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## VIRGINIA WOOLF'S QUEST FOR EQUILIBRIUM

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Virginia Woolf would agree with D. H. Lawrence that human beings have two ways of knowing, "knowing in terms of apartness, which is mental, rational, scientific, and knowing in terms of togetherness, which is religious and poetic."<sup>1</sup> As we shall see, Virginia Woolf associates these two ways with the two sexes. In *A Room of One's Own* (1929) she suggests that every mind is potentially bisexual. But she finds that among writers, and particularly among her contemporaries, most men tend to develop only the analytic, "masculine" approach, what Lawrence calls "knowing in terms of apartness," and most women only the synthetic, "feminine," that is, "knowing in terms of togetherness." In her opinion, however, to be truly creative one must use the "whole" mind.<sup>2</sup> In keeping with this, the greatest writers are "androgynous": they use and harmonize the masculine and feminine approaches to truth.<sup>3</sup> They do not suffer from what T. S. Eliot calls the "dissociation of sensibility" or what Carl Jung calls the "split consciousness" of modern man;<sup>4</sup> for, in Jungian terms, they have discovered the "self," "a point midway between the conscious and the unconscious" in which there is a reconciliation of opposites.<sup>5</sup> Like Jung, Virginia Woolf

<sup>1</sup> *Apropos of "Lady Chatterley's Lover"* (London, 1931), p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> *A Room of One's Own* (London, 1954), pp. 147, 156-57.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 148, 156. According to Virginia Woolf, the androgynous mind is "undivided." In 1929 she notes "how much harder it is to attain that condition now than ever before." She attributes the difficulty to the sex-consciousness stimulated by the feminist movement. For instance, in challenging male superiority, the suffrage campaign put both sexes on the defensive. Virginia Woolf believes that the resulting preoccupation of both with their own sex and its characteristics is reflected in their literary works (pp. 148-49).

<sup>4</sup> See Eliot's essay, "The Metaphysical Poets," and Jung's *The Undiscovered Self*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Boston, 1958), p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> C. G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, VII (New York, 1953), 219.

feels that neither an individual nor an age can find this point of equilibrium without frankly confronting and understanding the exact nature of the opposing forces. Thus her interest in what it means to be a male or a female is related to her quest for the "self" or the point of balance that would stabilize her personality and give her the sense of wholeness and unconsciousness which characterizes the "androgynous" writer.

Virginia Woolf's interest in the accepted versus the real differences between the sexes was aroused when she was quite young, for she perceived and resented the fact that her father, Leslie Stephen, expected more of his sons than of his daughters.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, she became increasingly aware of the limitations which society placed upon the freedom of women. Her brother Thoby served as a model for Jacob Flanders in her third novel, *Jacob's Room* (1922). Jacob's life of intellectual contacts, friendships, sexual experiences, and travels is contrasted with his sweetheart's dull life of tea and supper parties. Like Katharine Hilbery in *Night and Day* (1919), Virginia Stephen was not satisfied with the role of perfect mother and perfect hostess expected of the women of her class; for just as Katharine loved mathematics, she loved writing and wanted to write professionally. Leslie Stephen allowed her to read and practice writing as she wished.<sup>7</sup> However, after his wife's death in 1895, he felt so miserable and sorry for himself that his demands upon his children for pity and devotion were almost unbearable.<sup>8</sup> Thus, thinking of him in 1928, twenty-four years after his death, she wrote in her diary, "His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books;—inconceivable."<sup>9</sup> His death freed her from his egotistical demands and, by providing her with an adequate income, made her financially independent.<sup>10</sup>

Yet in 1904, when she began a new way of life at 46 Gordon Square in Bloomsbury with her sister Vanessa and her brothers Adrian and Thoby, she discovered that she was only partially liberated. Confronted frequently with Thoby's friends, she found herself extremely shy, won-

<sup>6</sup> Aileen Pippett, *The Moth and the Star: A Biography of Virginia Woolf* (Boston and Toronto, 1955), p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Leslie Stephen," *Collected Essays*, IV (London, 1967), 79-80.

<sup>8</sup> Noel Annan, *Leslie Stephen: His Thought and Character in Relation to His Time* (London, 1951), pp. 98-99. Significantly, in *The Years* (1937) Eleanor gives up a life of her own to care for her aging father.

<sup>9</sup> *A Writer's Diary* (London, 1953), p. 138.

<sup>10</sup> Pippett, p. 48.

dering if she were capable of speaking as an equal with university graduates; moreover, she was constantly fearful that they were reacting to her, not as a human being, but as a female.<sup>11</sup> Or confronted with a blank page in those early years, she felt similarly shy and fearful as a writer. In a paper read in 1940 to the Women's Service League, later published as "Professions for Women," she tells how she had to begin by killing that part of her which had learned that a woman should respect what men have to say and repress what she herself might think or feel.<sup>12</sup> As a female, she believed that her vision, though hopefully bisexual, should on the whole be distinctly feminine (that is, "woman-manly" as opposed to "man-womanly").<sup>13</sup> Looking back, a year before her death in 1941, she felt that she had succeeded in expressing honestly what she wanted to say with one exception: she had been afraid to convey frankly her "own experiences as a body."<sup>14</sup>

Virginia Woolf's efforts to understand and harmonize the feminine and masculine aspects of her own nature were further complicated by the mental illness from which she suffered. As her husband and as the publisher or copublisher of many important works in the field of psychoanalysis,<sup>15</sup> Leonard Woolf may be believed, I think, when he suggests in his autobiography that her illness, given the general label neurasthenia by her doctors, was, at least in its severest form, manic-depression. Danger signals (headache, insomnia, a tendency for the thoughts to race) would appear when she tired herself mentally, physically, or emotionally. With rest, these symptoms would usually disappear after one or more weeks, and she would again be able to lead a normal life. Four times, however, they did not, and she slipped into insanity. "She had a minor breakdown in her childhood; she had a major breakdown after her mother's death in 1895, another in 1914,

<sup>11</sup> Pippett, p. 54.

<sup>12</sup> *Collected Essays*, II (London, 1966), 285.

<sup>13</sup> *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 132, 147-48.

<sup>14</sup> *Collected Essays*, II, 288. Actually, she hints at these chemical experiences in her portrayal of Jenny in *The Waves* (1931) and of Isa in *Between the Acts* (1941); and more important, she captures the way in which sexuality permeates even the seemingly nonsexual contacts between men and women. Consider, for example, the relationships between Mrs. Ramsay and the male characters in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) or the relationship between Helen Ambrose and St. John Hirst in *The Voyage Out* (1915).

<sup>15</sup> As editor of the Hogarth Press, he published works by Helene Deutsch, Karl Abraham, and Sigmund Freud (including the Standard Edition of Freud). In 1924 the Institute of Psycho-Analysis asked him to become the publisher of the International Psycho-Analytical Library. In the next forty years he published seventy volumes in it. For further details see Leonard Woolf, *Downhill All the Way: An Autobiography of the Years 1919-1939* (London, 1967), pp. 163-68.

and a fourth in 1940." During each of these breakdowns she went through two distinct states, first mania, then depression.<sup>16</sup>

I believe that Virginia Woolf's experience during mania is related to what she would consider an essentially feminine vision of life and that her experience during depression is related to what she would consider an essentially masculine vision of life. Moreover, as I shall explain, *To the Lighthouse* (1927) would seem to suggest that she relates her periods of mania to her mother and her periods of depression primarily, although not exclusively, to her father. John Custance, an English manic-depressive born in 1900, describes his psychosis in two books, *Wisdom, Madness and Folly* (1952) and *Adventures into the Unconscious* (1954). On the basis of personal experience, he too associates mania with the maternal and depression with the paternal.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, combining the implications of both visions of life, he develops a *Weltanschauung* amazingly similar to Virginia Woolf's.

There are many hypotheses but no certain knowledge as to why some people become manic-depressives. In Virginia Woolf's case, there were genogenic factors.<sup>18</sup> Her father was hypersensitive both as a child (he cried if reproached, would not hear stories with an unhappy ending, refused to look at any picture of the Crucifixion, adored poetry but shook with emotion when he listened to it) and as an adult (he would not visit hospitals, would not allow the word *dentist* to be mentioned, and during the Boer War refused to look at a newspaper).<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, his endless demands for love, sympathy, even adoration, and his exaggerated self-criticism suggest a depressive type of personality.<sup>20</sup> Significant

<sup>16</sup> Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-1918* (London, 1964), p. 76. On manic-depression, see, for instance, Robert W. White, *The Abnormal Personality*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1956), pp. 513-29, hereafter cited as White; Leopold Bellak *et al.*, *Manic-Depressive Psychosis and Allied Conditions* (New York, 1952); John D. Campbell, *Manic-Depressive Disease* (Philadelphia, 1953); Hassan Azima and Bernard C. Glueck, eds., *Psychiatric Research Reports of the American Psychiatric Association*, No. 17 (November, 1963), pp. 73-83, 91-97; and William A. White *et al.*, eds., *Manic-Depressive Psychosis, Association for Research in Nervous and Mental Disease*, XI (Baltimore, 1931).

<sup>17</sup> *Wisdom, Madness and Folly* (New York, 1952), p. 88. *Adventures into the Unconscious* was published in London. For another inside account of manic-depressive psychosis, see C. W. Beers, *A Mind That Found Itself* (New York, 1935).

<sup>18</sup> Robert W. Gibson ("Psychotherapy of Manic-Depressive States," *Psychiatric Research Reports*, p. 92) and others say there is a high incidence of manic-depression in the same family. White states that "For about 20 to 25 per cent of manic-depressive patients the history shows that one parent or the other had a mental illness, generally manic-depressive illness" (p. 532).

<sup>19</sup> Annan, pp. 12, 97. According to Leslie Stephen, Virginia's grandfather, James Stephen III, was also "over-sensitive and nervously irritable" (F. W. Maitland, *Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* [London, 1906], p. 433).

<sup>20</sup> White discusses Rado's belief that the behavior of a depressed person may be explained in part "as a cry for love: a display of helplessness and a direct appeal for the affection and

too is the fact that his elder brother's son, James K. Stephen, in the 1880s "became unpredictable in his behavior, veering between the extremes of wild gaiety and deep gloom," and was later committed to an institution.<sup>21</sup> The nature of the physiological defects which perhaps helped cause this instability in the Stephen family is suggested by strong evidence that the autonomic nervous system and the endocrine system to which it is closely related operate in a deranged manner in manic and depressive disorders.<sup>22</sup> Whatever the physical predisposition, however, such disturbances may also be a response to psychological stress. In turn, anxieties may be aggravated by the tendency toward emotional instability. Thus, in manic-depressives there is probably a very complex, continuous interaction between somatic and psychodynamic events.<sup>23</sup>

Certainly, Virginia Woolf was troubled about her relationship with her parents. On the date of her father's birthday, twenty-four years after his death and thirty-three years after her mother's death, she recorded in her diary:

I used to think of him and mother daily; but writing the *Lighthouse* laid them in my mind. And now he comes back sometimes, but differently. (I believe this to be true—that I was obsessed by them both, unhealthily; and writing of them was a necessary act.)  
(p. 138)

The central characters in *To the Lighthouse*—Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay, and Lily Briscoe—were inspired by her mother, her father, and herself. On May 14, 1925, Virginia Woolf recorded in her diary her

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security that have been lost" (p. 527). Compare Virginia Woolf's portrait of her father (Mr. Ramsay) in *To the Lighthouse* (London, 1955), especially p. 63. Stephen wrote in 1900 that he was often depressed; in 1895 he mentioned that sometime earlier he had had a "nervous depression" (Maitland, pp. 455, 434). Furthermore, Stephen's irrational fear of bankruptcy (described by Annan, p. 71) characterizes most manic-depressives when in a state of depression. Whereas the manic eats and acts as if his bank account were unlimited, the depressive refuses to eat, fearing bankruptcy and starvation (White, p. 530).

<sup>21</sup> Pippett, p. 20. Also, Laura, daughter of Leslie Stephen and his first wife, Minny Thackeray, was retarded (Annan, p. 92). Both Maitland and Pippett are strangely silent about Laura. Annan suggests that she had inherited the "insanity of her grandmother, Isabella Thackeray." However, her condition may also be related to what seems to be a hereditary weakness in the Stephen family.

<sup>22</sup> White, p. 535.

<sup>23</sup> See White, p. 523. Bellak and Gibson take a similar position. Others tend to emphasize either the somatogenic or the psychogenic position. Campbell, for instance, espouses the former. Accounts of psychoanalytic contributions may be found in O. Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* (New York, 1945), chap. 17, and P. Greenacre, ed., *Affective Disorders* (New York, 1953).

plan for *To the Lighthouse*: “[It is] to have father’s character done complete in it; and mother’s; and St. Ives; and childhood; . . . But the centre is father’s character, sitting in a boat, reciting *We perished*, each alone . . .” (pp. 76-77). The exactitude of her portrait of her father is confirmed by writings by and about Leslie Stephen, particularly by a journal he wrote for his children, his essay “An Agnostic’s Apology,”<sup>24</sup> and F. W. Maitland’s *Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*. The exactitude of the portrait of her mother is indicated by her sister’s reaction: “She says it is an amazing portrait of mother; . . . has lived in it; found the rising of the dead almost painful.”<sup>25</sup>

To write this novel, Virginia Woolf had to come to terms with the relationship between her parents and clarify her relationship to them.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Lily Briscoe cannot complete her abstract painting of “Mrs. Ramsay sitting in the window with [her son] James” (p. 32) until she has experienced the type of relationship Mrs. Ramsay had with her husband. Early in the novel Lily represents Mrs. Ramsay on her canvas as a triangular shape (p. 84), and toward the end of the novel she perceives Mr. Ramsay as part of the triangular form of a sailboat on the sea. Lily senses a disproportion and lack of harmony when she looks either at the “placing of the ships” on the sea or at the way she has arranged the shapes on her canvas. Before she can feel harmony in her mind and attain it in her painting, she realizes that she must “achieve that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces; Mr. Ramsay and the picture” (p. 296). In other words, she must bring into equilibrium the masculine and feminine approaches to life represented by Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. When she finally succeeds, she draws a line “in the centre” of her picture (p. 320). As Lily admits, this line may not be satisfying aesthetically; yet it seems to symbolize for her the place at which the masculine and feminine forces meet in the “androgynous” mind. So too in the novel, Virginia Woolf establishes the validity and interdependence of the two ways of knowing. She momentarily experiences what in *A Room of One’s Own* she calls “unity of mind” (p. 145). For this reason, *To the Lighthouse* is the happiest and least disturbing of her novels.

<sup>24</sup> Published in *An Agnostic’s Apology and Other Essays* (London, 1903). Some of the material in his unpublished journal is discussed by Annan (p. 99). His children referred to this journal as the *Mausoleum Book*.

<sup>25</sup> *The Writer’s Diary*, p. 107.

<sup>26</sup> Significantly, when Leonard Woolf read this novel in 1927, he called it “a psychological poem” (*ibid.*, p. 103).

After this moment of insight, however, she must have discovered, perhaps only unconsciously, that in terms of her personal development something important had occurred in the course of writing that novel. In oversimplified Freudian terms, she had made the difficult transition from the pre-Oedipal to the Oedipal stage.<sup>27</sup> This shift is symbolized by the behavior of Lily in Part III of *To the Lighthouse*. Mrs. Ramsay has died, and Lily is longing and crying out for her. But then, having successfully pictured her again in her mind's eye, she suddenly longs for Mr. Ramsay, for she wants to share her vision of Mrs. Ramsay with him (p. 310). Virginia Woolf's normal development was undoubtedly upset, or if it was already upset, compounded, when at the age of thirteen she lost her mother. Like the Ramsay children, Cam and James, she belatedly puts aside or at least softens her hostility toward her tyrannical, sympathy-seeking father and yields to his call for love and pity. She seems to realize in 1927 more than she had before that, despite his weaknesses, his view of life ("We perish'd, each alone." "We are driving before a gale—we must sink") is, in fact, more honest and like her own than her mother's (unpleasant facts should be hidden for the sake of harmony). Hence, she feels a new interest in her father's vision of life,<sup>28</sup> the influence of which is increasingly felt in her subsequent novels.

Virginia Woolf's lifelike portraits of her parents in *To the Lighthouse* reveal to what extent her concepts of the masculine and feminine ways of knowing were influenced by her observations of her parents and to what extent her inability to harmonize the two in any lasting way is related to her manic-depression. As we shall see, Mr. Ramsay prefers to see life steadily, Mrs. Ramsay to see it whole.

Leslie Stephen says in "An Agnostic's Apology" that "man knows nothing of the Infinite and Absolute"; therefore, he should "renounce for ever the attempt to get behind the veil" and be satisfied with "the systematic interrogation of experience."<sup>29</sup> Indeed, this is sufficiently challenging; for even to proceed, symbolically speaking, from A to Q and try to get to R required of Mr. Ramsay "qualities that in a desolate expedition across the icy solitudes of the Polar region would have made him the leader, the guide, the counsellor" (p. 57). Relentless in his pursuit of truth, he represses his intuition that his efforts are ultimately of

<sup>27</sup> Freud discusses female development in these terms in "The Psychology of Women," *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, trans. W. J. H. Sprott (New York, 1933), pp. 161-85.

<sup>28</sup> "He comes back now more as a contemporary. I must read him some day" (*A Writer's Diary*, p. 138). After publishing *To the Lighthouse*, she wrote in a letter, "I am more like him than her, I think . . ." (quoted by Pippett, p. 14).

<sup>29</sup> *An Agnostic's Apology and Other Essays* (London, 1903), pp. 40-41.

no importance and goes about quoting<sup>30</sup> and acting like the charging Light Brigade commemorated in Tennyson's poem:

Stormed at with shot and shell,  
 Boldly they rode and well  
 Into the jaws of Death  
 Into the mouth of hell. . . .

When he unexpectedly comes upon Lily Briscoe and William Banks in the garden, he is forced to realize that to the detached observer his intellectual struggle must indeed seem ridiculous (p. 44). The Light Brigade was uselessly sacrificed in 1854 at Balaklava in the Crimean War because "Someone had blundered." Reminded of the uselessness of the attack and muttering "Someone had blundered," he, though averting his eyes, bears down upon his wife for comfort. In her presence he silently regains his self-esteem and hence his equilibrium (p. 52). As he recovers, the reader may be reminded of the lines that follow "Someone had blundered" in "The Charge of the Light Brigade":

Theirs not to make reply,  
 Theirs not to reason why,  
 Theirs but to do and die.

The difference between Mr. Ramsay's state of mind in Part I and his state of mind in Part III parallels the difference in tone between "The Charge of the Light Brigade" and the poem that haunts him in Part III, Cowper's "The Castaway." The "mate" he has left behind is his wife, Mrs. Ramsay, whose love and sympathy were so important to him. In her own way, she was admirably courageous, yet no power intervened to prevent her death. Mr. Ramsay, like the speaker in "The Castaway," identifies himself with the fate of the one he loved. The lines he quotes are from the last stanza:

No voice divine the storm allay'd,  
 No light propitious shone,  
 When, snatch'd from all effectual aid,  
 We perish'd, each alone:  
 But I beneath a rougher sea,  
 And whelm'd in deeper gulfs than he.

<sup>30</sup> Mr. Ramsay recites poetry just as Leslie Stephen did. Leslie Stephen had a marvelous memory for poetry; "he could absorb a poem that he liked almost unconsciously from a single



When Cowper wrote this poem in 1799, he had had a delusion that he had lost the favor of God. Like Virginia Woolf's father, Mr. Ramsay had long ago accepted, in the words of Leslie Stephen's friend, W. K. Clifford, the "utter loneliness" that accompanies the agnostic's recognition that "the Great Companion is dead."<sup>31</sup> However, he is faced now with the additional loss of his goddess,<sup>32</sup> whose love shielded him from feeling constant terror. Such terror would have reduced to nothing the self-confidence he needed even to get from A to Q.<sup>33</sup> Mr. Ramsay is saved only because Lily, by praising his boots, takes over Mrs. Ramsay's role as ego-protector (p. 237).

It is easy to see life steadily if one is not conscious of the Void, but to be aware of the threat of nothingness and at the same time to try to see life "steadily" is to risk falling into a state of spiritual dryness which may in turn lead into a psychotic depression. In *The Abnormal Personality* Robert W. White suggests that in the manic-depressive, mania may be an attempt to control depression; for, whereas when depressed the patient considers himself worthless, in mania he avoids all thoughts detrimental to his self-esteem (pp. 525-26). Mrs. Ramsay's fertility places a similar check on Mr. Ramsay's spiritual sterility. Mr. Ramsay goes to his wife "to be assured of his genius, first of all, and then to be taken within the circle of life, warmed and soothed, to have his senses restored to him, his barrenness made fertile" (p. 62). As she sits knitting, his demands for entry are answered by an invitation: "she created

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reading." His daughter recalls that "He knew many of Mr. Rudyard Kipling's ballads by heart, and shouted Mr. Henry Newbolt's 'Admirals All' at the top of his voice as he went about the house or walked in Kensington Gardens, to the surprise of the nursery-maids and park-keepers." She goes on to say that when he recited, "we felt that he was speaking not merely the words of Tennyson or Wordsworth but what he himself felt and knew. Thus many of the great English poems now seem to me inseparable from my father; I hear in them not only his voice, but in some sort his teaching and belief" (Maitland, pp. 475-76; the "daughter" is undoubtedly Virginia).

<sup>31</sup> *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays* (London, 1947), p. 124.

<sup>32</sup> Mrs. Ramsay is often described in these terms; see, for example, pp. 27, 49-50, 279. For a comparison of her attributes with those of certain female figures in pagan mythology, see Joseph L. Blotner's interesting article, "Mythic Patterns in *To the Lighthouse*," *PMLA*, 71 (1956), 547-62.

<sup>33</sup> Virginia Woolf seems to have been very familiar with Maitland's biography of her father. Compare how the sight of Mrs. Ramsay and James at the window reassures Mr. Ramsay to what Leslie Stephen wrote in his letters to J. R. Lowell after the birth of Laura in 1870 and again after the birth of Vanessa in 1879. Speaking of his wife and their baby in 1870, he claims that "nothing much more beautiful can be seen on the face of the earth," and then again in 1879, "The sight of wife and child is the best argument I know against the supremacy as well as the existence of the foul fiend" (Maitland, pp. 224, 337). The A through Q image was undoubtedly suggested to Virginia Woolf by the fact that her father spent many trying years as editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Maitland has a chapter entitled "The Struggle with the Dictionary (1882-1891)."

drawing-room and kitchen, set them all aglow; bade him take his ease there, go in and out, enjoy himself" (p. 63).<sup>34</sup> Restoring her husband's equilibrium, she makes him feel whole again. By writing about her parents' relationship in *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf undoubtedly discovered a new kinship with her father; for when depressed, she too craved the sense of organic unity or wholeness which she must, as a child, have experienced in her mother's presence.

She also shared her father's desire to look unflinchingly at life as it is. This respect for honesty and truth (which she would label masculine) is reflected in the aspect of her aesthetics emphasized in "Modern Fiction": "Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness."<sup>35</sup> In her attitude toward life, it meant that she would have been annoyed, as Mr. Ramsay was, when Mrs. Ramsay "flew in the face of facts" (p. 53).<sup>36</sup> By insisting that it might not rain the next day (thus allowing the trip to the lighthouse), she "made his children hope what was utterly out of the question, in effect, told lies" (pp. 53-54).<sup>37</sup> It meant too that, for herself at least, Virginia Woolf would not, like Mrs. Ramsay, cover a "horrid" skull with a green shawl and then say it was like a mountain, a bird's nest, or a garden. Mrs. Ramsay knew the difference too (pp. 177, 95), but Virginia Woolf would have a harder time pretending it was something other than what it was. Like her mother, Mrs. Ramsay tried to soften the blows and threats to human happiness; but to Virginia Woolf and her father, a fact was a fact.<sup>38</sup>

Yet there were many moments in Virginia Woolf's life when she

<sup>34</sup> In a letter to Katherine Mansfield, written in December, 1918, D. H. Lawrence claims that such an experience between man and woman is equivalent to a return to the mother (*Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Aldous Huxley [New York, 1932], p. 462).

<sup>35</sup> *Collected Essays*, II, 107.

<sup>36</sup> This phrase may have been inspired by Stephen's in "An Agnostic's Apology." Reacting to the supposedly soothing statements made during funeral services, he declares: "To suppress these spasmodic efforts to fly in the face of facts would be some comfort, even in the distress which they are meant to alleviate" (*An Agnostic's Apology*, p. 4).

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *An Agnostic's Apology*, p. 3: "Dreams may be pleasanter for the moment than realities; but happiness must be won by adapting our lives to the realities."

<sup>38</sup> Although Leslie Stephen could not stand to hear of dentists or war, he "would receive his own death sentence with the coolest courage, and any of his friends who had to face 'a bad five minutes in the Alps' or elsewhere would have been wise to choose him for a companion. Nor certainly did he allow his vivid realisation of imagined pain to prevent him from 'looking ugly facts in the face' when he was making his estimate of the world. The ugly facts were for him painfully ugly—they had no sort of fascination for him—but if they were there, he would gaze at them steadily and take their measure" (Maitland, p. 436).

shared her mother's way of seeing things whole. For instance, she knew the ecstasy of artistic creation. Her mother, like Mrs. Ramsay, practiced the art of bringing people together and then managing them so that, momentarily, despite personality differences they felt themselves to be part of a harmonious whole, one which, in Mrs. Ramsay's words, partook "of eternity" (p. 163).<sup>39</sup> In writing her novels, Virginia Woolf similarly creates out of the material of life a new entity. What she calls "design" is not for her, however, as it may be for many artists, simply a way of ordering her subject matter.<sup>40</sup> She also intends, I believe, to convey through pattern the peculiar sense of "reality" or Oneness which she claims to perceive and longs to express. She visualizes this "reality" as a permanent shape which exists beneath the constant movement and change inherent in life.<sup>41</sup> In 1928 she describes it in her diary as "something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky; beside which nothing matters; in which I shall rest and continue to exist." She adds, "I fancy sometimes this is the most necessary thing to me: that which I seek. But who knows—once one takes a pen and writes? How difficult not to go making 'reality' this and that, whereas it is one thing" (p. 132). This "reality" is obviously related to the Oneness (the key to the universe) sometimes revealed to manic-depressives when they are in mania. John Custance, for instance, experiences "a sort of grasp of the whole, a passing beyond the antitheses, an interpenetration of the innumerable watertight compartments of life and experience." During such moments of manic revelation, in Custance's words, "the Eternal Masculine and Feminine are united and there is peace."<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> We may compare Mrs. Ramsay's talents as a hostess with what Leslie Stephen wrote after his wife's death: "Julia used to be 'at home' on Sunday afternoons; and though we did not attempt to set up a literary or artistic 'salon,' I can see her surrounded on such occasions by a very lively and pleasant group. Especially, I may say, she took the keenest possible interest in young people; she was loved and admired in return by many young friends; she was happy in watching their friendships or love-makings, and her pleasure was in itself a refinement and a charm. Her courtesy was perfect—sometimes a tacit rebuke to me, who find courtesy to bores a very difficult duty" (Maitland, p. 323). Annan claims that Virginia's mother was more remarkable than her father: "She responded to other people's feelings instinctively; she could . . . read thoughts before they were uttered, and her sympathy was like the touch of a butterfly, delicate and remote—for she knew what it was to live an inner life and respected other people's privacy. Leslie thought himself a practical man but beside her he was a ninny. Leslie thought himself a friend in need, but she knew how to translate sympathy into action" (p. 101). Her one publication, *Notes for Sick Rooms*, which is about nursing, reveals the same disconcerting sense of humor and tone of voice that characterize much of Virginia Woolf's writing, particularly works like "A Mark on the Wall" and *Orlando*.

<sup>40</sup> *A Writer's Diary*, pp. 58, 61, 146.

<sup>41</sup> Thus, Lily sees her painting in this way: "In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability" (pp. 249-50).

<sup>42</sup> *Wisdom, Madness and Folly*, pp. 55, 46.

Virginia Woolf does not experience this wholeness very often, however; and in her diary she explicitly says that in depression she has a "harassed feeling" because she searches for it without success (p. 86). Yet, as long as this feminine or manic vision of an underlying design at least alternates or coexists with her "honest" (scientific) masculine vision of apparently meaningless flux, she is able to remain "upright" like her father. After the two are united briefly in Lily Briscoe's painting, however, Virginia Woolf seems to be more and more sensitive to the "shot and shell" amidst which man has to live. Although sinking into "deeper gulfs," she continues to look for meaning or at least pattern in life, but the odds against finding either appear to increase. In 1931 she suggests in *The Waves* that the artist's ability to create may be affected by this lack of pattern, for Bernard, who wants to write, fails to transform the chaos of life into an artistic whole. But whereas Bernard's enemy is still the Void against which he fights courageously, in *The Years* (1937) and *Between the Acts* (1941) man's enemy is his own behavior. The tone of these last two novels reflects not only Virginia Woolf's increased sense of the meaninglessness of life, but also her horror as she observes supposedly sane individuals and nations preparing for another world war. Her horror of war was as great as her father's, but she could not ignore the world wars as her father had the Boer War. Thus, her periods of depression became "deeper and more dangerous."<sup>43</sup> In *Between the Acts* Miss La Trobe's image of the modern age as fragments of the human and inhuman reflected by moving mirrors clearly suggests that a normal sense of psychological wholeness was by 1941 no longer possible for Virginia Woolf.

The duality inherent in Virginia Woolf's illness, her parents' personalities, her own view of life, and her aesthetics may be further illuminated by Custance's description of his feelings as a manic-depressive. Considering differences in personalities and the little information we have about Virginia Woolf's experience while ill,<sup>44</sup> we cannot say

<sup>43</sup> Leonard Woolf, *Downhill All the Way*, p. 153.

<sup>44</sup> There may be more material in the 26 volumes from which Leonard Woolf selected the 365 pages of *A Writer's Diary*. These volumes have just recently become available. They are now part of the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library. Seven earlier diaries, written periodically during the years 1899-1919, may also be found in the Berg Collection. These diaries do not add to what we know of her illness; however, pages 149-56 of Diary No. 2 (Hyde Park Gate, June 30, 1903—October 1, 1903?) support what I have said of the connection between her parents and her psychosis. This connection is further supported by an autobiographical fragment located in the Berg Collection ("The tea table was the centre of Victorian family life," in her "Articles, essays, fiction and reviews," Vol. 9, dated January 28, 1940, Part I of 1940, pp. 55-69; see, in particular, pp. 57, 65-69).

that her manic-depression was exactly like his. Yet his vision of the world in terms of the masculine and the feminine, his association of the masculine with depression, the feminine with mania, and his feeling that what was wrong with individuals and societies was that they were not androgynous because they were not feminine enough<sup>45</sup> suggest some basic similarity in the way their minds work. His descriptions of depression and mania in *Wisdom, Madness and Folly* (pp. 31-81) remind us of her portraits of the personalities of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay.

In depression, Custance is in a universe of horror; in mania, he is in a universe of bliss. In the former he feels miserable and ill; in the latter he has a sense of well-being. In depression, he, like Mr. Ramsay, does not notice visual detail; in mania he has, like Mrs. Ramsay, an artist's eye.<sup>46</sup> In one state, he withdraws like Mr. Ramsay into his own ego and feels isolated from others and from "god";<sup>47</sup> in the other, he feels, as Mrs. Ramsay sometimes does, a "mystic sense of unity with the All."<sup>48</sup> In one mood, he feels repulsion for the outside world and for himself; in the opposite mood, he feels Mrs. Ramsay's protective, indiscriminate love for all men and her sense of godlike power over their lives.<sup>49</sup> While depressed he feels guilty and, like Mr. Ramsay, inadequate and dissatisfied, whereas in mania, he feels, as Mrs. Ramsay often does, proud and elated.<sup>50</sup> Finally, when a victim of depression, he is, like Mr. Ramsay, cut off from the secret of the universe; metaphorically speaking, he cannot reach "Z." But as a manic, he seems to have "some clue, some Open-Sesame to creation";<sup>51</sup> so too Lily Briscoe depicts Mrs. Ramsay's heart and mind as containing "tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out would teach one everything" (p. 82).<sup>52</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938).

<sup>46</sup> The difference between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's ways of seeing is indicated in this passage: "And looking up, she saw above the thin trees the first pulse of the full-throbbing star, and wanted to make her husband look at it; for the sight gave her such keen pleasure. But she stopped herself. He never looked at things. If he did, all he would say would be, Poor little world, with one of his sighs" (p. 112).

<sup>47</sup> Standing in the boat, Mr. Ramsay looked "as if he were saying, 'There is no God . . .'" (p. 318).

<sup>48</sup> Custance, p. 37. Cf. *To the Lighthouse*, p. 100.

<sup>49</sup> *To the Lighthouse*, pp. 19, 131.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>51</sup> Custance, p. 52.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. also Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway* (London, 1925); he feels he is the recipient of an ineffable revelation which should be conveyed immediately (pp. 28, 109), for if the Establishment had this information, everything would be different. White describes this aspect of manic behavior (p. 520). In *Adventures into the Unconscious*, Custance tells how he actually went to 10 Downing Street to see the Prime Minister (p. 199). Septimus's behavior during

These striking similarities and the preceding discussion of Virginia Woolf's own quest for an androgynous vision help to suggest what Leonard Woolf means when he says that "the connection between her madness and her writing was close and complicated."<sup>53</sup> The intensity of her quest, reflected both in her essays and her novels, may be better appreciated when we realize that in her mind it meant the difference between sanity and insanity. Custance envisions the problem of equilibrium in these terms: "Normal life and consciousness of 'reality' appear to me rather like motion along a narrow strip of table-land at the top of a Great Divide separating two distinct universes from each other"; and he adds, "In the condition of manic-depression, this table-land is so narrow that it is exceedingly difficult to keep on it" (p. 29). Virginia Woolf knew that to slip off it, into Heaven or into Hell, meant that she could no longer write or take care of herself.

Worse yet, lurking behind the fear of attacks of manic-depression is the greater fear of incurable insanity; for if a manic-depressive is not permanently cured, with age his attacks often become more and more schizophrenic in nature.<sup>54</sup> During the last two attacks of hypomania described by Custance in *Wisdom, Madness and Folly*, he claims that he has slipped over the line into schizophrenia (pp. 135, 138). A comparison of this first book with his second suggests the difference between the manic-depressive and the schizophrenic cited by White in *The Abnormal Personality*: to an observer, the manic-depressive appears abnormally speeded up or slowed down "and thus seriously disorganized, but not unintelligible or queer"; however, the schizophrenic does seem "crazy" (pp. 520-21). Moreover, the schizophrenic's chances for periodic or permanent recovery are much less than the manic-depressive's. For instance, a schizophrenic may have to live forty to fifty years in a mental institution.<sup>55</sup> This illuminates Virginia Woolf's

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depression (pp. 18, 99) is also similar to Custance's. In severe depression one's vision is affected; ordinary objects become frightening. Custance describes his experience in *Wisdom, Madness and Folly*: "There was the god Baal, with a cruel mouth like a slit (a wrinkle in the side of a bed), waiting to devour me as a living sacrifice. There was Hecate, who used generally to appear in pillows, her shape was . . . the most horrible of all. When I went out I saw devils by the hundreds in trees and bushes, and especially in cut wood, generally in serpent form" (p. 72). Cf. *Mrs. Dalloway*, pp. 18, 26.

<sup>53</sup> *Beginning Again*, p. 81. In this regard, it is interesting to note what Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary on September 10, 1929: "and these curious intervals in life—I've had many—are the most fruitful artistically—one becomes fertilised—think of my madness at Hogarth—and all the little illnesses—that [illness] before I wrote the *Lighthouse* for instance. Six weeks in bed now would make a masterpiece of *Moths* [later entitled *The Waves*]" (p. 146).

<sup>54</sup> C. A. Bonner, "Psychogenic Factors as Causative Agents in Manic-Depressive Psychosis," in *Manic-Depressive Psychosis*, ed. W. A. White et al., p. 547.

<sup>55</sup> White, p. 544.

explanatory suicide note in which she expressed her belief that she was going mad again and that this time she would not recover.

This background of threatened insanity explains somewhat Virginia Woolf's intensity as an artist. Driven by a search for "self," she put the "whole of herself"<sup>56</sup> into her novels and remarks about writing. With her temperament she could not have done otherwise. Yet her quest was, in personal terms (not, I believe, in terms of her literary reputation), rather like the charge of the Light Brigade. For, as Leonard Woolf notes, "it is significant that, whenever she finished a book, she was in a state of mental exhaustion and for weeks in danger of a breakdown."<sup>57</sup> Ironically, the strain of her quest endangered the equilibrium she sought.

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<sup>56</sup> See Leonard Woolf's remarks about this in *Beginning Again*, p. 81, and in *Downhill All the Way*, p. 149.

<sup>57</sup> *Beginning Again*, p. 81.