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The Art of Self-Perception in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Edith Wharton's *The Reef*

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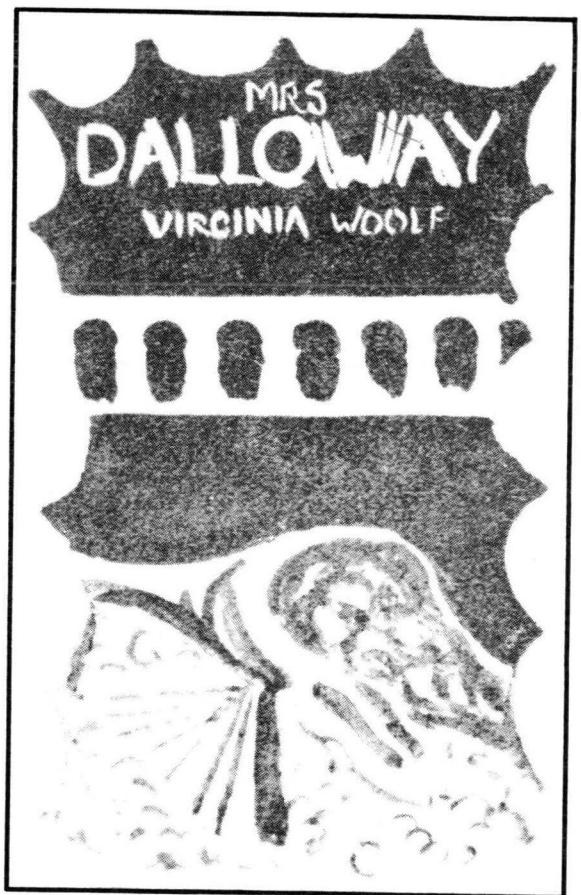
VIRGINIA WOOLF, pencil and watercolour sketch by Vanessa Bell.

At first glance, Bloomsbury aesthete Virgin Woolf and American novelist of manners Edith Wharton appear to have little in common as writers. Woolf, whose essay "Mr. and Mrs. Brown" contains her manifesto concerning the irrelevance of nineteenth-century realist fiction to her own concerns as a novelist, rejects plot structure in favour of a theory of narrative as recurring images.[1] Wharton, on the other hand, focuses upon the moment of moral choice.[2] For Wharton, "the art of rendering life in fiction can never . . . be anything . . . but the disengaging of crucial moments from the welter of existence."[3] Nevertheless, such distinctions between the two writers are somewhat misleading; Woolf's methods of characterization evolve from an assessment of realist and naturalist modes, while Wharton's attitude to form is considerably more experimental than many of her commentators have appreciated. Both writers show an ob-

session with the fetters of social convention, with the search for spiritual freedom, and with the relationship between the sensations of the present moment and the imaginative memory of the past. Moreover, a close reading of a major work by each novelist indicates an intriguing similarity in attitudes to art and society. Woolf and Wharton believe that artistic creativity offers the best hope for the reconstruction of society; further, they explore the extent to which the principles of art as an enclosed, self-contained world can act as the means to personal transformation and the agent for a magical rejection of the predatory forces in both nature and society.



DRAWING FOR THE JACKET OF MRS. DALLOWAY, by Vanessa Bell, 1925.

The attempt to withstand nature and society as destructive forces might be shown in terms of any character, male or female, but Woolf and Wharton tend to use aristocratic women as examples of the creative impulse. Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and Wharton's *The Reef* (1912) provide what Woolf might call "tunnel" vistas of a woman's perceptions of her past against the background of cultural change.[4] Moreover, both novelists use their leading characters as a way to express views of female creativity. Anna Leath, the heroine of *The Reef,* and Clarissa Dalloway, the unifying consciousness in *Mrs. Dalloway,* are aristocrats in sensibility and background. Both have learned to conform to the conventions of an established social order, but they share a secret, mysterious strength of being which allows them to project into other people's minds; in short, they are life-artists who view the world from the superior heights of intuition as well as wealth and privilege. However, there are inherent dangers in their artistic ability. Art can become a healing quality through which they join the past to the present in order to protect themselves and others from painful experiences, or it can distort the past so that the present moment of bliss is transient and false.

Clarissa Dalloway and Anna Leath are used to express moral condemnation of sinister undercurrents in the society of their time; their sensitivity thus reflects outrage concerning the power motive in civilization. This criticism of society takes two forms; one involves the fear of personal violation, and the other shows the threat of social solidarity upon personal freedom. In both novels, the underlying assumption is that personal egotism and aggressive behaviour lead to a totalitarian state.[5] When, for example, Anna Leath must face the fact of her own depravity as the greed for instinctual satisfaction, she feels as if she encounters the death of her individual soul. Clarissa correspondingly fears the emotion of hate as destructive to her soul: "It rasped her

. . . to have stirring about in her this brute monster! to hear twigs cracking and feel hooves planted down in the depths of that leaf-encumbered forest, the soul, never to be content quite, or quite secure, for at any moment the brute would be stirring . . . ."[6] In a wider sense, also, Clarissa and Anna attempt to reject those persons who seek to dominate others, or to destroy the happiness of others. In *Mrs. Dalloway,* Clarissa has a feeling of revulsion for Sir William Bradshaw, and to a certain extent, for Lady Bruton; Anna, on the other hand, has a more subtle perception of coarseness when she regards Sophy Viner as a common opportunist. Clarissa has a vision of spiritual expansion and continuity to sustain her whereas Anna's widening horizons at the end of *The Reef* emerge only after she has lost her idealistic faith in the human spirit. Although both novels strongly suggest the inevitability of social entrapment, *Mrs. Dalloway* presents possibilities for communication and escape, while *The Reef* contains an ambivalent view of personal survival.

Clarissa and Anna are described by means of obsessive images of confinement Both feel trapped by the necessity of fulfilling the requirements of being wives and mothers; moreover, their sense of entrapment is accentuated by fears relating to the possibility of self-destruction. Especially in the opening section of Woolf's novel, Clarissa is intensely aware of the insubstantiality of her social identity as Mrs. Richard Dalloway:

> She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being nor more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway (*Mrs. Dalloway,* p. 13).

To counteract this social parade (summed up in the sudden presence of an unnamed member of the Royal Family) Clarissa creates her own imaginative pageant. She lives a secretive existence, for she invents each day as a voyage of discovery, creating each moment anew in the wholeness of her creative faculties: "For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh . . . (*Mrs. Dalloway, p. 6*). Within her home, also, she creates a comforting sense of personal enclosure. At noon she retreats to the secure, cool serenity of her house. At the same time, however, Clarissa is aware of this enclosure as containing elements of entrapment. She appreciates, with a certain element of horror, that she is alone because of her failure to experience sexual passion. Her home is described as a vault, while she herself is a "nun who has left the world and feels fold round her the familiar veils and response to old devotions" (*Mrs. Dalloway,* p. 35). As she climbs the stairs to her room, her spirit contracts:

> Like a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower, she went upstairs, paused at the window, came to the bathroom. There was the green linoleum and a tap dripping. There was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room . . . . Narrower and narrower would her bed be . . . ." (*Mrs. Dalloway,* p. 36).

She recalls her failure to provide her husband with physical satisfaction, and she is also aware, half-consciously, that she failed to accept Peter Walsh because he demanded an intense relationship. This sense of failure comes from her fear of both physical and spiritual violation. Clarissa has the pleasurable knowledge that her tact and sympathy link her to others; on the level of superficial relationships, her life is highly successful, but as far as allowing her hidden self to emerge for the outside world, she has avoided the struggle. Like

Anna Leath, she has the habit of reticence, partly as a result of her adherence to decorum, but more significantly, because she wants to conceal her strongest feelings from others.

Just as Clarissa's consciousness forms the main aspect of Woolf's novel, so also Anna Leath's mind unifies *The Reef.* Even when Anna is not actually present, as in Book One, the novel suggests aspects of experience which she must later assimilate. Moreover, Anna has an inherent desire to unify the disparate elements in her environment. In the opening scenes of Book Two, she creates a mood of personal harmony. Standing before her house at Givre, for example, she feels the universe reduced to the strength of her own receptive spiritual and sensual shell:

> her air was less of expectancy than of contemplation: she seemed not so much to be watching for any one, or listening for an approaching sound, as letting the whole aspect of the place sink into her while she held herself open to its influence.[8]

EDITH WHARTON: Christmas, 1905. Photo courtesy of the Wharton Mss., Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

The house here becomes a symbol of her attempt to deal with experience on the level of personal being. Moreover, her memory has the magical quality of releasing from the sensual experiences of the past a vital significance. As she relives in her mind the circumstances of her past, she comes to terms with them for the first time. As Anna absorbs the atmosphere of her home, she recalls her youthful disappointment and unhappy marriage, but as she reads a letter from Darrow announcing his arrival, she feels on the verge of a new awareness: "She felt, saw, breathed the shining world as though a thin impenetrable veil had suddenly been removed from it" (*The Reef,* p. 84).

Against the force of disintegration in the external world, both Anna and Clarissa seek to create their own universe. Rather then defying her husband openly, Anna remembers that she created a sanctuary which represented the preservation of her former ideals, especially the belief in a freer world. Givre, thus, becomes part of Anna's fantasy world and as such represents the denial of external reality:

> She tried to throw a compensating ardour into the secret excursions of her spirit, and thus the old vicious distinction between romance and reality was re-established for her, and she resigned herself

> again to the belief that 'real life' was neither real nor alive (*The Reef,* p. 94).

Clarissa also recalls her girlhood at Bourton, seeking to locate in her rejection of Peter Walsh and her acceptance of Richard some sort of clue to the present. The opening lines of the novel clearly show that the central problem for Clarissa, in the progress of her day, will be how to analyze the past. Clarissa perceives in the past an element of tragedy:

> How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen . . . (*Mrs. Dalloway,* p.5).

For the reader of *Mrs. Dalloway,* also, there is a major problem in deciding what did happen at Bourton that summer. Clarissa tends to distort the past as she creates moments of intense communion in the present moment. She recalls her feeling for Sally as a point of spiritual ecstasy:

> It was sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extra-ordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores (*Mrs. Dalloway,* p. 36).

At such moments of feeling for relationships in the past, Clarissa's art allows her to become a healer of her own painful inadequacy; through the art of memory and imagination, she has a sudden glimpse of the meaning of her existence.

Clarissa and Anna display a sensitivity to time which brings out, in each case, the novelist's concern with juxtaposing the past and the present. This awareness of the effects of time is used to attack the entire concept of time as the progression of hours and days measured by the clock and symbolic of an orderly, civilized life. In *Mrs. Dalloway* the use of time to structure the episodes becomes one of the major techniques through which Clarissa's mind is linked to others. Theoretically, the striking of Big Ben should serve to remind people of their collective social interests, but Woolf shows that the links and ties are created through Clarissa's strong rejection of "clock" time. For her, the "leaden circles" dissolve in the air. She is deeply afraid of the effects of time as physical decay and death, but she believes that time is irrelevant in contrast to the continuity of the human soul.

Anna's attempts to transcend time, however, are ultimately unsuccessful. In looking back over her marriage to Fraser Leath, Anna believes that she understands it for the first time, but, in fact, only her happiness in the present moment allows her such moments of insight. Through Darrow's presence, she attempts to create an enclosed, ideal world in which they can enact the rituals of love celebrated by the troubadours of medieval Provence. The Givre in which she welcomes Darrow becomes an enchanted world where love can exist uncontaminated by the outside environment. Refusing to define their future, she dwells instead upon the enchanted moment in which they confess their love and redefine the unsatisfactory nature of their past: " 'I want to draw all these wasted months into today—to make them a part of it' " (*The Reef,* p. 110). The uselessness of Anna's attempt to hold onto the moment, however, becomes apparent in a series of contrasting descriptions of Givre. Anna's consciousness of Givre is of a beautiful landscape in which romantic love may be realized, but the artificiality of the set-

ting is evident: "the delicate frosting gave the grass a bluish shimmer, and the sun-light, sliding in emerald streaks along the tree-boles, gathered itself into great luminous blurs at the end of the water-walks" (*The Reef,* p. 108). Moreover, these impressionist descriptions of Givre conflict with the natural background. Nature negates Anna's vision. Actually, the time is autumn and "the smell of wet roots and decaying leaves was merged into the pungent sense of burning underbrush" (p. 116).

Anna and Clarissa find themselves opponents of the predatory power in nature and civilization. Anna wants Givre to be her personal sanctuary and shrine, but she is aware that it is her island of captivity. In fact, Givre represents a prison, a symbol of collective force. The house looks like a medieval castle, with a chapel and gilded cross. Moreover, it acquires aspects of decadence, revealed as the superstructure of a religious faith that holds civilization intact long after its inmates have ceased to believe. Like Clarissa's house, the house at Givre lacks a soul; there is an emptiness at the core. Even though Clarissa does not perceive herself as a prisoner in the way that Anna feels perpetually hemmed in by her dead husband's conventions, she evidently resents the way she is trapped by the forms of the society in which she moves. She knows that others view her as cold, bird-like, a symbol of the educated upper-class establishment, and the embodiment of British imperialist culture. Her drawing room becomes the centre of London, which in turn is the centre of the civilizated world.

If houses in both novels emerge as outward signs of personal and social enclosure, then travel is associated with emotional release. In *Mrs. Dalloway,* especially, there is a constant alternation between the rhythms of retreat and expansion as the mind attempts to comprehend experience and then as the ego responds to the exciting stimulus of the external world. As Clarissa steps into the traffic of London, she feels the distancing of a dual identity: "She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxicabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone . . . (*Mrs. Dalloway,* p. 10, 11). In *The Reef* the sea is also used as an image of spiritual expansion. We feel Anna's moments of joyful liberation in terms of the waves, those brave creatures whom Woolf perceives as exciting glimpses of the spirit venturing forth toward the unknown. Emotion in *The Reef* is expressed as the buoyancy of floating in moving waters:

> The earth always felt elastic under her, and she had a conscious joy in treading it; but never had it been as soft and springy as today. It seemed actually to rise and meet her as she went, so that she had the feeling, which sometimes came to her in dreams, of skimming miraculously over short bright waves. The air, too, seemed to break in waves against her, sweeping by on its current all the slanting lights and moist sharp perfumes of the failing day (*The Reef,* p. 99).

This delight in motion is part of the expression of individuality, not as the greed to possess the soul of another person, but as the pleasure of releasing vitality. In Wharton's novels, travel, especially by train, acquires symbolic importance as part of the search for freedom. Anna's happiest moments with Darrow, for example, occur on a train en route to Paris.

Because of their belief in the importance of personal discovery, Woolf and Wharton show the free spirit with a high degree of excitement. In *Mrs. Dalloway,* Clarissa's daughter Elizabeth becomes the epitome of the disengaged

spirit as she travels the buses to an area of London which her parents do not frequent. Similarly, Sophy Viner, in the opening section of *The Reef,* represents the spirit of youthful freedom. Left alone at an early age, after the death of her parents and guardian, Sophy feels the pleasure of being released to the world of possibilities: "The latter had represented only the means of holding her in bondage, and its disappearance was the occasion of her immediate plunge into the wide bright sea surrounding the island of her captivity" (*The Reef,* p. 22). She enjoys the entrance to Paris by train when travel distracts her from personal difficulty. Of course, Sophy is free because she lacks moral constraints, whereas Elizabeth is free because she is uncommitted, but both young women are used as barometers of change in the social climate for women. Anna and Clarissa, however, dwell within the cloistered world of a dying aristocracy and suffer from the need to hold onto tradition.

Like Clarissa, Anna delights in preserving human values which appear more important than individual appetite. In contrast to her husband, Fraser Leath, who observed an outward show of artistic interest, Anna has an absorbing desire to preserve images of humanity, however grotesque, in the sanctity of her mind: "the exploring ray of curiosity lit up now some shape of breathing beauty and now a mummy's grin" (*The Reef,* p. 94). But Anna lacks an outward vehicle for her intense search for beauty and truth; only in the creative acts of thought or in social acts of compassion can she express the vitality of her nature. Clarissa does, at least, believe that her parties are an offering, an outward show of her individualism and her creativity: "An offering for the sake of offering, perhaps. Anyhow, it was her gift "(*Mrs. Dalloway,* p. 135). While Anna fails to locate a society formed according to spiritual values, Clarissa appears to create in her parties the beginnings of a new civilization purged of the sinister threats of materialism and greed.[10]

There is a note of optimism at the end of *Mrs. Dalloway.* After hearing of Septimus' suicide from the Bradshaws (whom she dislikes), Clarissa goes off by herself and contemplates an old lady climbing the stairs to her bedroom, turning off her light. She recalls the line from Shakespeare, "fear no more the heat of the sun," which has recurred in her mind throughout the day. She relieves her fear and anguish: "there was the terror; the overwhelming incapacity, one's parents giving it into one's hands, this life, to be lived to the end, to be walked with serenely; there was in the depths of her heart an awful fear" (*Mrs. Dalloway,* p. 204). Intuitively, Clarissa can feel Septimus' horror at the intrusion of Sir William Bradshaw upon his privacy; she feels the physical pain of his death, but more significantly she recognizes that Bradshaw would hurl him out of society, punish him for failing to conform. Septimus' death becomes a form of communication: "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" (p. 214). Imaginatively, Clarissa has transformed herself from the brittle, mannered, tense creature of the beginning of her day to the position of acceptance of the terror of death. Not only does she believe in a kind of mind expansion but she also now believes that the life of another person has been worthwhile as an offering to her personally. She has ceased to feel the loneliness of estrangement; she feels the contact of the human soul as a comforting collective force. However one interprets the lines "death is communication," one must recognize that Clarissa's attitudes have changed; subtly, Woolf has suggested that, in the course of a day, Clarissa has relived the central experiences of her entire life and come to terms with them for the first time. She has undergone a mysterious transformation, the full extent of which is only briefly indicated.

Woolf appears to arrive at a theory of immortality; Clarissa, at least, feels assured of contact with others. For Wharton, however, there is no comforting faith in mysticism. Wharton's pessimism is all the more acute in that she has almost as strong an obsession with spiritual survival as Woolf. But the ending of *The Reef* shows Anna torn between spiritual release and possessive sexuality.

In one of the most extraordinary scenes in Wharton's fiction, Anna perceives in Darrow's eyes the evidence of his fallen image. As she changes her opinion of his character, admitting to herself that he has had an affair with Sophy Viner, she observes that his manner and expression alter:

> she seemed to look into the very ruins of his soul. That was the only way she could express it. It was as though he and she had been looking at two sides of the same thing, and the side she had seen had been all light and life, and his a place of graves (*The Reef,* p. 277).

Anna's transformation moves in the opposite direction from Clarissa's. Inevitably, Anna's recognition of Darrow's consciousness as a "place of graves" substantially alters her own perception of the world around her. Moreover, her instantaneously felt vision of the death of his soul leads to the loss of her own moral integrity. She feels her inner being begin to crumble in the face of her sudden knowledge of survival as the only rule of existence. As a result of her relationship with Darrow, Anna must face unpleasant facts about her own character—that she is possessive, jealous, and intolerant. Even her feeling of buoyancy, the surge of sexual vitality which leads her to Darrow's bedroom, is based on a jealously regarding Sophy Viner and a determination to have the same intimacy with Darrow that Sophy once had. Anna must also come to terms with her own depravity and irrationality. Through this new awareness, she becomes estranged from her former being: "She looked back with melancholy derision on her old conception of life, as a kind of well lit and well policed suburb to dark places one need never know about" (*The Reef,* p. 253). Although the social world has moved beyond such values, a puritan sense of responsibility and personal guilt pervade Anna's mind. Because of her puritan conscience, she will always regard such dark places as the source of sin. Moreover, for Anna, to recognize the sinfullness of one's own being means to acknowledge the loss of immortal life. Against the awesome horror of this revelation, there is the day-to-day satisfaction which might come from marriage to Darrow. Accordingly, the intriguing question posed by the last scenes of the novel is the extent to which Darrow and Anna can continue to hold each other's respect when the essence of their being has disappeared.

The end of *The Reef* provides an extremely ambiguous portrait of Anna's situation, partly because Anna herself is divided between happiness and misery. Despite the fact that Anna now has fragmented conscious awareness of who she is and what she wants, the implication is that Anna will miss Givre all the more now that its dark spirits have been released. Scenes of domestic life in Book Five have a tranquility which contrasts with the hectic confusion of Paris. Furthermore, Anna loses the centre of her being and the focus of her life once she departs from Givre. In Paris, she is grotesquely out of her element.

Painfully civilized, sensitive, intuitive, and spiritual, Anna and Clarissa suffer from an idealism which separates them from others. In a sense, this idealism is part of their class background; as young girls, they have been sheltered from the coarser material world. Both have been trained in decorum, reticence, and the "measured" response. Moreover, both seem to deliberately create the illusion of

their superiority. Darrow notes in Anna, and Peter Walsh in Clarissa, a quality of mystery, a presence, as if they cultivated the glamour of a personal myth for the sake of others as well as for their own self-satisfaction. Anna, for example, appears a godess when called upon to perform as act of charity: "her face wore the pale glow it took on at any call on her energy, a kind of warrior brightness that made her small head with its strong chin and close-bound hair like that of an amazon in a frieze" (*The Reef,* p. 193). Peter enters Clarissa's house as if worshipping at the shrine, experiencing a heightened form of consciousness. The ending of *Mrs. Dalloway,* thus, brings out the enigma of Clarissa: "For there she was" (*Mrs. Dalloway,* p. 215). We cannot be sure whether Woolf intends us to feel Peter Walsh's adoration of her glittering exterior as a kind of masquerade, or whether Clarissa has, in the process of her spiritual encounter with Septimus, reached an authentic self which is now visible to those who know her. However, the difficulties of interpretation in the endings of both *The Reef* and *Mrs. Dalloway* are expressed, the reader comes back to the essential fact that Anna and Clarissa seem liberated, at least in part, from isolation.[11]

Their response to others has altered considerably. In Anna's case, her recognition of personal needs leads to a new awareness of the desperation of needs in others. She comes to perceive Darrow's dependence on her as the focal point his existence. Numerous passages in the novel show that Darrow experiences Anna as the life-sustaining element into which he must submerge his painful consciousness:

> Her gaze, so grave and yet so sweet, was like a deep pool into which he could plunge and hide himself from the hard glare of his misery. As his ecstatic sense enveloped him he found it more and more difficult to follow her words and to frame an answer; but what did anything matter, except that her voice should go on, and the syllables fall like soft touches on his tortured brain? (*The Reef,* p. 270).

When he feels Anna passing from him, his life force expires: "He had an almost physical sense of struggling for air, of battling with material obstruction . . . (*The Reef,* p. 143). Part of Anna's development involves the recognition of herself as the life force, the medium of physical and spiritual energy, for those around her. Up to the point of committing herself to Darrow, Anna has insisted that her happiness and escape from Givre depended on her stepson, Owen.[12] They were like two prisoners who drew together for comfort and became so close that they could read each other's minds. Wharton suggests that Anna's tie to Owen is incestuous; she projects her own desire to rebel onto his youthful rejection and disdain of his father. In order to mature socially, Anna must relinquish her hold on Owen in favour of a tie with someone from the outside world. Moreover, she must accept the relationship between Sophy Viner and Darrow as part of her own future.

As well as assimilating the death of Septimus Smith, Clarissa, in *Mrs. Dalloway,* absorbs the life experience of Peter Walsh. In an important way, his view of her character has always formed a strong element in her self-perception. She knows that he sees her as a prude. In turn, he fears her, as the reminder of his past humiliation, but he clearly sees her as the strongest aspect of his own sense of personal reality. Walsh is the "solitary traveller" who lives in the land of dreams, who drifts on the surface of experiences, whereas Clarissa represents the "the sleeper jolting against him in the railway carriage," (*Mrs. Dalloway,* p. 85) the agent who brings him to consciousness. When he sleeps, he has visions of her as an epic figure, a giant embodiment of female creativity; when he wakes, his central anguish is the realization that she is not present to listen to his

words.[13] A phrase pops into his mind: "death of the soul" (p. 66). Ironically, without Clarissa, he is void of that romantic impulse which has sustained him. Moreover, he recalls her prudish reaction to a woman who had a child out of wedlock, and feels, with a certain delight, the superiority of his more liberal views. Because he experiences a more erotic view of relationships, he contributes to Clarissa the missing element in her personality. Through him, she mysteriously absorbs the ageless creature singing in Regent's park.

Clarissa's emancipation from her past, however, occurs more overtly in her encounter with Sally Seton. Coarse, materialistic, even vulgar, the Sally Seton who arrives uninvited at the party scarcely lives up to that ecstatic memory of their kiss. In fact, Sally may have betrayed Clarissa, in sending Peter Walsh away, at the crucial moment in the past at Bourton. Sally admits that Clarissa would never visit her. In an ironic way, Sally is used to sum up a major pattern of imagery and to suggest Clarissa's personal success: "Are we not all prisoners? She had read a wonderful play about a man who scratched on the wall of his cell, and she felt that was true of life—one scratched on the wall" (*Mrs. Dalloway,* p. 213). Ironically, Sally appears the agent of Clarissa's betrayal and entrapment, but Clarissa has mysteriously purged herself of all bitterness. She is shown standing beside the two people, Sally and Peter, who have contributed most to her views of life. Significantly, Richard, her husband, has disappeared, and the prime minister, the Bradshaws, and the rest have also faded to the background. Part of the effect of this final appearance of Clarissa's personality must surely lie in the assumption of her preparation for death, not as a tragic outcome, but as a moment of triumph.

Like many other modern novelists, Woolf and Wharton describe the human fear of exposure balanced against the fear of entrapment. Clarissa Dalloway and Anna Leath endure the stripping away of illusions concerning themselves and civilization, but in the first case Clarissa seems to prepare herself for death by purging herself of physical needs, whereas in the second instance, Anna discovers sensuality only by losing other aspects of selfhood. Clarissa and Anna embody, finally, the frustrations of the woman's search for identity. In later writings, *(Orlando, To the Lighthouse, A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas),* Woolf explains her theory of the artist as androgynous, yet her sympathy for the woman who attempts to be creative within the boundaries of social convention remains. Isa, the furtive poet in her last novel, *Between the Acts,* continues this fascinating vision of hidden aspects of female consciousness. Wharton's views of the female mind as creative, however, seem more ambivalent. In two later fictions, *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive,* she presents the life story of a male writer, showing the difficulties of the artist's development partly from the perspective of his wife, but she does not attempt any extended descriptions of the female imagination. Despite the success of her characterization of Anna, she turns to a different mode of writing and a different kind of heroine in her novels after *The Reef.*

Virginia Woolf and Edith Wharton never met, although they had friends in common.[14] Personal differences of nationality, temperament, and life style, as well as a thinly-masked jealousy of one another's literary success (on Wharton's part, at least), might have prevented any possibility of friendship; but in their novels they reveal similar views toward the future of civilization. In their writings, they show a certain disdain for democracy. Both fear the chaotic force of humanity as a whole, unable to understand what Wharton called "the man with the dinner pail"[15] and "promiscuous contacts" with "agglutinated humanity" (*The Reef,* p. 10), and what Woolf described in her letters as "The London poor,

half drunk and very sentimental or completely stolid with their hideous voices and clothes and bad teeth."[16] Despite such aristocratic hauteur, both are capable of sympathy for personal deprivation and suffering. Essentially, their attitudes to society are ambivalent: on the one hand, they are fascinated by the spectacle of social activity, and on the other hand, they fear the effect of social conformity upon personal freedom. For both, the meaning of an ideal society lies in the continued association of a small circle of friends, bound together by common artistic and political interests. Indeed, Wharton was never as far removed from Bloomsbury as she liked to think in later years. For both Woolf and Wharton, the creative imagination provides release from the prison of a solitary consciousness. Art, then, provides the key element in the hoped for creation of a more ideal world.[17]

NOTES

1. The title and form of Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, for example, shows her belief that people discover themselves beyond the boundaries of social existence; there is little plot structure, and at the end of the novel we remain unsure as to the specific nature of Rachel Vinrace and her personal change prior to death. The novel is organized in terms of contrasting images of darkness and light which express Rachel's fear that selfhood is a flickering spiritual force easily extinguished: " 'Does it ever seem to you, Terence, that the world is composed entirely of vast blocks of matter, and that we're nothing but patches of light?' " (London: Hogarth Press, 1965, c. 1915, p. 358).
2. The titles of Wharton's first three works (*The Greater Inclination, Crucial Instances* and *The Valley of Decision*) show her method of structuring narrative in terms of the climax of moral choice.
3. Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction* (New York: Scribner's, 1925), p. 14.
4. In her diary entries for 1923, Woolf says of *Mrs. Dalloway*: "It took me a year's groping to discover what I call my tunnelling process, by which I tell the past by installments, as I have need of it" (*A Writer's Diary*, ed. Leonard Woolf, London: Hogarth Press, 1953, p. 61). Wharton's means of revealing the past is more traditional—we are given a synopsis of Anna's thoughts—but Wharton also shows that the present moment is composed of one's reactions to immediate experience sifted through the medium of one's assessment of the past.
5. Both Woolf and Wharton disliked fascism as an exaggerated manifestation of egotism. In Wharton's case, the attack upon totalitarian states took the form of rejecting Germans as the invading barbarians of the first World War. Woolf, on the other hand, later linked Hitler to anti-feminism (see *Three Guineas*, 1938).
6. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1967, c. 1925), p. 15. All subsequent references to the novel will be to this edition.
7. There are two separate ways of entering the story told in *The Reef*. Book One dramatizes the encounter between George Darrow and Sophy Viner in Paris, whereas the opening in Book Two shows Anna awaiting Darrow's arrival at Givre.
8. Edith Wharton, *The Reef* (New York: Scribner's, 1914, c. 1912), p. 81. All subsequent references to the novel will be to this edition.
9. Wharton uses three images to unify the sections of her novel; each of three segments of narrative is dominated by the perception of one image which controls the feeling of that section: the prologue, Book One, represents the emergence of the reef as an image of the inscrutable presence of the past, the middle section (Book Two to Book Four) develops as Anna Leath's island sanctuary of Givre, and Book Five acts as an epilogue and an opening of her characters' conscious minds to the effects of the sea as an external environment.
10. In *The Venture of Form in the Novels of Virginia Woolf*, Jean Alexander sums up Clarissa's party in this way: "Civilization has lost the narrowness of 1920 patrician English mores, and has become archetypal. Woolf has incisively cleared away the prime ministers and Sir Williams to make clear the distinction between civilization and power structures. What is left is a harmonious movement of contrary individuals within a ceremonious form, dependent nevertheless on a solitary imperative of choice" (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1974, p. 104).
11. Several critics have viewed Clarissa's quest as existential. See, for example, Lucio P. Ruotolo's essay "Clarissa Dalloway" in *Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Criticism*, ed. by Thomas S.W. Lewis, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975, p. 53.
12. Owen's role in *The Reef* tends to be rather baffling for the reader; at the end of the novel, he journeys to Spain in order to forget Sophy Viner, who leaves him because she can never forget her love for Darrow. Wharton seems to suggest that he is an Oedipal figure.
13. For an exhaustive analysis of the way Peter Walsh experiences women as both visionary and mortal see Julia Carlson's essay "The Solitary Traveller in *Mrs. Dalloway*," in *Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Criticism*, ed. by Thomas S.W. Lewis. New York: McGraw Hill, 1975.
14. According to R.W.B. Lewis's biography of Wharton, these included Geoffrey Scott, Lytton Strachey, Henry James, Mary Berenson, Desmond MacCarthy and Aldous Huxley. Wharton wrote to friends that she regarded *Orlando* as "exhibitionism" and claimed that Woolf had criticized her American vocabulary in print (*Edith Wharton: A Biography*, New York: Harper and Row, 1975, p. 483).
15. Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Scribner's, 1964, c. 1934), p. 206.
16. *The Question of Things Happening: The Letters of Virginia*, Vol. II, 1912-1922, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: Hogarth Press,

1976), To Vanessa Bell, Wednesday, 13 November, 1918, entry 987, p. 293.

17. See Cynthia Giffin Wolff's biography *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) for a thorough treatment of Wharton's belief that art is the essential social experience.