acts* the pageant - both product and story of human life and consciousness is twice saved from failure by uncontrollable factors - the appearance of the cows and the sudden rain<sup>56</sup>. The incidents recall Pope's words on the interaction of Art and Nature:

*Parts answering parts shall slide into a whole,  
Spontaneous beauties all around advance,  
Start ev'n from difficulty, strike from chance;  
Nature shall join you; ...*<sup>57</sup>

Yet for Virginia Woolf this ordering seems less spontaneous, more

precarious, its achievement far more dependent on selection and exclusion by consciousness: the absorption of the external world by that of consciousness noted in *The Waves*, our sense of narrowness in the social range of her characters, the uneasy feeling that the asserted unity of human personality is, in the novels, rather a matter of her failure fully to stand outside her own sensibility and personality: we have only to measure Virginia Woolf against the Tolstoy she frequently praised to recognize this failure. If writing is a form of therapy it will also tend to be an escape from aspects of the world:

*It was the night C. killed herself. We were walking along that silent blue street with the scaffolding. I saw all the violence and unreason crossing in the air: ourselves small; a tumult outside: something terrifying; unreason - shall I make a book out of this? It would be a way of bringing order and speed again into my world<sup>58</sup>.*

Thus, even in writing *The Waves* where the effort to give

*the whole of the present society - nothing less: facts as well as the vision<sup>59</sup>*

is most sustained, the effort to inclusiveness becomes absorbed in the problem of form - "how to adjust the two worlds" of art and life, internal and external reality. With this problem we are brought back to our starting point - the relation between consciousness and its objects. The purpose of this paper has been to understand Virginia Woolf's effort to achieve a satisfactory relation between the two rather than to evaluate her achievement; and if we return to the notion of reality offered earlier - "the adequate union of subject and object" it follows that not simply

inclusiveness but the order perceived by consciousness must be our criterion for the achievement of realism.

Although Proust takes the emphasis on consciousness much further than Virginia Woolf - for example, his archetype of the artist is the musician who works in the subjective world of time, whilst hers is the painter, working in the external world of space - another comment in Beckett's essay on the French writer is to the point here. Seeing the object in itself, he suggests, is a matter of fully conscious perception:

*when the object is perceived as particular and unique and not merely the member of a family, when it appears independent of any general notion and detached from the sanity of a cause, ... then and only then may it be a source of enchantment. Unfortunately Habit has laid its veto on this form of perception, its action being precisely to hide the essence - The Idea - of the object in the haze of conception + preconception<sup>60</sup>.*

Thus it is only consciousness as intellect, not as intuition, which acts as a screen to the external - we recall the opposition of intellect and intuition in *To the Lighthouse*. Beckett adds that it is habit which eliminates suffering whilst living and perceiving consciously is the gateway to both suffering and reality. This explains why Virginia Woolf's emphasis on the ordering achieved through consciousness is not escapism. Since it does not eliminate suffering - it is the habitual complacency of Sir William Bradshaw not the imagination and sensibility of either Mrs. Dalloway or Septimus Warren Smith which does this.

To say that reality is the union of subject and object is to say that, whilst the external world does exist independently its reality - significance and value - is only realized through a

conscious rather than habitual perception of it - that is why the italicized passages of *The Waves* achieve, through their metaphoric writing, an effect of vividness rather than detachment<sup>61</sup>.

Furthermore, since both halves of Moore's dualism have reality, the elimination of consciousness is equally a distortion of the total reality: what Virginia Woolf attempts is to communicate and activate both a consciousness of the external world and of the inner world of consciousness itself. Her work is an assertion of the validity of consciousness - and thus of art - as a mode of perceiving reality, a means of establishing relationship between the dimensions of human life: "I and the not I; and the outer and the inner." From this viewpoint consciousness and art do not distort reality but offer a frame for those moments in which we are most fully aware of it:

*But the breeze blew the great sheet out; and over the edge he surveyed the landscape - flowing fields, heath and woods, Framed they became a picture. Had he been a painter, he would have fixed his easel here, where the country barred by trees, looked like a picture. Then the breeze fell<sup>62</sup>.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Damian Grant, *Realism* (Methuen, 1970), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, H. Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot* (Methuen, 1965). A.C. Bolgan, "The Philosophy of F.H. Bradley and the Mind and Art of T.S. Eliot" *English Literature and Britain Philosophy* ed. S.P. Rosenbaum (U. of Chicago Press, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> They are, for example, thus described by J. Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* (Penguin Books, 1968).

There is an analogy between the relation of Moore's Critical Realism to naive materialism, and that of Virginia Woolf's theory of fiction to contemporary 'realists' like Bennett.

<sup>4</sup> "The Nature and Reality of Objects of Perception" *Philosophical Studies* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922).

<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the article entitled "The Refutation of Idealism" also published in *Philosophical Studies*, works through arguments from logic and linguistic usage, rather than from metaphysics.

<sup>6</sup> Even the nature of the influence of Moore's ethics on Bloomsbury as a whole is not always clear. The argument on these point between various members of the group is discussed by D.J. Watt, "G.E. Moore and the Bloomsbury Group" *English Literature in Transition*. Vol. xii 1969 pp. 119-34.

<sup>7</sup> S.P. Rosenbaum, "The Philosophical Realism of Virginia Woolf" *English Literature and British Philosophy*, p. 319.

<sup>8</sup> See D.J. Watt, loc. cit. p. 121.

<sup>9</sup> Passmore, op. cit. p. 205.

<sup>10</sup> A.D. Nuttall, *A Common Sky: Philosophy and the Literary Imagination* (Chatto & Windus for Sussex U.P. 1974).

<sup>11</sup> Thus, in a sense, an effort to correct Berkely's failure to attach reality to *both* non-mental 'things' and - in Locke's terminology - 'ideas'.

<sup>12</sup> L. Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, quoted by A.D. Nuttall, op. cit. p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> And not without some justification: see for example the notion of reality suggested in the essay "Modern Fiction" *Collected Essays* (New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), vol. II.

<sup>14</sup> "The Refutation of Idealism," p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> Thus,

*sometimes the sensation of blue exists in my mind and sometimes it does not; and knowing, as we do now, that the sensation of blue includes two different elements, namely consciousness and blue, the question arises whether, when the sensation of blue exists, it is the consciousness which exists, of the blue which exists, or both. And one point at least is plain: namely that these three alternatives are all different from one another. So that if any one tells us that to say 'Blue exists' is the same thing as to say that 'Both blue and consciousness exist', he makes a mistake.*

(Moore, loc. cit. pp. 17-18).

<sup>16</sup> This is discussed by Passmore, op. cit. pp. 209-12.



- 17 And for Moore, 'qualities' of objects - blue for instance - are *objects of perception*.
- 18 The later notion of "sense-data" - discussed by Passmore, p. 210 - doesn't solve this problem, being largely indistinguishable from the Lockian 'idea'.
- 19 G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*. (C.U.P. 1971), p. 19.
- 20 The terms are those of D. Grant, *op. cit.*
- 21 *Op. cit.* p. 15.
- 22 V. Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* ed, L. Woolf (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc. 1954), p. 66.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 W. Stevens, "Adagia" *Opus Posthumous*.
- 25 Thus Rhoda in *The Waves* (Penguin Books, 1964), p. 22
- But I will stretch my toes so that they touch the rail at the end of the bed; I will assure myself, touching the rail, of something hard. Now I cannot sink; cannot altogether fall through the thin sheet now... Oh, to wake from dreaming! Look, there is the chest of drawers. Let me pull myself out of these waters.*
- 26 *A Writer's Diary*, p. 80. Leonard Woolf's editing of the diary makes it difficult to find any fairly explicit account of the nature and causes of Virginia Woolf's periods of madness: some of the private letters quoted in Quentin Bell's biography are more explicit.

27 "The Mark on the Wall" *A Haunted House and Other Stories*  
(Penguin Books, 1973).

28 *Principia Ethica*, ch. 4.

29 "An Unwritten Novel" *A Haunted House and Other Stories*.

30 The contrast with Keats on this point is illustrated by the comparison between the rejection of the fantasy of "An Unwritten Novel" and stanza iv of the *Ode to a Grecian Urn* in which the "little town" that is nowhere present, becomes through imagination more 'real' than the forms present on the urn.

31 *A Writer's Diary*, p. 96.

32 See *Mrs. Dalloway* (Penguin Books, 1964), pp. 110-13 and 164-5.

33 "The Mark on the Wall" p. 45.

34 S. Beckett, "Proust" *Proust and Three Dialogues* (John Calder, 1965), p. 76.

35 *A Room of One's Own*, quoted by D.J. Watt, loc. cit, p. 126.

36 See Passmore, op. cit. p. 209.

37 "Modern Fiction", p. 106.

38 *Mrs. Dalloway*. p. 113.

39 "The Lady in the Looking-Glass" *A Haunted House and Other Stories*.  
p. 99.

40 Isabella's emptiness in the short-story can also be seen the reduction of a subject to the status of an object by another subject. This Sartrean notion occurs also in *The Waves*:

*Oh, but there is your face. I catch your eye. I, who had been thinking myself so vast, a temple, a church, a whole universe, unconfined and capable of being everywhere on the verge of things and here too, am now nothing but what you see - an elderly man, rather heavy, grey above the ears, who (I see myself in the glass) leans one elbow on the table, and holds in his left hand a glass of old brandy. That is the blow you have dealt me." (p. 251).*

But it has added ethical implications in the context of an ethic - Moore's which places value solely in the existence of certain subjective states.

41 "Phases of Fiction" *Collected Essays* vol. II.

42 E.M. Forster, "Virginia Woolf" *Two Cheers for Democracy*.

43 This point is well-argued - if it needs arguing - by M. Bradbury, "The Open Form: the Novel and Reality" *Possibilities* (O.U.P. 1973).

44 *A Writer's Diary*, pp. 67-8.

45 *A Writer's Diary*, pp. 248 & 250.

46 *The Waves*, p. 247.

47 Almost any passage will serve as example:

*The sun rose. Bars of yellow and green fell on the shore, gilding the ribs of the eaten-out boat*

and making the sea-holly and its mailed leaves gleam blue as steel. Light almost pierced the thin swift waves as the- raced fan-shaped over the beach. The girl who had shaken her head and made all the jewels, the topaz, the aquamarine, the water coloured jewels with sparks of fire in them, dance, now bared her browns and with wide-opened eyes drove a straight pathway over the waves." (p. 62)

48 "Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown" *Collected Essays* (Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1967), vol. I, pp. 324 & 330.

49 *To the Lighthouse* (Penguin Books, 1964), p. 34.

50 Its implications for character in the novel are made clear also in Lawrence's well-known letter to Edward Garnett:

*You mustn't look in my novel for the old stable ego of character. There is another ego, according to whose action the individual is unrecognizable and passes through, as it were, allotropic states... (Like as diamond and coal are the same pure single element of carbon... And my diamond might be coal or soot, and my theme is carbon."*

52 *A Writer's Diary*, p. 59.

53 This point is discussed more fully by Jean Guiguet, *Virginia Woolf and Her Works* (Hogarth Press, 1965), pp. 234-7.

54 "Modern Fiction," p. 109.

55 For example,

*and yet, when I meet an unknown person, and try to break off, here at this table, what I call*

"my life," *It is not one life that I look back upon; I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs.*"  
(*The Waves*, p. 237).

Virginia Woolf's own "Yes, I'm 20 people." (*A Writer's Diary*, p. 33) recalls Keats' "chameleon poet."

<sup>56</sup> *Between the Acts* (Hogarth Press, 1941), pp. 165 and 210.

<sup>57</sup> Pope, "Moral Essays" Epistle III 11.66-9.

<sup>58</sup> *A Writer's Diary*, p. 176.

<sup>59</sup> *A Writer's Diary*, p. 191.

<sup>60</sup> C. Beckett, *loc. cit.* pp. 22-3.

<sup>61</sup> We can contrast this with the intention and effect of, for example, Robbe-Grillet's non-metaphoric description.

<sup>62</sup> *Between the Acts*, p. 18.