

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Virginia Woolf was a self-proclaimed atheist, yet her fictional and personal writing reveal her ecstatic consciousness. Characters in Woolf's novels experience ecstasy, and her letters and diaries support the theory that she herself had experienced ecstatic consciousness. Major figures in the philosophy of religion assert that ecstatic consciousness is the root of all religion; it is primary to religious dogma and doctrine. Therefore, despite the fact that Woolf did not speak of God with the theistic language of her culture, she can be understood anew as a religious person.

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Measures of Reality: The Religious Life of Virginia Woolf

by

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This thesis is dedicated to Douglas and Jules.

Measures of Reality: The Religious Life of Virginia Woolf

Chapter I God, Atheism and Reality

Virginia Woolf is commonly perceived as an atheist, and she did reject traditional notions of God by proclaiming that she was not a Christian—she was an atheist. Yet her writing reflects an awareness of the kinds of experiences that give birth to religion and of an understanding of reality very similar to the “core structure” of religion.

In several letters Woolf explicitly separated herself from Christianity and her society’s concept of God. To her sister Vanessa Bell she wrote about T.S. Eliot when he became a Christian in 1928: “He has become an Anglo-Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to church. I was really shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean, there’s something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God.”¹ Several years previously she claimed, “We are not Christians.”² Clearly, she had no interest in organized religion.

Woolf proclaimed her atheism to Violet Dickinson, the confidant of her youth. “Nothing comes up to the Church Service in these old Cathedrals; though I don’t believe a word of it and never shall. Still the language and the sentiment of it all are dignified and grand above words.”³ Again, on Christmas she lays no claim to Christianity: “I should have saluted the happy morn had I been a Christian.”⁴ At times, what appears to irritate her is the hypocrisy and shallowness of the Church. Woolf remarked to her cousin,

¹ Nigel Nicolson, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Volume Three: 1923-1928* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977) letter 1848/pp. 457-58.

² Nicolson, *Letters: Volume Three*, letter 1520/p. 149.

³ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume One: 1888-1912* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975) letter 186/p. 148.

Emma Vaughan, in 1902, “I hope you are regaining your wonted activity—and not imitating the ways of the Church—which seems utterly gone over to the bad.”⁵ Years later, in 1911, she commented specifically on the hypocrisy and shallowness of Christianity:

A great attack was made upon my faith this Christmas, and I am led to think that Atheists are still persecuted. For instance, wishing to read just now, I was dinned crazy by a cracked church bell, which didn't peal, but merely hammered, like an arrogant and bigoted street seller. Then the congregation sings without understanding, and as for the psalms, which all the little boys and errand boys, sing, I never heard anything so senseless in my life. However, I suppose it would be too rash to burn them all. They must have imaginations. I am more charitable about them than they are about me.⁶

Indeed, Woolf seemed to regard Christians as slightly childlike and beneath her; the implication is that Woolf understood “the way things were” better than the silly Christians. Referring to Janet Case, Woolf's tutor while a teenager, Woolf wrote, “She is full of tender humanities, and a kind of cultured Christianity, though she is too well educated to be a Christian.”⁷ In mid-1910, when for the second time admitted to Twickenham for convalescence, she was coherent enough to write and receive letters. Observing her female caretaker and the other women around her there, Woolf wrote to Vanessa that they seemed “ruined” by religion. The women admired her gifts but felt that Virginia was “left . . . in the dark.”⁸ Once no longer at Twickenham, Virginia is hounded by the caretaker, Jean Thomas, to become a Christian. We read:

My only other letter was from Jean, enclosing ‘What I believe’ by Tolstoy. She sent a long serious letter with it, exhorting me to Christianity, which

⁴ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume One*, letter 331/p. 271.

⁵ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume One*, letter 63/p. 64.

⁶ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume One*, letter 549/p. 448.

⁷ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume One*, letter 444/p. 363.

⁸ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume One*, letter 531/p. 431.

will save me from insanity. How we are persecuted! The self conceit of Christians is really unendurable. But the poor woman has got into one of her phrases, which lasts a whole letter, about something lacking in your life, which alone will bring etc. etc.⁹

Despite Woolf's atheistic declarations, she appears to have had a sense of ultimate reality, to use theologian Paul Tillich's phrase for the sacred. This is evidenced in her novels, letters and diaries, which reflect her ecstatic experiences, that is, her religious experiences. Around the time when Woolf was born, Richard Jeffries published *The Story of My Heart*, which relates his search to express his deep mystical consciousness. He was a self-proclaimed atheist and did not find expression for what he knew in the theism available to him in the 1880s. Indeed, he rejected quite vigorously the religious language of his day, yet contemporary religious critics see him as a particularly interesting mystic because he had rejected the *status quo* and expressed his mystical knowledge in a new way.¹⁰ For Jeffries, as Robinson frames it, "[T]he idea of a God is, for him, totally inadequate for the reality which the soul touches but cannot hope to grasp."¹¹ Jeffries stood outside of theistic understanding to express what he knew.

I see Jeffries as a forerunner of Woolf, who also stood outside of institutional religion but was deeply religious simply because she had a sense of ultimate reality. To put it another way, Woolf was religious because she saw "The Way Things Are."¹² One could also speak of her as religious due to the similarities between her experience and the picture of reality portrayed by the world's religions. The categories Woolf had to express

⁹ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume One*, letter 546/p. 442.

¹⁰ See F.C. Happold, *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology* (Harmonsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1979) p. 384; John A.T. Robinson, *Exploration into God* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967) pp. 151-153.

¹¹ Robinson, p. 152.

what she knew were in her own writing (both fiction and non-fiction), yet not in the typical religious language of her day.

Indeed, she wrote: “fiction is like praying, nobody should listen; it relieves the soul.”¹³ So close to herself and from so deep a source was her writing. As early as 1904 she wrote to Violet Dickinson that writing was her “natural means of expression.”¹⁴ By 1924, she spoke of artistic expression as the core of the soul to an artist friend, Jacques Raverat, who was slowly dying of multiple sclerosis: “But could you tell me about your painting now? And isn’t it the nut, core, kernel (as my Quaker aunt used to call it) of your soul!”¹⁵ Because writing was so personal for Woolf, she became distraught when friends read her work. She admitted, “but I’m a little morbid about people reading my books.”¹⁶ She worried about being accepted after friends had her fiction before them. To know that what is in her writing is her most passionately intimate expression, one must remember her thoughts to Vita Sackville West: “What are they, I wonder, the very intimate things, one says in print? There’s a whole family of them. Its [sic] the proof, to me, of being a writer, that one expresses them in print only.”¹⁷ And she explored the contours of her mind in letters, for she wrote to Clive Bell in 1907, “A true letter, so my theory runs, should be as a film of wax pressed close to the graving in the mind.”¹⁸ What Woolf expressed in print only are revelations of her religious life and understanding—her

¹² Andrew M. Greeley, *Ecstasy: A Way of Knowing* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974) p. 61. This phrase refers to the reality a mystic apprehends.

¹³ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume Three*, letter 1460/p. 100.

¹⁴ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume One*, letter 183/p. 144.

¹⁵ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume Three*, letter 1496/p. 131.

¹⁶ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume Three*, letter 1524/p. 154.

¹⁷ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume Three*, letter 1670/p. 291.

¹⁸ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume One*, letter 345/p. 282.

“religious emotions.” Thus in part one I will describe the experiences and understanding that give rise to her ecstatic expression.

Ecstasy is a state of being outside of or beyond one’s normal, routine, or everyday consciousness. In this exalted state, one, in a way, transcends one’s self and perceives or experiences the extraordinary. Most basically, these experiences can be described as a unity with a force greater than one’s self which provides an individual with a knowledge of the way things are. Ecstatic consciousness is religious simply because it apprehends *what is*—the ineffable, that of which we cannot speak clearly, God. These experiences thus give birth to religion. This form of consciousness is a way of knowing that is quite different from our empirical knowledge, yet it is just as valid as the pointers of science, perhaps even more so because it lies at the center of the soul. Although it is not always accurate to strictly separate the forms of ecstatic consciousness, it may be helpful to understand some general types, as noted by philosophers of religion. The categories of ecstatic consciousness are: transcendent experiences, shamanism, mysticism, and radical amazement.

Briefly, transcendent experience is a type of ecstasy, but it is much more general and less ethereal than mysticism. An example of a transcendent experience is a near death experience, which people have described as a peaceful out of body experience during which they were still connected to the earthly realm yet spiritually removed from their bodies. One is still conscious of the self and the material world. Shamanism is also a category of ecstasy, and it could even be considered a form of transcendence. The shaman possesses the powers to communicate with the dead and is a communication link

between the dead and the living. To enter into this passage of reality where the spirits of the dead can be found, the shaman must leave his or her ordinary state of consciousness.

Mysticism is an overwhelming understanding of unity with all that is, with ultimate reality, with God. Most centrally, it is an experience of non-duality. As Nicolas Berdyaev described it, mysticism “is a preoccupation with primal realities, with the existential mystery. . . . Mysticism is a *revelation of revelations*, a revelation of the realities behind symbols.”¹⁹ More succinctly, mysticism is an “experimental knowledge of God.”²⁰ This means that knowledge about God is through direct experience based on intuition rather than reason. There are two types or categories of mysticism: extravertive and introvertive. An extravertive mystical experience is one in which the world is still readily apprehended. The mystical experience is perceived through physical reality. Hence, one’s eyes are still open. In an introvertive mystical experience, the world is no longer “seen” by the experient. The physical world has fallen away from the mystic’s consciousness. One’s eyes are closed.

Radical amazement, as described by the great Jewish philosopher of religion Abraham Heschel, is an extravertive mystical experience and is both a singular mystical moment and a way of seeing. It is a moment of crystallized existence, when the trivialities of life seem to melt away, leaving one with a simple yet profound knowing. It is a breath of God, a moment of stillness, a glimpse of the holy. One fleetingly hears only the soundless music of the ineffable. Yet radical amazement is also a way of seeing the world that lies within the primordial current of knowing in each of us; in other words,

¹⁹ Nicolas Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality* (Translated by George Reavey. London: The Centenary Press, 1939) p. 131.

deep within each of us lies the innate ability to know life in a manner unclouded by our own concepts, thoughts and trivia. Within radical amazement, we see the world afresh, continually aware of how amazing the fact of life itself is. Radical amazement is ecstatic simply because within it, one is fleetingly beyond one's ordinary self and one gains a knowledge of the way things are.²¹

In 1902 William James published his famous work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in which he delineated core characteristics of mysticism. His description remains apt for our understanding. Mystical states are marked by four characteristics: 1) ineffability, 2) a noetic quality, 3) transiency, and 4) passivity.

1) Mystical consciousness is undomesticated by language and categories; the experient is bereft of his or her usual means of expression. Language only seems to point to the newly known. Indeed, as Buber asserts:

Of all the experiences which are said, in order to mark their incomparability, to be incommunicable, only ecstasy is by its very nature the ineffable. It is such because the human being who experiences it has become a unity into which no more dualities extend.²²

Our "usual" plane of dialectics and dichotomies has been superseded by ineffable unity. Buber continues, "Yes, it is true: the ecstatic cannot say the unsayable. He says the other thing—images, dreams, visions—not unity. He speaks, he must speak, because the Word burns in him."²³ Yet, as Andrew Greeley points out, mystical knowledge is without

²⁰ Happold, p. 41.

²¹ See Abraham Heschel's *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, Inc., 1951).

²² Martin Buber in Introduction to *Ecstatic Confessions*, edited by Paul Mendes-Flohr (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) pp. 4-5.

²³ Buber in Mendes-Flohr, p. 9. Buber and other authors cited within this text use non-inclusive gender language. I have chosen not to change the original language but to acknowledge that had these authors been aware of the importance of inclusive language, they most likely would have used it.

symbols and therefore difficult to express.²⁴ The ecstatic feels that his or her personal and holy experience is limited by words. Words miserably fail to elucidate the mystic's truth.

2) Mysticism is also noetic, that is, a way of knowing. Experience, not rationality, is the seat of mystical knowledge. The intense experience of unity, a complete loss of ego boundaries, fills the mystic with knowledge, derived not from empirical knowledge but from an illumination. Although illuminations can be similar, they are always couched in a person's cultural situation. For example, an illumination may make someone aware of immortality or give them a sense that the universe is teeming with life, but these general illuminations will be filtered through one's culture, whether it be Western, Eastern or atheistic.²⁵ More specifically, for example, a Christian may interpret immortality in an understanding of heaven and an alive universe as a Christ-filled place.

3) The third characteristic James outlined was transiency. These experiences do not last very long. They come and go very quickly. One cannot prolong a mystical state; it passes through one fleetingly. Moreover, mystical experience is so timeless that it slips through our fingers. Mystical consciousness seems to go beyond the hands of the clock, yet one cannot grasp at this most transient of interludes.²⁶ The mystic feels him-or herself caught up in a vacuum with no time. It is always *right now*; there is no before and no after.²⁷ These eternal experiences, when measured in clock-time, pass quickly away, giving the mystic a completely different concept of time. As one person shared:

²⁴ Greeley, pp. 60-61.

²⁵ Bucke, p. 90 as cited in Greeley, p. 19.

²⁶ See Greeley, pp. 16-17; William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, originally published in 1902 (New York: Signet, 1958) p. 293.

²⁷ See Happold, pp. 47-48.

‘I have had similar experiences from time to time. I can only describe them as an opening of a window, or the lifting of a corner of a curtain. They are always brief, not more than a flash, and the effect, or the glimpse they give of something more real than obvious reality, lasts forever.’²⁸

The moments last an eternity and are never long enough. Indeed, the mystics Jan van Ruysbroeck and Meister Eckhart both spoke of the duration of mystical consciousness as “the eternal now.”²⁹

4) Lastly, passivity characterizes mystical states. That is, you cannot *make* these experiences happen. One *receives* them, as opposed to *deciding* to enter such a state. As Greeley explains, “Something besides the conscious, self-controlling reality principle is operating.”³⁰ What is centrally clear is that mysticism is not *chosen* by an individual.³¹

Thus we see that experience is at the heart of mystical knowledge. This contrasts with the rational knowledge of science, which can only point to part of reality, whereas human experience points to more. As Greeley indicates, in a world that had been dependent on science, the mystic claims to know how things really are and is potentially an interpreter of the “other world.” Greeley asserts, “Whether such experiences are noticed or not is probably a function of whether they are at any given moment culturally acceptable.”³² In other words, culture may dictate how acceptable mystical knowledge is in telling us about reality. Huston Smith interprets the final definition of modernity as our dependence on physical evidence, that is, on evidence of *this* ontological level. He

²⁸ As quoted in Meg Maxwell and Verena Tschudin, eds. *Seeing the Invisible* (London: Penguin, 1990) p. 15.

²⁹ Walter T. Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics* (New York: New American Library, Inc., 1960) p. 158.

³⁰ Greeley, p. 17.

³¹ One may, however, facilitate ecstasy by means of one’s lifestyle or use of art, nature, or intoxicants.

³² Greeley, p. 11.

thinks we have become too dependent on rational knowledge, hall marked by science. However, Smith asserts that at the heart of the world's religions is an understanding of reality which sweeps beyond the physical reality we call home. Our soul's home is really beyond our rationality, Smith argues.

According to Smith, the common vision of the world's religions points to a multi-dimensional reality: the terrestrial, the intermediate, the celestial, and the Infinite. The "higher" levels are not accessible to ordinary consciousness. As James expressed it, "[O]ur normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different."³³ Although "beyond" our ordinary reality, our other levels of consciousness are collectively the mirror of our deepest selves.

The higher levels of reality, according to Smith, are not literally elsewhere; they are removed from us only in that they are not accessible to ordinary consciousness. "In this respect the multiple states of being resemble multiple dimensions more than they do multiple levels."³⁴ The terrestrial level of reality is most common to us all. This world is quantifiable into the categories of space, time, energy/matter, and number. For example, here we know color, touch, geography, breathing, science. This is the plane of our universe where most of us understand what it is to be human. Here we think, reason, work, read, love and hate.

³³ James, p. 298.

³⁴ Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992) p. 21.

Above or beyond the terrestrial is the intermediate dimension, often referred to as the subtle or psychic plane. It is, in one sense, far removed from the terrestrial, yet it is a breath away from our perception. Intermediate experience is “often encountered in phantasms,” which are divided into animate and inanimate categories.³⁵ The intermediate houses both. The animate is composed of three forms of subtle bodies: ghosts; “departed souls that are provisionally in limbo, or traversing the intermediate *bardos* (planes), as the Tibetans would say;” and our own subtle bodies, which are disengaged from our bodies when sleeping.³⁶ Inanimate phantasms are archetypes, the collective unconscious, which Jung asserted shape matter as well as mind.

Smith suggests that the experience of many insane people is dominated by encounters with the intermediate plane. He argues that although we pity people who are “mad” as if they have lost their minds, insanity is not always simply a lack. A person’s ability to reason may be replaced with something else which is not necessarily inferior. Pointing out that traditional societies “tend to regard the insane with a species of awe and respect,” Smith obliquely argues that modern societies are not mindful of our place in the psychic plane.³⁷ The intermediate lies within and around us; it governs the terrestrial and reflects the celestial, the next dimension of reality.

The third level of reality is the celestial sphere, the abode of our personal God. One way to refer to it is as the place where God transcendent lives—not representative of the totality of God, but of God’s involvement in the world. The Divine which exists in

³⁵ Smith, p. 38.

³⁶ Smith, p. 39.

³⁷ Smith, p. 43.

the celestial is the God we speak of cosmologically, that is, God as a being separate from the universe.

The infinite is the fourth dimension of reality. Most characteristic of the Infinite is that it is unbounded and undifferentiated, remaining nameless and without distinction. Any images of the Infinite that we might attempt are only analogous terms. Our language simply fails in the face of that which is not finite. In understanding the limitlessness of the Infinite, we begin to grasp the pressure the mystic experiences upon his or her soul in an encounter with the Infinite and the weight of translating the ineffable to the uninitiated.

Because mysticism enables us to know “the more that is”³⁸, it lies at the heart of all religion. Religion finds its roots in mysticism because mysticism gives us knowledge of God and our souls. James describes this phenomenon clearly in his distinction between ecclesiastical religion and personal religion. Personal religion is “the primordial thing” and “more fundamental than either theology or ecclesiasticism.”³⁹ Mysticism is personal religion. In mystical consciousness an individual becomes one with the Absolute, whereas the ecclesiastical religious experience is lived through the attestations of the founders, who themselves were mystics because they had experienced God directly. Therefore, according to James, mystical consciousness is the root of ecclesiastical religion. Henri Bergson supports James’ conclusion, for he saw mysticism as “the source and inner reality of all religion.”⁴⁰

³⁸ “The more that is” can also be named God, the ineffable, the sacred.

³⁹ James, p. 42.

⁴⁰ Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) p. 305.

Heschel, too, described religion as “more than a creed or an ideology”; religion is an experience and cannot be understood when separated from our lives.⁴¹ Radical amazement, which gives us a sense of the ineffable, is the source of all religion. As Heschel understood it, “Religion begins with the sense of the ineffable, with the awareness of a reality that discredits our wisdom, that shatters our concepts. It is, therefore, the ineffable with which we must begin.”⁴² Religion grows out of the universal experience of radical amazement. Insofar as radical amazement and mysticism speak of the mystery to which our souls are drawn, they are religious, yet they are not doctrinally or dogmatically circumscribed.⁴³

Because mysticism is not controlled by institutional religion, having ecstatic experiences is not dependent upon being affiliated with a religious tradition or upon “belief” in God. As accounts show, these experiences happen to anyone.⁴⁴ Heschel perceived radical amazement as

a universal insight into an objective aspect of reality, of which all men are at all times capable; . . . The sense of the ineffable is not an esoteric faculty but an ability with which all men are endowed;⁴⁵

And as Plotinus so beautifully spoke of this universal capability, “Shut your eyes and change to and wake another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use.”⁴⁶ Virginia Woolf was one of those few.

⁴¹ Heschel, p. 55.

⁴² Heschel, p. 59.

⁴³ Doctrine and dogma may be two categories we expect to be associated with the religious. However, James defined religion as “*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*” James, p. 42.

⁴⁴ See Maxwell and Tschudin, p. 22; Greeley, pp. 1-5.

⁴⁵ Heschel, p. 19.

⁴⁶ From W.R. Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, quoted in Stace, p.114.

Chapter II Cultural Forces

Although she derides Christianity, Woolf drops hints of believing in God—in *a* God, not necessarily the God of the Church of England. In 1903, while her father was dying from abdominal cancer, Virginia confesses, “The only reason I have to believe in a God is that some life grows in one and out-grows most things. But otherwise—it seems to me he has a heavy hand.”¹ Not dismissing outright belief in a God, in 1906 Virginia wonders what place she has with God the day her beloved older brother Thoby dies: “Goodnight and God—have I a right to a God? send you sleep.”²

An initial force on young Virginia’s concept of God was her father’s fierce agnosticism amidst a tumultuous late childhood and adolescence. Born in 1882 in London to Sir Leslie Stephen and Julia Jackson, Adeline Virginia Stephen was a fiery child until she contracted the whooping cough in 1888.³ After her illness she became increasingly more fragile and vulnerable, which was compounded by multiple deaths in her family at the turn of the century. Her mother died when she was 13, and her surrogate mother, her step-sister Stella, died shortly thereafter.⁴ The adolescent Virginia was left alone with her sister Vanessa, her two brothers, Thoby and Adrian, her two step-brothers, George and Gerald Duckworth, and her father. Vanessa, three years older than Virginia, was a comfort to some extent, but being the eldest female, she was consequently overwhelmed with the business of a well-to-do English household and did not have much

¹ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume One*, letter 91/p. 85.

² Nicolson, *Letters: Volume One*, letter 301/p. 248.

³ Lee, Hermione. *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997) p. 104.

⁴ Her father died when she was 22, and her brother Thoby died when she was 24.

energy to devote to Virginia.⁵ Her brothers were sent away to school for their education, as was customary for males in England. Virginia was left vulnerable to the forces of her step-brothers and her father. While the attentions of George and Gerald were at times kind and charitable, George's sexual abuse may have convinced Virginia that the world was evil.⁶ Indeed, her aversion to the Duckworths remained strong throughout her life.

Toward her father, Virginia felt deep ambivalence. She both loved and hated him. She was extraordinarily like him, yet she always worked to set herself up in opposition to him. She loved him, for his gifts to her were reading, literature, and critical thinking. Therein lay the root of their relationship.⁷ Yet the force and authority of Sir Leslie Stephen is perhaps best characterized by a family memory of Leslie throwing Virginia by surprise, naked, into the sea on a family vacation. (In this incident Virginia most likely experienced the same helplessness that she would later experience at the hands of her step-brother's sexual advances.)⁸ Leslie's characteristic force and authority bore itself out in his agnostic questioning of God.

After completing his Cambridge education in 1854, with considerable pressure from his father, Leslie Stephen was heading into the clergy. As doubts and Darwinism (the "new science") pressed upon him, he experienced an intense crisis of conscience, which at least one friend attests made him suicidal.⁹ On the other side of the crisis, he declared himself an unbeliever. He would later be described as a non-Christian

⁵ Throughout her life, Virginia would remain exceptionally close to Vanessa.

⁶ See Lee, pp.151-156.

⁷ Leon Edel, *Bloomsbury: A House of Lions* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippencott, 1979) p. 91.

⁸ Edel, p. 86.

⁹ Lee, p. 69.

humanist,¹⁰ which was radical in pro-Christian Victorian England. Leslie was anti-conservative early on: he attacked “religion as the breeding-ground of intolerance and hypocrisy”; he supported university and parliamentary reform, Irish independence, and disestablishment of the Church.¹¹ His opinions on God and religion were put into “An Agnostic’s Apology,” in which he attempted to extricate ethics from religion. Sir Stephen’s beliefs are articulated well by the biographer Noel Gilroy Annan: “Firstly, dogmatic religious systems are unreal; secondly, evidence does not support belief in God’s existence; thirdly, religion demoralises society”.¹² His sharp criticism and attacks on religion prepared the way for the later, modernist deconstruction of the Church.¹³

In stark contrast to her father’s agnostic proclamations, Virginia did something very dangerous: she held the exact opposite view of her father. In “An Agnostic’s Apology,” Leslie Stephen criticized any attempts to describe the nature of God. Referring to a time when she was fifteen or sixteen years old, Virginia remembers: “I was then writing a long picturesque essay upon the Christian religion, I think; called *Religio Laici*, I believe, proving that man has need of a God; but the God was described in process of change[.]”¹⁴ She was exploring the nature of God and she felt the need for a God. As Louise DeSalvo brilliantly points out, Virginia Stephen created a persona, “Miss Jan,” to allow herself to secretly explore theological ideas vastly different from her forcefully agnostic father. DeSalvo asserts that Virginia used Miss Jan to write about her

¹⁰ John W. Bicknell in Jane Marcus, ed., *Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) p. 55.

¹¹ Lee, p.70.

¹² Louise A. DeSalvo in Marcus, p. 114.

¹³ See Lee, p. 70.

¹⁴ Anne Olivier Bell, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume Three: 1925-1930* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980) p. 271.

secret self, to express the realization that her voice would not be heard, and to explore ideas different from her father's. Woolf herself "indicates that writing, for her, established a sense of connection with her own experience, a connection that she apparently did not feel as intensely unless she wrote down her thoughts".¹⁵ Miss Jan and the writing process itself helped Virginia to self-define and to separate herself from her family.

After Sir Leslie Stephen's death in 1904, Vanessa, Thoby, Virginia, and Adrian found themselves with freedom rarely known previously to young adults at the end of the Victorian era. They moved out of their childhood home at 22 Hyde Park Gate and into their own residence at 46 Gordon Square. Although no longer stretched by her father's agnosticism and no longer under his direct power, Woolf's quest for self-definition through her writing never ended, for Virginia was soon in the fold of Bloomsbury's love, rivalry, and defiance of God, amidst which she continued to self-differentiate.

Bloomsbury had its origin in a group of male friends who were members of the Apostles, a secret society at Cambridge University. Thoby Stephen went to Cambridge in 1899 and soon thereafter became an Apostle and fell into intimate friendship with Saxon Sydney-Turner, Desmond MacCarthy, Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf, and, though not an Apostle, Clive Bell. Later Maynard Keynes and Duncan Grant (among others) would fill out the male Cambridge circle. Of greatest influence to these young men was the philosophy of George E. Moore, a Cambridge professor and Apostle who had reading parties for his favored students, which included Leonard and Lytton.¹⁶

¹⁵ DeSalvo in Marcus, p. 103.

¹⁶ Lee, pp. 204-205.

According to Desmond MacCarthy, what the Apostles mainly discussed were “the search for truth, aesthetic emotions and personal relations—love and friendship.”¹⁷ Moore insisted upon truth and reason, rejected original sin, and held that all value is in “the contemplation of beauty, love and truth.”¹⁸ They were to enjoy beautiful objects and to take pleasure in human relationships. The personal ethic of “Moorism” was pleasure. Leonard described Moore as a genius because he discerned the important from the unimportant.¹⁹ He had a passion for truth and often said nothing if there were nothing “truthful” to say, and he demanded his students to be absolutely clear in what they meant.²⁰ What *was* the question? he repeatedly asked his students.²¹

In the pursuit of truth, Moore and his disciples rejected organized religion, yet Moore and his philosophy offered the young men a religion of the mind, a seemingly objective view of reality. Although the Apostles dismissed the idea of a personal savior, some of them nevertheless viewed Moore as their Christ for the revelation he brought to them. Reflecting upon his Cambridge time in the company of Moore, Leonard wrote years later that it seemed they could see for the first time

the nature of truth and reality, of good and evil and character and conduct, substituting for the religious and philosophical nightmares, delusions, hallucinations, in which Jehovah, Christ, and St Paul, Plato, Kant, and Hegel had entangled us, the fresh air and pure light of plain common-sense.²²

¹⁷ Desmond MacCarthy in S.P. Rosenbaum, ed., *The Bloomsbury Group: A Collection of Memoirs, Commentary and Criticism* (Croom Helm Ltd., London: University of Toronto Press, 1975) p. 31.

¹⁸ Quentin Bell (Woolf's nephew), as quoted in Lee, p. 249.

¹⁹ Leonard Woolf in Rosenbaum, p. 100.

²⁰ Leonard Woolf in Rosenbaum, p. 100.

²¹ Edel, p. 46.

²² Leonard Woolf in Rosenbaum, p. 104.

Leonard believed that what had covered their eyes was removed. Moore wanted his students to analyze their assertions and beliefs with common sense. Although common sense is subjective, Moore's dogged pursuit of truth wrought through reason and scrutiny led the young Apostles to question all that was considered respectable in Victorian England, including the Church and Christianity.

An unnamed young man, "whose friendship Leonard prized," wrote to him that he had to part company with Leonard and his friends; he would not be back to Leonard's rooms because he could not stand to be in the company of his friends.²³ He found them offensive. The young man wrote:

'I am not what is known as religious, but I was not going to associate with people who scoffed and jeered at my religion: fair criticism given in a gentlemanly way I do not mind. But the tone of Strachey and even you on matters of religion was not gentlemanly to me.'²⁴

Leonard himself admitted that, as befits youth, they at times used irony and jest regarding serious matters. For example, Thoby once drew the "backside" of God.²⁵ Leonard pointed to the heaviness of late Victorianism in Church and State as a small excuse, yet agrees that they had no "religious respect" because they questioned the truth of everything. What we find in the anonymous young man's letter is a description of the seed of Bloomsbury's attitude against religion.

After the young men were graduated from Cambridge, Thoby and his friends felt adrift outside of their Cambridge context and began to meet on Thursday evenings in 1905 at 46 Gordon Square, the young Stephens' home. Virginia was then 23 years old.

²³ Edel, p. 45.

²⁴ As quoted in Edel, pp. 45-46. Thoby put out a pamphlet protesting compulsory chapel at Cambridge (Nicolson, *Letters: Volume One*, p. 161).

As Vanessa Bell recalls, Thoby did not intend to include his sisters in the gatherings, yet “still there they were.”²⁶ Desmond MacCarthy seems to concur with Vanessa’s recollection when he recalls Bloomsbury as “really an off-shoot or colony of Cambridge at the beginning of the century (with Leslie Stephen’s two daughters, Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, added).”²⁷ However, Vanessa and Virginia came to mean more than simply an addendum to the group of strangely intense and silent young men; the young women represented a challenge to their ideas.²⁸

This group of men, Thoby Stephen, Saxon Sydney-Turner, Clive Bell, Desmond MacCarthy, Lytton Strachey, Maynard Keynes, and Leonard Woolf, slowly made room for Virginia and Vanessa at Gordon Square “Thursday evenings.” It was a tight circle which the women joined. “Not all of them were—or would remain—homosexual—but male camaraderie, shared culture and ways of speech shaped their behaviour.”²⁹ How did early Bloomsbury influence Virginia Woolf? Most retrospects on “Old Bloomsbury” have been written by men; according to their versions, the format and content of discussion originating with Moore and the Apostles continued on with only slight variation. Supposedly, Vanessa and Virginia altered things little. “This kind of talk, goes the story, provided a liberating medium which encouraged her [Virginia] to use her brain and free herself from self-consciousness.”³⁰

²⁵ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume One*, p. 172.

²⁶ Vanessa Bell in Rosenbaum, p. 76.

²⁷ MacCarthy in Rosenbaum, p. 31.

²⁸ The young men were described as silent by Virginia, who, particularly at the time, found women’s company to be far more interesting. See Lee, p. 208.

²⁹ Lee, p. 206.

³⁰ Lee, p. 207.

In fact, the company of these men initially infuriated Virginia. In letters and in essays (and even in fiction she wrote years later) there is derision against male company. She perceived the young men as “pale, preoccupied & silent.”³¹ They so dearly longed for the cohesion of their Cambridge days that they published a little book of verse, *Euphrosyne*. On this Virginia privately heaped scorn in an unpublished review. She shared her displeasure with a friend, Eleanor Cecil, sending her a copy of a common woman’s suicide poem along with a copy of *Euphrosyne*. Woolf asked why the woman is determined to be mad, but none of the seven young men are. As Lee points out:

For the first time, she sets against the product of educated, classical male culture, the voice of ‘anon’ and the life of a ‘common’ woman without education. . . . ‘Why do I write all about suicide and mad people?’ Because, the answer might have been, her own appalling experiences of the previous year gave her a language and a range of feeling not available to these seven ‘melancholy’ young men. Far from forming her writing under the influence of the Cambridge graduates, she forms it in opposition to them.³²

Lee’s conclusion is supported by both Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant. In her memoir, Vanessa writes that initially she and Virginia had not read G.E. Moore³³, but that did not prevent them from entering the discussion. She remembers: “The young men were perhaps not clear enough in their own heads to mind trying to get clearer by discussion with young women *who might possibly see things from a different angle.*”³⁴ After Thoby’s death in 1906 and Vanessa’s marriage in 1907, Virginia and her brother Adrian

³¹ Lee, p. 208.

³² Lee, p. 209. In 1904 Leslie Stephen died after two years of suffering from abdominal cancer at home. Shortly after their father died, the four siblings went on a trip to Italy and France. Upon their return, Virginia became extremely ill. She “refused to eat, was violent with her nurses, had hallucinations and appalling headaches, and tried to kill herself by jumping out of a (low) window” (Lee, p. 195). She also had scarlet fever.

³³ Virginia read it in 1908 at the urging of Clive Bell.

³⁴ Vanessa Bell in Rosenbaum, p. 77. Emphasis added.

set up house at 29 Fitzroy Square, at which time Duncan Grant became a regular participant in the group of friends. He describes Virginia then as beautiful, fierce and shy. She talked only to those immediately near her and always maintained a bit of aloofness and a tinge of ferocity in her interaction with most men. Grant writes:

The impression generally given must have been that these two young women were absorbing the ideas of their new Cambridge friends. And of course this was true up to a point. . . . [T]hese Apostolic young men found to their amazement that they could be shocked by the boldness and scepticism of two *young women*.³⁵

The young men *did* engage in vigorous, open discussion with Virginia, yet she was not simply a new disciple; she forged her ideas often in opposition to her new group of friends.

The term “Bloomsbury” was not used until 1910, and then only as a joke to distinguish this particular group from other groups of middle class intellectuals in London. For some members of Bloomsbury, such as Leonard Woolf and Lytton Strachey, the principles of G.E. Moore remained central to a certain extent. Generally speaking, Bloomsbury derived its own formula from Moore’s work: “Personal relationships plus aesthetic sensibility equals the good life.”³⁶ From Moore, Virginia personally formed “a respect for argument and a view of her own about the relation of high culture and the common reader.”³⁷ Perhaps most notably, Moore instilled in his disciples a hunger for truth and permission to question any established idea or institution.

Bloomsbury was thus an embodiment of the modernist movement, which largely sought to repudiate Victorian strictures. In particular, the English brand of modernism

³⁵ Duncan Grant in Rosenbaum, p. 67. Emphasis added.

³⁶ Michael Holroyd in Marcus, p. 46.

had a strong sense of transformation, which was ending the Age of Victorianism.³⁸ The young were in revolt against the past. Proper codes of conduct, nationality, the Church, and sovereign British rule had come to represent Victorian England. In Victorian art, content and representation were supreme. Modernism as a cultural movement broke with the ideas of proper conduct (especially between the sexes), ardent nationality, the Church (and thereby, religion), and British rule. As an artistic movement, form was more important than content. There was an understanding of an end times to the order of things, as expressed by Woolf herself:

On or about December 1910 human nature changed . . . All human relations shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature.³⁹

Certainly, such cultural movements are not precipitated within one month, yet here Woolf seeks to express when she noticed that life had altered.⁴⁰

As befits a Modernist microcosm, Bloomsbury generally derided religion, especially Christianity. This stance hearkens back to Moore's teachings against original sin and for an ethic of aesthetic pleasure. Writing about the Apostles in 1938, Keynes remembers, "We used to regard the Christians as the enemy, because they appeared as the representatives of tradition, convention and hocus-pocus."⁴¹ According to Vanessa, Lytton Strachey was Bloomsbury's catalyst for speaking freely amongst themselves,

³⁷ Lee, p. 249.

³⁸ Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*. 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin, 1991) pp. 178-179.

³⁹ Virginia Woolf, 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' (1924), reprinted in *Collected Essays, volume 1* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), p. 321.

⁴⁰ Woolf's sense of this change can be linked to "The First Post-Impressionist Exhibition," which opened in November 1910 and caused a great controversy. Roger Fry directed the exhibition, and Clive and Vanessa Bell were strong artistic supporters.

which was a cultural revolution, especially between men and women. Among other topics, they discussed religion freely. Vanessa writes:

There was very little self-consciousness I think in those early gatherings; but life was exciting, terrible and amusing and we had to explore it, thankful that one could do so freely. Perhaps it made a difference that no one . . . had any feelings to be considered. None of us had the slightest respect, for instance, for religion or religious emotions. If we wanted to mock some doctrine which seemed to us laughable we could do so as freely as if we were mocking some ludicrous happening in daily life. . . . Anyhow it was a help to ease and intimacy not to have to consider in conversation such 'feelings' as might have existed either about religion or anything else.⁴²

She attests that they could talk freely about anything, and certainly Bloomsbury seems to have had the freedom to deprecate religion, to tear down their culture's illusion of Christianity. However, the freedom to talk *for* religion and about "religious emotions" undoubtedly did not exist.

How did Virginia Woolf feel about her group's derision of religion? I believe that while Virginia could match the sentiments of Bloomsbury to deplore the hypocrisy of the Church and its stuffiness or to laugh at its doctrines, she could not find sympathy there for her own "religious emotions," her understanding of reality that seemingly opened up her soul to the ultimate. Just as she did not match the Apostles belief for belief, Woolf likewise did not match some elusive homogeneous world view held by Bloomsbury. Woolf's work must be viewed with an understanding of Bloomsbury, but one must keep in mind Woolf's own ambivalence towards it. Although she lived within the arms of Bloomsbury and loved her friends, she also sought self-definition, creating herself in

⁴¹ Maynard Keynes in Rosenbaum, p. 61.

⁴² Vanessa Bell in Rosenbaum, p. 79.

opposition to them. Bloomsbury was like her family, for there she loved, learned, and fought to differentiate.

By 1911, Virginia and Adrian had moved out of Fitzroy Square and into Brunswick Square, and no more Thursday evenings took place. According to Vanessa, the years 1909 to 1914 were the most exciting ones among Bloomsbury, but the beginning of World War I brought an end to their joy. The group dispersed before any of them were famous, and as the group metamorphosed into something different, they came to refer to themselves during the time before the war as “Old Bloomsbury.”⁴³

After a courtship marked by ambivalence and intensity, Virginia Stephen and Leonard Woolf were married on August 10, 1912. Virginia hovered over the idea of marriage to Leonard for months before agreeing. She was concerned about his Jewishness, her instability, his strong feelings for her and her lack of passionate feelings for him. At the same time, she knew that he was the only one she could really talk with, he already belonged to her circle, and he had loved her beloved brother Thoby. Virginia eventually came to love Leonard, and what may have ultimately convinced her that marriage could work was their understanding that they would make marriage their own, a place where they could both be fulfilled and challenged.⁴⁴

Although Leonard was not a practicing Jew as an adult, as a boy he learned his prophets and Hebrew. As an adult he continued to identify himself with his “race.” His education, earned with scholarships, provided him the safety of a classical education: he could pass as an acceptable gentleman in Gentile circles. Yet he remained passionate

⁴³ Vanessa Bell in Rosenbaum, pp. 73, 82-83.

⁴⁴ Lee, pp. 303-307.

about his outsider status as a Jew. In his first year at Cambridge he went through an existential crisis, dwelling on life's futility. "G.E. Moore provided an ethical basis for living in 'a universe without meaning.' Under his influence Leonard developed his liking for Socratic rationalism and for a Greek ideal of friendships, a preferable alternative to family life."⁴⁵ Perhaps Moore and membership with the Apostles fulfilled a sense of belonging and a need for legitimacy for Leonard, for, interestingly, Lytton and Leonard maintained their ardent devotion to Moore into adulthood and experienced the Apostles as a kind of religion.⁴⁶

Aside from his adherence to Moore's philosophy and his Jewish background, three aspects of Leonard stand out in relation to Virginia: his latent misogyny, his political activism, and his attitude toward religion. Most of Leonard's Cambridge friends were homosexual or bisexual, and single sex education provided a forum for such explorations of sexual identity. Yet Maynard Keynes's biographer referred to these loves as "'cultural commitment.'"⁴⁷ Keynes, Strachey and other Apostles were raised to believe that women were inferior physically and mentally. Ethically, then, for love to be attached to worthy objects, it should rightly be attached to young men. "'The Higher Sodomy, as the Apostles jokingly referred to it, was thus an ethical position, not just a sexual or emotional preference.'"⁴⁸ It is likely that Leonard passed through such an understanding, if not physically, at least emotionally. He wrote once to Lytton that, unlike Lytton, Leonard preferred sex with women, but, he wrote, "If it wasn't for the paraphernalia and

⁴⁵ Lee, pp. 296-297.

⁴⁶ See Quentin Bell, p. 184 and Leonard Woolf in Rosenbaum, pp. 92-109.

⁴⁷ Lee, p. 297.

⁴⁸ Lee, p. 297.

their extraordinary foulness, I should work all the morning and engage a whore for the afternoon and copulate among the ferns.”⁴⁹ His letters to Lytton from Ceylon are simultaneously boastful and scornful of the whores he sees there. Most telling, however, is his violent sexual disgust in his novel, *The Wise Virgins*, which was written one year after he and Virginia were married:

One imagined that “forked” animal woman—a poor, thin, soft white body, forking out into two long, weedy white legs like one of those white clammy turnips, which you sometimes see forking grotesquely into two legs—one imagined her thrust into that sort of bell-like cover of clothes, like an egg into a ridiculous egg-cosy.⁵⁰

At the very least, Leonard Woolf had some very confused sexual feelings.

Yet his latent misogyny swayed his politics too. Leonard was contemptuous about women’s rights and did not care a bit about their right to vote because he thought that more women than men were fools. Not until years later would he become an “honorary feminist” after his work with some suffragists. Even after that, he remained blind to Virginia’s radical vision of politics. As the political activist,⁵¹ he wanted to prevent war by creating new organizations and new structures for peace (such as the League of Nations), but Virginia thought war could be prevented by eliminating the patriarchal system altogether, for war, she understood, is a male activity. She believed that “the same social conditions which encourage war are those which permit men to

⁴⁹ Lee, p. 298.

⁵⁰ Leonard Woolf, *The Wise Virgins*, p. 155, as quoted in Lee, p. 298.

⁵¹ Leonard Woolf’s career in politics is impressive. He wrote *The Intelligent Man’s Way to Prevent War*, which became the blueprint for the League of Nations. For many years he was the secretary for the Labour Party’s Advisory Committee on International Affairs. And the majority of his writing was political: he wrote unending books and articles on world events, and he served as the editor of *War and Peace*, the *Nation*, and *Political Quarterly*. (See Laura Moss Gottlieb, “The War between the Woolfs,” in Marcus, p.242.)

dominate women economically, sexually, and intellectually.”⁵² In 1916, during World War I, Virginia wrote in a letter:

I become steadily more feminist, owing to the Times, which I read at breakfast and wonder how this preposterous masculine fiction [the war] keeps going a day longer—without some vigorous young woman pulling us together and marching through it—Do you see any sense in it?⁵³

Although Leonard was the political activist, Virginia suggested a more radical, indeed, a feminist, answer: a major power shift. Leonard dismissed his wife as the most apolitical person he knew. It is important to recognize that Leonard was working within the confines of the patriarchal system to remedy the world, and Virginia basically ignored patriarchal politics, looking towards radical feminist possibilities.

Just as Leonard dismissed women’s suffrage, he also (with the help of Moore’s rationalism) discounted religion. If he had had to choose a religion, he would have chosen Buddhism because to Leonard, it was superior to others. Leonard’s attraction to Buddhism stemmed from his longing for solitude, for Buddhists enter solitude in order to throw off worldliness, unlike Christians, who enter solitude as penance. He identified with the former concept of solitude. Moreover, Buddhism appealed to Leonard because there was no mess of theology, there were no God or gods with which to deal, and it was more of a philosophy or a code of conduct than a religion.⁵⁴ He did not have to worship something or someone, and dogma was not central to Buddhism. Although he learned Sinhalese from a Buddhist priest while in Ceylon and thus explored Buddhism, Leonard apparently practiced neither Buddhism nor Judaism, his ancestral religion.

⁵² Moss Gottlieb in Marcus, p. 246.

⁵³ Nigel Nicolson, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Volume Two: 1912-1922* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) letter 740/p. 76.

Yet his sympathy towards Buddhism and his own Jewish roots did not preclude a passion to debunk religion. In June 1926 the *Nation and Atheneum*⁵⁵ published Leonard's article, "Rationalism and Religion." As a result of this article, the *Nation* included a questionnaire on religious belief in successive issues in August and September. Leonard himself volunteered to tally the results.⁵⁶ The results were reported in October; the answer to the first question, "Do you believe in a personal God?" tallied 743 yes and 1024 no replies.⁵⁷

Thus we see that Virginia Woolf was surrounded by people, many of them dearly important to her, who had little regard for religion or "religious emotions." Her father argued vigorously against God, religion, and the Church. Moore's influence on the young Apostles to throw out doctrine and pursue an ethic of pleasure spilled over into the Bloomsbury circle and was simply an aspect of the modernist movement itself. Within Bloomsbury, Vanessa and Leonard, the two people most important to Virginia, had strong sentiments against religion. Vanessa laughed about it, and Leonard worked against it rationally. Clearly, Woolf was in an environment hostile towards religious expression. Nevertheless, Virginia Woolf's religious experiences, as described above, are woven throughout her writing. As I will show, when she wrote *Mrs. Dalloway*, which was in the middle of her writing career, she felt as if she were delving deeply into her soul. Towards the end of her life she seems to have viewed her writing as a mystical

⁵⁴ Edel, pp. 115-116.

⁵⁵ Leonard was the literary editor of the *Nation and Atheneum*, also known as the *Nation*.

⁵⁶ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume Three*, p. 289.

⁵⁷ Anne Olivier Bell, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume Four: 1931-1935* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982) p. 108, n. 6.

experience. Indeed, by 1935 she mused, “[I] have a feeling that I’ve reached the no man’s land that I’m after and can pass from outer to inner and inhabit Eternity. A queer, very happy feeling. . . . So what does it mean?”⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Bell, *Diary: Volume Four*, p. 355.

Chapter III A Young Woman's Ecstasy: *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*

In her first two novels, *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*, Virginia Woolf created young heroines who experience ecstatic consciousness, forgetting their worlds and themselves. Rachel Vinrace, an accomplished pianist, loses herself in music. Katherine Hilbery, a closet mathematician, leaves ordinary reality when she delves into formulas and numbers. What these young women experience has been described by philosopher of religion Abraham Heschel as radical amazement, the moment of wonder when the world seems to stop, filled with a hushed awe. Heschel explains that radical amazement is the experience of sheer wonder, of being stunned. It is a moment when all else seems to fall away and meaning is beyond words. This is ecstatic consciousness. According to Heschel, what is experienced in those precious moments is a glimpse of God, an experience of the ineffable. It is *the* experience which gives rise to the notion of God. "Wonder or radical amazement, the state of maladjustment to words and notions, is therefore, a prerequisite for an authentic awareness of that which is."¹ In other words, those who experience radical amazement have a sense of reality deeper, wider and higher than those who do not.

Rachel Vinrace, the protagonist in *The Voyage Out*, knows radical amazement through music. Rachel is an accomplished musician and when she is overwhelmed by the trivialities of human life, she longs for the ecstasy of music.

Instead of joining them as they began to pace the deck Rachel was indignant with the prosperous matrons, . . . and turning back, she left them abruptly. . . . In three minutes she was deep in a very difficult, very classical fugue in A, and over her face came a queer remote impersonal

¹ Heschel, p. 11.

expression of complete absorption and anxious satisfaction. Now she stumbled; now she faltered and had to play the same bar twice over, but an invisible line seemed to string the notes together, from which rose a shape, a building. She was so far absorbed in this work, for it was really difficult to find how all these sounds should stand together, and drew upon the whole of her faculties, that she never heard a knock at the door.²

Rachel's absorption takes her away from herself into awe, the self-forgetfulness of radical amazement identified by Heschel.

Rachel's identification with music is so complete that she prefers it over language. Woolf narrates, "It appeared that nobody ever said a thing they meant, or ever talked of a feeling they felt, but that was what music was for. Reality dwelling in what one saw and felt, but did not talk about."³ Rachel exclaims, "'Think of words compared with sounds!' . . . She seemed to herself to be in a position where she could despise all human learning."⁴ Sensing the purity of music over language, a sign that she prefers wordless wonder over the awkwardness of language, the young woman says to her courtier:

"Novels," she repeated. "Why do you write novels? You ought to write music. Music, you see . . . music goes straight for things. It says all there is to say at once. With writing it seems to me there's so much . . . scratching on the matchbox."⁵

To Rachel, language is inadequate. One cannot give the full expression of reality in it, and one cannot become one with it. As Heschel makes clear, "Always we are chasing words, and always words recede. But the greatest experiences are those for which we have no expression. To live only on that which we can say is to wallow in the dust,

² Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, originally published in 1915 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1948) p. 57.

³ Woolf, *TVO*, p. 37.

⁴ Woolf, *TVO*, p. 292.

⁵ Woolf, *TVO*, p. 212.

instead of digging up the soil.”⁶ The young musician certainly is maladjusted to words. Our language simply cannot describe ecstatic consciousness.

Just as Rachel found religious expression and identification in music, so did Woolf. That she found more in music than in a church service is clear:

I have been having a debauch of music and hearing certain notes to which I could be wed—pure simple notes—smooth from all passion and frailty, and flawless as gems. That means so much to me, and so little to you! Now do you know that sound has shape and colour and texture as well? A London Sunday affords no topics for letters, unless it be the singular and by no means edifying topic of the Christian religion. A church bell—they ring them for 2 hours daily—says something to me hardly to be translated: there again it is sound that wraps up the meaning and colours it and translates it and keeps it mystic and unexpressed meanwhile. Should you think there was any sense in that?⁷

Years earlier, Woolf had claimed complete soul identification with music, going so far as to assert to a cousin,

The only thing in this world is music—music and books and one or two pictures. I am going to found a colony where there shall be no marrying—unless you happen to fall in love with a symphony of Beethoven—no human element at all, except what comes through Art—nothing but ideal peace and endless meditation.⁸

Both the young Woolf and the young heroine find more that speaks to their souls in music than in human discourse. As Heschel asserted, human language seems to be scratching in the dust, while music initiates the soul’s dance with reality where language and reason have no place.

Even without music, Rachel experiences radical amazement. Shocked with wonder, she forgets herself:

⁶ Heschel, pp. 15-16.

⁷ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume One*, letter 323/p. 263-264.

⁸ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume One*, letter 35/p. 41-42.

Her dissolution became so complete that she could not raise her finger any more, and sat perfectly still, listening and looking always at the same spot. It became stranger and stranger. She was overcome with awe that things should exist at all. . . . She forgot that she had any fingers to raise. . . . The things that existed were so immense and desolate. . . . She continued to be conscious of these vast masses of substance for a long stretch of time, the clock still ticking in the midst of the universal silence.⁹

What Woolf describes here is the loss of ego boundaries attributed to ecstatic consciousness. The experiencer no longer holds on to “I,” but the ego fades and she feels herself merging with an object, a focal point, or simply with “that which is.” To cite another example, Rachel is again filled with awe when her attention is focused on a single tree out of a vast stand of trees.

But filled with one of those unreasonable exultations which start generally from an unknown cause, and sweep whole countries and skies into their embrace, she walked without seeing. . . . So she might have walked until she had lost all knowledge of her way, had it not been for the interruption of a tree, which, although it did not grow across her path, stopped her as effectively as if the branches had struck her in the face. It was an ordinary tree, but to her it appeared so strange that it might have been the only tree in the world.¹⁰

Her soul merges with the tree and her self melts away. Her only focus is on the tree. This is classical extravertive mysticism. Although the moment lasts an eternity, it is quickly over, just as Heschel describes radical amazement. Yet after the moment of ecstasy, she will never be the same: “Having seen a sight that would last her for a lifetime, and for a lifetime would preserve that second, the tree once more sank into the ordinary ranks of trees.”¹¹ Although the ineffable is lodged in the extraordinary, it can

⁹ Woolf, *TVO*, p. 125. Ellipses in original.

¹⁰ Woolf, *TVO*, pp. 173-174.

¹¹ Woolf, *TVO*, p. 174.

also be ascertained in something common, and Rachel senses the ineffable in an ordinary tree.

Radical amazement can be likened to the mystical experience of unity: with an object, the universe, the Self, God. As explained by philosopher of religion Walter Stace, an experience of non-duality is a core element of mysticism.¹² What becomes evident to the mystic is a loss of ego/world boundaries or ego/world separation, an undifferentiated unity. The mystic does not turn to herself but turns both inwardly and outwardly. The Indian philosopher Radhakrishnan describes the mystical path in the following manner:

‘The way of growth lies through a gradual increase in impersonality by an ever deeper and more intense unifying of the self with a greater than itself. In this process prayer, worship, meditation, philosophy, art, and literature all play their part, since all help in purifying the inner being and disposing it more and more for contact with the divine.’¹³

For Rachel music is a pathway to intuitive or mystical knowledge, for she despises the categorical knowledge of facts and language. Her knowledge is through “direct knowing,” that is, through radical amazement or mystical consciousness.

Likewise, in *Night and Day* Katherine Hilbery slips into trances which make her unaware of herself and all that surrounds her when she is solving mathematical problems. Katherine, an aristocratic young woman with an auspicious family lineage, assists her mother in researching and writing the biography of her famous poet grandfather. Although she dutifully helps her mother every morning in the sitting room, she would rather be elsewhere—with her mathematics.

When she was rid of the pretense of paper and pen, phrase-making and biography, she turned her attention in a more legitimate direction, though,

¹² Stace, p. 15.

¹³ As quoted in Happold, p. 57.

strangely enough, she would rather have confessed her wildest dreams of hurricane and prairie than the fact that, upstairs, alone in her room, she rose early in the morning or sat up late at night to . . . work at mathematics. No force on earth would have made her confess that. Her actions when thus engaged were furtive and secretive, like those of some nocturnal animal. Steps had only to sound on the staircase, and she slipped her paper between the leaves of a great Greek dictionary which she had purloined from her father's room for this purpose. It was only at night, indeed, that she felt secure enough from surprise to concentrate her mind to the utmost.¹⁴

Katherine, like Rachel, found less reality in words and phrases than she did in symbols, but for Katherine it was with math rather than music. And just as Rachel is distracted from people by the desire to play music, so is Katherine drawn from what she should be doing to the ecstasy of mathematics.

Similarly, Katherine is filled with wonder when she is in Kew Gardens, simply observing plants and talking with Ralph Denham, a man who loves her. Her absorption into another state of consciousness is apparent to him:

[H]e looked at her taking in one strange shape after another with the contemplative, considering gaze of a person who sees not exactly what is before him, but gropes in regions that lie beyond it. The far-away look entirely lacked self-consciousness. Denham doubted whether she remembered his presence. He could recall himself, of course, by a word or a movement—but why? She was happier thus. She needed nothing that he could give her.¹⁵

Like Woolf, neither young heroine believes in a religious doctrine, yet each has religious experiences: radical amazement and a form of simple mystical consciousness. For example, Rachel is not taken in by the Christian passion of a young woman she knows. “[T]he only girl she knew well was a religious zealot, who in the fervour of

¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, originally published in 1920 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1948) pp. 45-46.

¹⁵ Woolf, *N and D*, p. 332.

intimacy talked about God, and the best ways of taking up one's cross, a topic only fitfully interesting to one whose mind reached other stages at other times."¹⁶ In a way, Rachel appears to grasp an understanding of reality more mature than the Christian understanding. Nevertheless, Rachel attests that she is a Christian. When others in the conversation hotly affirm that they are not Christians, Rachel differs.

"I am," Rachel stated.

"You believe in a personal God?" Hirst demanded, turning round and fixing her with his eyeglasses.

"I believe—I believe," Rachel stammered, "I believe there are things we don't know about, and the world might change in a minute and anything appear."

At this Helen laughed outright. "Nonsense," she said. "You're not a Christian. You've never thought what you are.—And there are lots of other questions," she continued, "though perhaps we can't ask them yet."¹⁷

Rachel is cornered and laughed at when she reveals her belief in a personal God, and she presumes that being a Christian goes hand in hand with her belief. In this dialogue we perhaps find Woolf's own experience in sharing her beliefs with either her agnostic father or her Cambridge educated friends. Perhaps Woolf herself passed through similar stages of belief; as an adolescent she wrote about the need for a personal God, which was directly opposed to her father's belief. And, like Rachel, Woolf may have gone through a denunciation of Christianity when she realized how unaware "believers" were of the reality known to her in moments of ecstasy.

Church for Rachel seems to be a cultural habit, for she "still went to church, because she had never, according to Helen, taken the trouble to think about it."¹⁸ Yet Rachel has an epiphany when a group of English tourists far away from home in the

¹⁶ Woolf, *TVO*, p. 35.

¹⁷ Woolf, *TVO*, p. 145.

tropics gathers for a church service. Woolf expresses her own disdain for oppressive English Sundays and simple-minded Christianity in the narrative describing the spirit amongst the group and individual foibles and characteristics. The service proceeds: “As the childlike babble of voices rose, the congregation, many of whom had only met on the staircase, felt themselves pathetically united and well-disposed towards each other.”¹⁹

Rachel listened critically for the first time to what was said during the service. She became enraged when she realized people’s shallow hypocritical reaction; so far as she could tell, they only pretended to understand the great truths expressed in the service.

All round her were people pretending to feel what they did not feel, while somewhere above her floated the idea which they could none of them grasp, which they pretended to grasp, always escaping out of reach, a beautiful idea, an idea like a butterfly. One after another, vast and hard and cold, appeared to her the churches all over the world where this blundering effort and misunderstanding were perpetually going on, great buildings, filled with innumerable men and women, not seeing clearly, who finally gave up the effort to see, and relapsed tamely into praise and acquiescence, half-shutting their eyes and pursing up their lips.²⁰

Rachel’s epiphany is concentrated in one woman’s face:

But looking at her carefully she came to the conclusion that the hospital nurse was only slavishly acquiescent, and that the look of satisfaction was produced by no splendid conception of God within her. . . . She was adoring something shallow and smug, clinging to it, so the obstinate mouth witnessed, with the assiduity of a limpet; nothing would tear her from her demure belief in her own virtue and the virtues of her religion.²¹

Suddenly, violently, Rachel understands Helen’s and Hirst’s hatred of Christianity. The force of her feelings causes her to reject Christianity. When later pressed about her

¹⁸ Woolf, *TVO*, p. 224.

¹⁹ Woolf, *TVO*, p. 226.

²⁰ Woolf, *TVO*, p. 228.

²¹ Woolf, *TVO*, pp. 228-229.

beliefs, Rachel exclaims that she believes in everything. Her mystical view of the world cannot be contained by trite Victorian Christianity.

“I believe in the bed, in the photographs, in the pot, in the balcony, in the sun, in Mrs. Flushing,” she remarked, still speaking recklessly, with something at the back of her mind forcing her to say the things that one usually does not say. “But I don’t believe in God, I don’t believe in Mr. Bax [the rector], I don’t believe in the hospital nurse.”²²

When confronted with what Christian churches pretended to attain, Rachel is repulsed. She herself does not ascribe to Christian doctrine, yet she knows an idea, a pulse, a reality exists beyond the plane of everyday cognizance. Her sense of the ineffable is larger than the Church’s understanding of God.

Katherine’s religious experience is grounded in the ecstasy, the radical amazement, found in mathematics. Unlike her Victorian predecessors, Katherine does not keep prayer books near her bed; she keeps math books at the ready for her private, meditative time at night. Although a mathematician who dreams of knowing the stars with scientific precision, Katherine relies at times on non-rational knowledge.

Without knowing or caring more for church practices than most people of her age, Katherine could not look into the sky at Christmas time without feeling that, at this one season, the Heavens bend over the earth with sympathy, and signal with immortal radiance that they, too, take part in her festival.²³

In fact, she is joined with the stars in a moment of radical amazement: “[A]s she looked up the pupils of her eyes so dilated with starlight that the whole of her seemed dissolved

²² Woolf, *TVO*, pp. 249-250.

²³ Woolf, *N and D*, p. 196.

in silver and spilt over the ledges of the stars for ever and ever indefinitely through space.”²⁴

Katherine understands the importance of both intellect and intuition, of “technical reason” and “ecstatic reason.” The intellect tells us only part of the story. Heschel emphasizes the necessity of ecstatic reason as a way of knowing how things really are. We sense the ineffable through non-rational knowledge because of our restless souls, which understand reality without scientific data. Heschel asserts, “Soul and reason are *not* the same. . . . [W]e realize that we are able to look at the world with two faculties—with reason and with wonder. Through the first we try to explain or to adapt the world to our concepts, through the second we seek to adapt our minds to the world.”²⁵ We truly know reality when we know it with wonder, not with reason.

Likewise, Rachel does not know reality primarily through technical reason. In fact her propensity to reject institutional learning is marked in comparison to Katherine. Once Rachel becomes friends with two young men, St. John Hirst and Terence Hewet, Hirst’s goal is to educate Rachel: she must learn to read “great” works and to reason. Once Terence and Rachel are engaged, Terence continues to be shocked at her lack of learned knowledge. As Rachel repeatedly tries to play a Beethoven sonata on the piano, Terence continually interrupts her. Finally, she gives up and sits near some books she had attempted to read: “antiquated problem plays, harrowing descriptions of life in the east end,” according to Terence.

Perched on the edge of the table, she stirred the red and yellow volumes contemptuously.

²⁴ Woolf, *N and D*, pp. 196-197.

²⁵ Heschel, pp. 7, 11.

She seemed to herself to be in a position where she could despise all human learning.

Terence looked at them too.

“God, Rachel, you do read trash!” he exclaimed.²⁶

Rachel ignores his comment, and confesses that humans often seem to her as patches of light—not solid matter. Terence replies, “No, . . . I feel solid; immensely solid; the legs of my chair might be rooted in the bowels of the earth.”²⁷

Later in the conversation, when extolling the virtues of Hirst’s intellect, Hewet scoffs at Rachel’s non-intellectual understanding of the world.

“But you’ll never see it [the goodness of Hirst’s brilliance]!” he exclaimed, “because with all your virtues you don’t, and you never will, care with every fibre of your being for the pursuit of truth! You’ve no respect for facts, Rachel; you’re essentially feminine.”

She did not trouble to deny it, nor did she think good to produce the one unanswerable argument against the merits which Terence admired. . . .

“But I like him,” she said, and she thought to herself that she also pitied him, as one pities those unfortunate people who are outside the warm mysterious globe full of changes and miracles in which we ourselves move about; she thought that it must be very dull to be St. John Hirst.²⁸

Rachel recognizes that her non-rational understanding reveals more to her than all the facts and reason with which Hirst, or Terence for that matter, is equipped.

Woolf herself seemed to see the world and life non-rationally. As a young woman, before any of her novels had been published, Woolf lamented to Violet Dickinson in 1903:

But Sparroy [Virginia] has come to one mournful egoistical conclusion—she’s a fool. I cant understand all these facts and figures for the life of me—and all the rest talk glibly. Do you understand? The British brain

²⁶ Woolf, *TVO*, p. 292.

²⁷ Woolf, *TVO*, p. 293.

²⁸ Woolf, *TVO*, p. 295.

feeds on facts—flourishes on nothing else—but I can't reason. Do you mind—do you think it'll make me a foolish writer?²⁹

She realized that she saw things differently from the majority and knew she would not write about facts. Would it be foolish in the eyes of the world? Not in the eyes of Rachel, for she scoffed at human learning; she understood reality by a means other than the confident facticity of the young man Hirst and the shallow opine of the church goers.

Both Heschel and Happold support the idea that reality is more than what we can know through our usual filters of understanding. Yet we humans have avenues by which we can engage the soul with the ineffable. For example, “[m]usic, poetry, religion—they all initiate in the soul’s encounter with an aspect of reality for which reason has no concepts and language has no names.”³⁰ And according to Happold:

The mystic puts aside this game of conceptual counters. He relies not on deductive reason but on intuitive unifying vision to pierce to the secret. As a result of direct intuitive experience, he finds not only a coherent pattern, which is not contrary to his reason, but also a certainty of a sort which cannot be given by philosophy.³¹

Logic is not the path of the mystic, nor is it the filter of radical amazement.

A final way in which Rachel is not bound to the ordinary dimension of our fact-finding world is through the illness which leads to her death. Her illness, identified primarily by a high fever, takes her into another world where she is far removed from earthly movement, form and color. “[A]t intervals she made an effort to cross over into the ordinary world, but she found that her heat and discomfort had put a gulf between her

²⁹ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume One*, letter 107/p. 100.

³⁰ Heschel, p. 36.

³¹ Happold, p. 42.

world and the ordinary world which she could not bridge."³² Illness initially cuts her off, leaving her isolated simply with her own body. As her fever progresses, she experiences intense mind and body separation.

But for long spaces of time she would merely lie conscious of her body, floating on the top of the bed and her mind driven to some remote corner of her body, or escaped and gone flitting round the room. All sights were something of an effort, but the sight of Terence was the greatest effort, because he forced her to join mind to body in the desire to remember something. She did not wish to remember; it troubled her when people tried to disturb her loneliness; she wished to be alone. She wished for nothing else in the world.³³

Here we may have Woolf's own description of illness, for she was often ill with headaches and fever, just as Rachel is. Woolf understood mind and body separation due to illness, for she wrote to Violet Dickinson, who was ill with typhoid fever:

Are you in what state of body or mind? My plan is to treat you as detached spirit; maybe your body has typhoid; that is immaterial (you will be glad to hear) I address the immortal part, and shoot words of fire into the upper aer [*sic*] which spirits inhabit. They pierce you like lightning, and quicken your soul; whereas, if I said How have you slept, and what food are you taking, you would sink into your nerves and arteries and your gross pads of flesh, and perhaps your flame might snuff and die there. Who knows?³⁴

Illness not only helps Woolf identify her soul as a separate being from her body, illness also brings another state of consciousness: mystical consciousness.

³² Woolf, *TVO*, p. 329.

³³ Woolf, *TVO*, p. 347.

³⁴ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume One*, letter 318/p. 259.

Chapter IV *Mrs. Dalloway*: Full Expression

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, published in 1925 when Virginia was 43 years old, Woolf gives us a view of her ecstasy primarily through two characters, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. As a well-to-do Englishwoman, married to a prime minister, Clarissa lives a life of relative leisure and hosts parties. On the surface, Clarissa seems contentedly enmeshed in upper-class society, yet at times she thoughtfully examines her life and works to define her own religious perspective. By all standards of her society, Clarissa is sane. Septimus Warren Smith is the counter balance to Clarissa: he has recently returned from serving in Italy during World War I, and he no longer seems to fit into his old life. He is a picture of imbalance, of madness. What binds Clarissa and Septimus together is their sensitivity to moments of radical amazement in their everyday lives and a perception of reality beyond the image we normally perceive. Within *Mrs. Dalloway* we find the fullest expression of Woolf's religious life, for here she relates personal experience through her characters, exploring the significance of the experiences within the contrast between rationality and feeling, a theme admittedly significant for Woolf, who was herself diagnosed as mad several times in her life. As noted above, this contrast between rational and non-rational knowledge is likewise important to philosophers of religion when talking about religious experience.

Clarissa senses the ineffable day after day, for we read:

No pleasure could equal, she thought, straightening the chairs, pushing in one book on the shelf, this having done with the triumphs of youth, lost

herself in the process of living, to find it, with a shock of delight, as the sun rose, as the day sank.¹

Again, within the parameters of her ordinary life, she senses the holy:

Mrs. Dalloway raised her hand to her eyes, and, as the maid shut the door to, and she heard the swish of Lucy's skirts, she felt like a nun who has left the world and feels fold round her the familiar veils and the response to old devotions. The cook whistled in the kitchen. She heard the click of the typewriter. It was her life, and, bending her head over the hall table, she bowed beneath the influence, felt blessed and purified, saying to herself, as she took the pad with the telephone message on it, how moments like this are buds on the tree of life, flowers of darkness they are, she thought (as if some lovely rose had blossomed for her eyes only);

And just as Woolf held to her atheism, so too does Clarissa, yet both author and character know the significance of these moments of radical amazement. The narration continues:

not for a moment did she believe in God; but all the more, she thought, taking up the pad, must one repay in daily life to servants, yes, to dogs and canaries, above all to Richard her husband, who was the foundation of it—of the gay sounds, of the green lights, of the cook even whistling, for Mrs. Walker was Irish and whistled all day long—one must pay back from this secret deposit of exquisite moments, she thought, lifting the pad[.]²

What she experiences is religious, for Clarissa seems to approach the ineffable, the holy, the luminous, for a fleeting second: “Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. But the close withdrew; the hard softened. It was over—the moment.”³ Woolf's description of Clarissa's illuminations perfectly match William James' description of mystical states: they are characterized by ineffability, a noetic quality, transiency, and passivity.

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, originally published in 1925 (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1953) p. 282.

² Woolf, *Mrs. D*, pp. 42-43.

³ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 47.

Septimus, too, enters the arena of the ineffable in his moments of ecstasy. In the commonplace, Septimus feels the intensity of the moment and the hush of the holy:

To watch a leaf quivering in the rush of air was an exquisite joy. . . . and now and again some chime (it might be a motor horn) tinkling divinely on the grass stalks—all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now. Beauty was everywhere.⁴

The wonder with which Septimus sees the world dissolves his sense of self, for he clearly has soft ego boundaries, a characteristic of mystical consciousness.

But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches.⁵

Although Clarissa and Septimus are awestruck in perfect moments of wonder, they are inevitably interrupted, jolted out of their radical amazement. Heschel asserts, “In such moments talk is an abomination.”⁶ Indeed, words are what jolt Clarissa and Septimus out of their ecstasy. When she was young, Clarissa was walking with Sally Seton, her closest friend, and described the moment as

a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up, . . . when old Joseph and Peter faced them: ‘Star-gazing?’ said Peter. It was like running one’s face against a granite wall in the darkness! It was shocking; it was horrible!⁷

Likewise, when Septimus is deep in a moment of wonder, Rezia, his wife, mars his reverence. “What are you saying?” said Rezia suddenly, sitting down by him.

⁴ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, pp. 104-105.

⁵ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, pp. 32-33.

⁶ Heschel, p. 26.

⁷ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, pp. 52-53.

Interrupted again! She was always interrupting.”⁸ Septimus’ mystical moments are often ended by Rezia’s incursions. Words simply do not belong within ecstasy.

These moments that Clarissa and Septimus have are examples of the experiences which are at the root of religion. Even as Heschel believes that “[r]eligion begins with the sense of the ineffable, with the awareness of a reality that discredits our wisdom, that shatters our concepts,” so Woolf relates the same idea through her characters’ experiences.⁹ For example, Septimus sits in the park and has an “eyes open” mystical experience. “Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds. A child cried. Rightly far away a horn sounded. All taken together meant the birth of a new religion—.”¹⁰ And, as mentioned above, Clarissa, like Woolf herself, does not believe in God; nevertheless, Clarissa thinks her experiences are deeply important.

Clarissa’s sensitivity allows her ultimately to identify with Septimus. Her awareness matches Woolf’s, of which Vita Sackville West wrote to her husband when she and Woolf were travelling alone in France: “I have never known anyone who was so profoundly sensitive, and who makes less of a business of that sensitiveness.”¹¹ In comparison, Heschel writes:

The rich in spirit do not know how to be proud of what they grasp, for they sense that the things which they comprehend are outbursts of inconceivable significance, that there are no lonely ideas roaming about in a void, to be seized and appropriated.¹²

⁸ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 36.

⁹ Heschel, p. 59.

¹⁰ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 33.

¹¹ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume Three*, p. 533.

¹² Heschel, p. 31.

What Woolf sensed, realized, and knew in moments of radical amazement led her to another dimension of existence to which Heschel alludes. If a person is able to experience radical amazement, she or he is aware that the ineffable is a “spiritual setting of reality,”¹³ not removed from our existence, but a part, a dimension, of our existence. Heschel writes: “The soul is introduced to a reality which is not only *other* than itself, as it is the case in the ordinary acts of perception; it is introduced to a reality which is *higher* than the universe.”¹⁴ This understanding of reality intersects with Huston Smith’s four tiered explanation of reality: the terrestrial, the intermediate, the celestial, and the infinite.¹⁵

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, two characters in particular, Septimus and Peter Walsh, experience levels of reality other than the terrestrial. When Peter Walsh falls asleep, his subtle body leaves the envelope of his earthly body and enters the intermediate dimension. In his dream as the solitary traveller, he represents the collective unconscious and experiences inanimate phantasms: the archetypes in his dream. The most prolific figure in Peter’s dream is woman.

The solitary traveller . . . suddenly sees the giant figure at the end of the ride. . . . But if he can conceive of her, then in some sort she exists, he thinks, and advancing down the path with his eyes upon the sky and branches he rapidly endows them with womanhood.¹⁶

Peter as the solitary traveller is definitely in the intermediate dimension.

Such are the visions which ceaselessly float up . . . often overpowering the solitary traveller and taking away from him the sense of the earth, the wish to return, and giving him for substitute a general peace. . . . So, he thinks,

¹³ Heschel, p. 64.

¹⁴ Heschel, p. 65.

¹⁵ See Chapter I for descriptions of these levels of reality.

¹⁶ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 85.

may I never go back to the lamplight, to the sitting room . . . rather let me walk straight on to this great figure, who will, with a toss of her head, mount me on her streamers and let me blow to nothingness with the rest.¹⁷

The solitary traveller is beyond earth, having never left it physically. He enters a transitory world where archetypes are encountered.

Septimus Warren Smith also leaves the terrestrial level. Of the two characters who leave this earthly plane, he has the most intense experiences, perhaps even going beyond the intermediate dimension. Septimus has visions, talks with the dead, relates messages of truth from another world, experiences flames, thinks he is going mad, and has a fascination with death. According to Thomas Aquinas, “the order of reality is found to be such that it is impossible to reach one end from the other without passing through the middle.”¹⁸ Septimus, who will leave behind his physical body on his way to the Infinite, exhibits every characteristic of traversing the intermediate plane. He speaks with the dead and has himself been “lately taken from life to death.”¹⁹ Expressed colloquially, he has seen the other side.

Visions which seem to make no sense enter Septimus’ field of consciousness. “He saw things too—he had seen an old woman’s head in the middle of a fern.”²⁰ Transformations occur before his eyes: “[A] Skye terrier snuffed his trousers and he started in an agony of fear. It was turning into a man! He could not watch it happen! It was horrible, terrible to see a dog become a man!”²¹ These inexplicable visions can be understood in two different ways. Either Septimus’ visions portray the chaos of the

¹⁷ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, pp. 86-87.

¹⁸ Smith, p. 38.

¹⁹ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 37.

²⁰ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 100.

²¹ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 102.

intermediate dimension, or they exemplify his lack of reason. Understood either way, Septimus is clearly in touch with the intermediate, for he is either simply relating the mess which he “sees” there or he is, in fact, insane, which, according to Smith’s understanding, places Septimus within the intermediate.²²

More often than having visions, Septimus sees and talks with the dead, who seem to be traversing the intermediate dimension, and brings back messages of important truth. When an aeroplane is sky writing, he thinks that they are signalling him. Sensitive to other levels of reality, Septimus sees the dead and is compelled to relate messages.

Men must not cut down trees. There is a God. (He noted such revelations on the backs of envelopes.) Change the world. No one kills from hatred. Make it known (he wrote it down). He waited. He listened. . . . they [sparrows] sang in voices prolonged and piercing in Greek words, from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk, how there is no death.

There was his hand; there the dead. White things were assembling behind the railings opposite. But he dared not look. Evans [a dead army friend] was behind the railings!²³

Evans continues to communicate with Septimus:

He sang. Evans answered from behind the tree. The dead were in Thessaly, Evans sang, among the orchids. There they waited till the War was over, and now the dead, now Evans himself—‘For God’s sake don’t come!’ Septimus cried out. For he could not look upon the dead.²⁴

Perhaps Septimus is not insane, after all, for, according to the Tibetans, souls that have left the earth are temporarily in limbo as they pass through the intermediate *bardos* (planes). According to the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the passage through the

²² According to Smith’s construction of reality, the insane are housed within the intermediate dimension of reality. See Chapter I.

²³ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, pp. 35-36.

²⁴ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 105.

intermediate runs the expanse from terror to bliss, but at an intensity far greater than we know terrestrially.²⁵ Evans may simply be crossing over still, and Septimus communicates with Evans because, as already noted, he is sensitive to other dimensions of reality. Clearly, Woolf wrote this scene in particular from her own knowledge:

I am now in the thick of the mad scene in Regents Park, I find I write it by clinging as tight to fact as I can, & write perhaps 50 words a morning. . . . I am stuffed with ideas for it. I feel I can use up everything I've ever thought.²⁶

Having traversed the intermediate himself, Septimus apparently approaches the Infinite, as did Blaise Pascal; their experiences differ little. Smith relates two aspects of the human encounter with the Infinite: walls and fire. Jung wrote toward the end of his life, "The difference between most people and myself is that for me the 'dividing walls' are transparent."²⁷ Smith asserts, "Remove the walls entirely, including any that might serve as boundaries or perimeters, and we have God in his ultimate nature: the Infinite."²⁸ Mystics may initially experience "God-incursion . . . accompanied by light that is physically sensed."²⁹ For example, Pascal recorded his experience thus:

"In the year of grace 1654, Monday 23 November, . . . from about half-past ten in the evening till about half an hour after midnight

F I R E

God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob. Not of the philosophers and the learned. Certitude. Certitude. Emotion. Joy . . . Joy! Joy! Joy! Tears of Joy . . . My God . . . let me not be separated from thee for ever."³⁰

²⁵ Smith, pp. 39,47.

²⁶ Bell, *Diary: Volume Two: 1920-1924* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1978) p. 272.

²⁷ Smith, p. 54.

²⁸ Smith, p. 54.

²⁹ Smith, p. 56.

³⁰ Smith, p. 33.

Woolf narrates Septimus' experience:

[A]nd this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him. The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames.³¹

More than once Septimus sees fire, and it is so vivid that Rezia actually looks for flames.

However, she sees nothing and tells him that it is a dream.

Because he continues to hear and see what others cannot, Septimus begins to wonder if he is insane. Although he thinks, "But he would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more,"³² Septimus cannot erase his sensitivity. As he continues to have visions and communicate with the dead, he tries to make sense of his experiences logically:

Heaven was divinely merciful, infinitely benignant. It spared him, pardoned his weakness. But what was the scientific explanation (for one must be scientific above all things)? Why could he see through bodies, see into the future, when dogs will become men? . . . He lay back in his chair, exhausted but upheld. He lay resting, waiting, before he again interpreted, with effort, with agony, to mankind.³³

Septimus' porous soul simply cannot be explained by science, for he knows reality which science cannot chart.

In fact, rational opposition is what ultimately drives Septimus to fling himself out the window. Rezia is worried about him and convinces him to see two different doctors, both of whom Septimus feels are against him. Indeed, Woolf describes Sir William Bradshaw, Septimus' second doctor, as "the priest of science" in the narration.³⁴ Sir

³¹ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 21.

³² Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 32.

³³ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, pp. 102-103.

³⁴ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 142.

William is driven by the idea of proper proportion in one's life and prescribes one thing for Septimus: rest, rest, rest. Septimus feels persecuted by the doctors, misunderstood.

But Bradshaw is a scientist, not a spiritual person:

To his patients he gave three-quarters of an hour; and if in this exacting science which has to do with what, after all, we know nothing about—the nervous system, the human brain—a doctor loses his sense of proportion, as a doctor he fails. Health we must have; and health is proportion; so that when a man comes into your room and says he is Christ (a common delusion), and has a message, as they mostly have, and threatens, as they often do, to kill himself, you invoke proportion; order rest in bed; rest in solitude; silence and rest; rest without friends, without books, without messages; six months' rest; until a man who went in weighing seven stone six comes out weighing twelve. . . .

Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion—³⁵

Because he talks of killing himself and because he experiences things others do not, he is told he must learn to rest, but without Rezia by his side. As the story's crescendo builds, Septimus feels more intensely under the power of the doctors: "So he was in their power! Holmes and Bradshaw were on him! The brute with the red nostrils was snuffing into every secret place! 'Must' it could say!"³⁶ When Dr. Holmes, Septimus' first doctor, calls on Rezia and Septimus at home, she attempts to divert Holmes, for she has begun to understand her husband and does not want to be separated from him. Alone upstairs, Septimus considers his options:

Holmes was coming upstairs. Holmes would burst open the door. Holmes would say "In a funk, eh?" Holmes would get him. But no; not Holmes; not Bradshaw. Getting up rather unsteadily, hopping indeed from foot to foot, he considered Mrs. Filmer's nice clean bread knife with "Bread"

³⁵ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, pp. 149-150. This is similar to Woolf's repeated convalescence.

³⁶ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 223.

carved on the handle. Ah, but one mustn't spoil that. The gas fire? But it was too late now. Holmes was coming. Razors he might have got, but Rezia, who always did that sort of thing, had packed them. There remained only the window, the large Bloomsbury-lodging house window, the tiresome, the troublesome, and rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out. It was their idea of tragedy, not his or Rezia's (for she was with him). Holmes and Bradshaw like that sort of thing. (He sat on the sill.) But he would wait till the very last moment. He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings—what did *they* want? Coming down the staircase opposite an old man stopped and stared at him. Holmes was at the door. "I'll give it you!" he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer's area railings.³⁷

Not being understood by others leaves Septimus no choice. Through his experiences of higher levels of reality, Septimus had learned not to be afraid of death and in the end could accept it over being controlled by a doctor. Death had come to fascinate Septimus, for he had told Rezia, "'Now we will kill ourselves,' [and he had] a look as if something fascinated him[.]"³⁸ Throughout the story, Septimus encounters Evans and other dead people behind a screen and is afraid when the other side beckons him. The screens which Septimus sees are analogous to the transparent walls Jung wrote about—the thin division for him between the terrestrial and the Infinite. So it is with Septimus. Most often, Septimus had been afraid of death, but in the last scene of his life, he loses his fear:

Every power poured its treasures on his head, and his hand lay there on the back of the sofa, as he had seen his hand lie when he was bathing, floating, on the top of the waves, while far away on shore he heard dogs barking and barking far away. Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more.
He was not afraid.³⁹

³⁷ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 226.

³⁸ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 172.

³⁹ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 211.

Because he is finally unafraid, he is able to jump out the window, leaving behind the terrestrial.

Later that same evening, Sir and Lady Bradshaw are guests at Clarissa Dalloway's party. At one time Clarissa herself had gone to Sir Bradshaw, and although she felt as if she had received good advice from him, she could not wait to be free from his presence. When Bradshaw arrives at her party, she wonders, "Why did the sight of him, talking to Richard [her husband], curl her up? . . . He had to decide questions of appalling difficulty. Yet—what she felt was, one wouldn't like Sir William to see one unhappy. No; not that man."⁴⁰ Lady Bradshaw discreetly reveals to Clarissa that one of Sir Bradshaw's patients had killed himself just before the party. Clarissa's initial reaction is dismay that the Bradshaws should come to her party, bringing death with them. She did not want death in the middle of her party, which she wanted to be a happy success. Clarissa's first step in identifying with Septimus is by reliving his death. (Clarissa never meets Septimus yet is connected with him spiritually.)

What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party? A young man had killed himself. And they talked of it at her party—the Bradshaws, talked of death. He had killed himself—but how? Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it. But why had he done it? And the Bradshaws talked of it at her party!⁴¹

Clarissa begins to comprehend:

Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded

⁴⁰ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 278.

⁴¹ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 280.

them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death.⁴²

She takes one more step in identifying with Septimus:

Or there were the poets and thinkers. Suppose he had had that passion, and had gone to Sir William Bradshaw, a great doctor yet to her obscurely evil, without sex or lust, extremely polite to women, but capable of some indescribable outrage—forcing your soul, that was it—if this young man had gone to him, and Sir William had impressed him, like that, with his power, might he not then have said (indeed she felt it now), Life is made intolerable; they make life intolerable, men like that?⁴³

Finally, she understands: “She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself.”⁴⁴

Through Clarissa and Septimus, Woolf is expressing ideas similar to those of philosophers of religion. There are two ways of seeing things: rationally and non-rationally. In the end, science explains only part of reality; the rest is left for our non-rational souls to apprehend. There is more here than meets the eye, one could say. And that “more” is not subject to our categories of time and space, for it cannot be measured.⁴⁵ Indeed, Woolf felt that what she was writing in *Mrs. Dalloway* was the richest that she could offer. Two separate entries in her diary from 1924, the time during which she was writing this novel, attest to this. Early in the year she wrote: “I’m working at *The Hours* [*Mrs. Dalloway*], & think it a very interesting attempt; I may have found my mine this time I think. I may get all my gold out. . . . And my vein of gold lies so deep, in such bent channels.”⁴⁶ Then in December, she mused about writing *Mrs. Dalloway*: “And as I

⁴² Woolf, *Mrs. D*, pp. 280-281.

⁴³ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 281.

⁴⁴ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 283.

⁴⁵ See Heschel and Smith.

⁴⁶ Bell, *Diary: Volume Two*, p. 292.

think I said before, it seems to leave me plunged deep in the richest strata of my mind. I can write & write & write now: the happiest feeling in the world."⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Bell, *Diary: Volume Two*, p. 323.

Chapter V Conclusion

Woolf's letters and diaries hint at the visions and experiences portrayed in *The Voyage Out*, *Night and Day*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*. As explained previously, her writing was her most intimate expression of her feelings and experiences. As we can see, she depended on her writing: "Much more important (to me) than anything else was my recovery of the pen; & thus the hidden stream was given exit, & I felt reborn."¹ What we can conclude from her writing, therefore, is that Woolf's religious life was similar to that which her characters had. Even the manner in which Woolf wrote elevated her beyond her brain, for she seems to have written in a mystical state because her "self," her ego boundaries, are gone. She wrote when she was annoyed that a friend had interrupted her writing:

It is a mistake to think that literature can be produced from the raw. One must get out of life-- . . . —one must become externalised; very, very concentrated, all at one point, not having to draw upon the scattered parts of one's character, living in the brain. Sydney comes & I'm Virginia; when I write I'm merely a sensibility.²

And in her personal writing, we find references to visions, madness, death and the soul.

Did she encounter the ineffable? Her vision is quite clear. In 1923 she wrote:

It was a wet windy night; & as I walked back across the field I said Now I am meeting it; now the old devil has once more got his spine through the waves. (but I cannot re-capture really). And such was the strength of my feeling that I became physically rigid. Reality, so I thought, was unveiled. . . . Really, it was a physical feeling, of lightness & relief & safety. & yet there was too something terrible behind it—the fact of this pair, I suppose; which continued for several days—I think I should feel it again if I went over the road at night; & it became connected with the deaths of the

¹ Bell, *Diary: Volume Two*, p. 134.

² Bell, *Diary: Volume Two*, p. 193.

miners, & with Aubrey Herbert's death next day. But I have not got it all in, by any means.³

Not only did Woolf have a sense of the ineffable, she also had particular visions. Upon her departure from Hogarth House, where she and Leonard had lived for nine years, Woolf reflected: "I've had some very curious visions in this room too, lying in bed, mad, & seeing the sunlight quivering like gold water, on the wall. I've heard the voices of the dead here. And felt, through it all, exquisitely happy."⁴ And Woolf wrote to Gwen Raverat after her husband Jacques died: "Still, the vision has become to me a source of wonder—the vision of your face; which if I were painting I should cover with flames, and put you on a hill top."⁵ Evidently she tried to relate her visions in writing. "[H]ere am I sitting after half the morning, crammed with ideas, and visions, and so on, and can't dislodge them, for lack of the right rhythm."⁶

That Woolf felt not as mad as she had been diagnosed to be implies perhaps she herself had traversed the intermediate level of reality. In response to a friend's reading of Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf responded: "It was a subject that I have kept cooling in my mind until I felt I could touch it without bursting into flame all over. You can't think what a raging furnace it is still to me—madness and doctors and being forced."⁷ In 1921 Woolf expressed in her diary her anger over being forced not to do what she wanted when she was ill: "Here I am chained to my rock: forced to do nothing; doomed to let every worry, spite, irritation & obsession scratch & claw & come again. This is to say

³ Bell, *Diary: Volume Two*, pp. 270-271.

⁴ Bell, *Diary: Volume Two*, p. 283.

⁵ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume Three*, letter 1541/p. 172.

⁶ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume Three*, letter 1624/p. 247.

⁷ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume Three*, letter 1550/p. 180.

that I may not walk, & must not work.”⁸ At other times, she regards her madness as an asset. In contrast to her brother Adrian, Woolf sees that in some way her madness has been her redemption. Regarding the difficulties her brother Adrian was having, she wrote to a friend, “My madness has saved me; but Adrian is sane—that’s all the light I can throw.”⁹ When she was 48 years old, Woolf wrote in her diary:

I believe these illnesses are in my case—how shall I express it?—partly mystical. Something happens in my mind. It refuses to go on registering impressions. It shuts itself up. It becomes chrysalis. I lie quite torpid, often with acute physical pain—. . . Then suddenly something springs.¹⁰

Eight years earlier she had written to E. M. Forster, complaining about all the time she had had to spend in bed during her life thus far, recuperating from illness. Yet she concludes: “Not that I haven’t picked up something from my insanities and all the rest. Indeed, I suspect they’ve done instead of religion. But this is a difficult point.”¹¹

Death fascinated Woolf, which we can surmise from Septimus’ curiosity with it, as well as from excerpts from her letters and diaries. Death was a common theme for Woolf, for she wrote in 1922, “I meant to write about death, only life came breaking in as usual. I like, I see, to question people about death. I have taken it into my head that I shan’t live till 70.”¹² Before her friend Jacques Raverat died, Woolf questioned whether or not the souls of the dead could come back. After Raverat died, she wrote to his widow, Gwen, “I become mystical as I grow older and feel an alliance with you and

⁸ Bell, *Diary: Volume Two*, p. 132.

⁹ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume Three*, letter 1450/p. 93.

¹⁰ Anne Olivier Bell, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume Three: 1925-1930* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980) p. 287.

¹¹ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume Two*, letter 1210/p. 499.

¹² Bell, *Diary: Volume Two*, pp. 167-168.

Jacques which is eternal, not interrupted, or hurt by never meeting.”¹³ In a later letter to Gwen, Woolf states, “That is what I should like for myself, that there should be no breach, no submission to death, but merely a break in the talk.”¹⁴ Most revealing, however, are her thoughts about death to Vita Sackville West.

Do you know this interesting fact. I found myself thinking with intense curiosity about death? Yet if I’m persuaded of anything, it is of mortality—Then why this sense that death is going to be a great excitement?--something positive; active?¹⁵

She repeats the same thought in her diary in 1926:

Life is as I’ve said since I was 10, awfully interesting—if anything, quicker, keener at 44 than 24—more desperate I suppose, as the river shoots Niagra—my new vision of death; active, positive, like all the rest, exciting; & of great importance—as an experience.
‘The one experience I shall never describe’ I said to Vita yesterday.¹⁶

Woolf seems to understand death, for she created Clarissa Dalloway to understand Septimus killing himself. As we read earlier, Clarissa realizes,

Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart—rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death.¹⁷

Woolf was intellectually convinced that she did not believe in God and that there was “nothing” after death. In contrast to her knowledge, she felt, sensed and spiritually experienced what was other than her intellectual reality. Her confusion over this dichotomy is expressed in *Mrs. Dalloway*. When Peter Walsh dreams and enters the intermediate dimension, he is perplexed: “By conviction an atheist perhaps, he is taken

¹³ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume Three*, letter 1541/p. 171.

¹⁴ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume Three*, letter 1547/p. 177.

¹⁵ Nicolson, *Letters: Volume Three*, letter 1687/p. 303.

¹⁶ Bell, *Diary: Volume Three*, p. 117.

¹⁷ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, pp. 280-281.

by surprise with moments of extraordinary exaltation.”¹⁸ What her soul could speak of comes out clearly in her fiction. Although she had originally banished writing about the soul in her diary, sometimes she allowed herself to explore a thought on it. In 1924, while she was writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, in fact, just after she had written the death of Septimus, she wrote in her diary:

The country is like a convent. The soul swims to the top. . . . but oh the delicacy & complexity of the soul—for, haven’t I begun to tap her & listen to her breathing after all? . . . And if we didn’t live venturously, plucking the wild goat by the beard, & trembling over precipices, we should never be depressed, I’ve no doubt; but already should be faded, fatalistic & aged.¹⁹

Although she tried to “banish” the soul from her diary, what she writes about in *Mrs. Dalloway* appears to be from her own soul. In 1923 she questioned her intentions in her diary: “But now what do I feel about my writing?—this book, that is, *The Hours* [later titled *Mrs. Dalloway*], if that’s its name? One must write from deep feeling, said Dostoevsky. And do I? Or do I fabricate with words, loving them as I do? No I think not.”²⁰

¹⁸ Woolf, *Mrs. D*, p. 85.

¹⁹ Bell, *Diary: Volume Two*, p. 307.

²⁰ Bell, *Diary: Volume Two*, p. 248.

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