

“There is always a Deep Below”: Reality and Moments of Being in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*
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ABSTRACT

This essay explores Virginia Woolf’s reality through her 1932 novel *The Waves*. In the novel, Woolf traces the lives of her six characters from childhood to adulthood. As children, the characters experience moments of revelation or what Woolf refers to as moments of being. These moments allow them to see “some real thing behind appearances” (*MB* 71), a powerful reality underneath the surface of everyday life. From these moments the characters begin to shape and build their lives, always living in relation to the reality below.

In the center of the novel, the characters come together for farewell dinner for their friend Percival. During the dinner party, the characters articulate their versions of the reality behind appearances. As they speak, they draw together the “severed parts” of reality in order to create a work of art (*MB* 71), a “globe” that encompasses all their versions of “some real thing” that gives their lives meaning (*The Waves* 145).

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Introduction

In 1932, Virginia Woolf published her highly experimental novel, *The Waves*. Like much of Woolf's fiction, *The Waves* explores the inner lives of her characters as they experience the world. What sets this novel apart from Woolf's previous work, however, is its scope: she traces the lives of her six characters from childhood to adulthood through their separate but deeply intertwined inner monologues. In addition, Woolf marks the stages of her characters' lives through her interludes which depict the rise and fall of the sun against the sea in a single day, so that each stage of the sun coincides with a significant transition in the lives of her characters: Bernard, Jinny, Neville, Louis, Rhoda, and Susan.

In section one, at dawn in the first interlude, Woolf's characters attend primary school together. They become friends and explore the world as they begin to form their identities. In section two, the sun rises higher, and the novel follows Bernard, Neville and Louis as they attend a single sex boarding school in England, while the girls similarly begin their formal education in Switzerland. In section three the sun continues to rise as the novel depicts Bernard and Neville's life at Cambridge, Louis's life as a banker in London, Rhoda and Jinny's fashionable life there as well, and Susan's life in the country. When the sun nearly reaches its peak in section four, the characters reunite for a farewell dinner for Percival, their friend, who is leaving England for India. At this point in the novel, the characters are in their early twenties, the same age as Woolf was in the early stages of the famous Bloomsbury Group.¹ When "[t]he sun had risen to its full height" in section five (148), the characters experience Percival's death. The sinking sun in section six meets the characters in adulthood, and though they separate here, the characters meet again for a

¹ As critics have noted, there are several connections between the characters in *The Waves* and the members of the Bloomsbury Group. I intend to explore the ways in which the characters in the novel and Woolf's fellow artists and friends converge in an extended version of this essay.

dinner party in Hampton Court as the sun sinks lower in section seven. In the final section of the novel, the sun sets and Bernard speaks *The Waves*: he looks back on his life and the lives of the other characters from childhood to adulthood and even comments on Rhoda's death. In the final pages of the novel, Bernard dies, and "[t]he waves [break] on the shore" (297). In this thesis, I focus primarily on the first and the fourth sections of the novel because these sections explore the ways in which the characters' early childhood experiences allow them to form conceptions against which they measure their lives, and how these conceptions merge in the center of the novel, my primary interest here.

From Woolf's diary entries, we know that she was deeply invested in writing this highly original novel. In fact, on January 7, 1931 she wrote: "Few books have interested me more to write than *The Waves*" (AWD 161). We also know that she was able to adhere to her original idea of the novel. Significantly, on June 23, 1929, Woolf outlined her intentions for the novel:

I think it will begin like this: dawn, shells on the beach; I don't know—voices of a cock and nightingale; and then all the children at a long table—lessons, the beginning. Well, all sorts of characters are to be there. Then the person at the table can call out to anyone of them; and build up that person by the mood, tell a story; for instance about dogs or nurses; or some adventure of a child's kind; all to be very Arabian nights; and so on; this shall be childhood; but it must not be my childhood; and boats on a pond; the sense of children; unreality; things oddly proportioned. Then another person or figure must be selected. The unreal world must be round all this—the phantom waves. . . .Early morning light—but this need not be insisted on; because there must be a great freedom from "reality." Yet

everything must have relevance. Well all this of course is the “real” life; and nothingness only comes in the absence of this. (*AWD* 141)

As she planned, after her first interlude, the novel begins near the beach where Woolf’s characters congregate before their primary-school lessons. Crucially, each character speaks about their unique experiences of the “oddly proportioned” external world (*AWD* 141). For example, Bernard sees the sun as “a ring,” “quiver[ing]. . .in a loop of light” (*The Waves* 9). Susan sees the sun as “a slab of pale yellow. . .spreading away until it meets a purple stripe” (9). Their differing perceptions of the same object demonstrate that there is something “real” about the “world...round all this” (*AWD* 141). “Real” life seems present, but, at the same time, it is just out of reach. Much of the novel portrays these real but unreal experiences through the characters’ monologues (*AWD* 141).

Significantly, however, these partial experiences pale in comparison to a larger, more profound reality which Woolf’s characters perceive through moments of revelation, what Woolf calls moments of being. Like their experiences on the beach, these moments are highly personal, and, thus, fascinating because while they stem from individual perception, they reveal powerful truths that shape the way the characters live. In fact, we witness them building their lives upon the insights that form in these moments.

Woolf writes about these moments in her 1939 autobiographical essay, “A Sketch of the Past”: “[W]e are sealed vessels afloat upon what it is convenient to call reality; at some moments, without a reason, without an effort, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality” (*MB* 142). This reality underneath fascinates Woolf; in fact, she seeks it out: “That is one of the experiences I have here in some Augusts; and [I] got then to a consciousness of what I call

‘reality’: a thing I see before me: something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky; beside which nothing matters; in which I shall rest and continue to exist. Reality I call it: that which I seek” (AWD 129-30). What I explore in this thesis is the way, in *The Waves*, Woolf tracks, individually and collectively, her characters’ ever-deepening unfolding of the significance of their first encounters with reality, that “abstract” flood outside the range of everyday consciousness, “beside which nothing matters” (129). In his 1987 book, *Virginia Woolf: The Waves*, Eric Warner argues that the characters in the novel “seek out, as it were, ‘the essence of reality’” (65). What I argue here is that this seeking is a progressive deepening and testing of an original insight, a powerful model for understanding how consciousness works.

In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf notes that her inner world might be described as “many...moments of non-being” punctured by “separate moments of being” (MB 70). In such moments, Woolf experiences “a shock,” or “a blow”: “something that happened so violently that [she] remembered it all [her] life” (MB 71). In these moments Woolf sees through to “the bottom of the vessel” or experiences the flood of “reality” (AWD 130, MB 142). Woolf illustrates this phenomenon by writing about “three instances of exceptional moments” from her childhood during her stay at St Ives (71). In the first instances, she and her brother Thoby “were pummeling each other with [their] fists,” when quite suddenly she felt: “why hurt another person?” (71). She describes becoming aware of a “hopeless sadness,” seemingly larger than the two of them, beside which she felt “powerless” (71). She also takes note of a second instance: “I was looking at the flower bed by the front door; ‘That is the whole,’ I said. I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower” (71). Once again, something whole and wordless cracks through the surface of everyday reality. In the

third instance, Woolf overhears her parents speaking about Mr. Valpy who “had killed himself” (71):

The next thing I remember is being in the garden at night and walking on the path by the apple tree. It seemed to me that the apple tree was connected with the horror of Mr. Valpy’s suicide. I could not pass it. I stood there looking at the grey-green creases of the bark—it was a moonlit night—in a trance of horror. I seemed to be dragged down, hopelessly, into some pit of absolute despair from which I could not escape. (71)

In the first instance, she discovers a deeper impulse underneath the affection she feels for Thoby. In the second, Woolf recognize that beneath the appearance of separateness or difference lies unity or wholeness. In this third instance, she associates the news of Mr. Valpy’s death with the physical presence of the apple tree (72). Somehow death and the “pit of absolute despair” the moment opened up in the midst of her everyday world became linked with an image she will carry with her for the rest of her life. Despite the fact that the reality discovered in these moments remains somewhat abstract, it is clear that this eruption of the underneath—“that which I seek”—is not fixed in appearance but is multiple and even contradictory (AWD 130). It is this insight from her own childhood that *The Waves*, with its six distinct but intertwining consciousnesses is brilliantly designed to explore.

Like Woolf, the characters in *The Waves* access reality in childhood though specific, highly personal moments of being. Additionally, like Woolf, who realized that only by a continued “putting it into words” could the shock of insight ever become “real” or “whole” (MB 72), her characters find that their moments of being and the reality they experience there prompt

them to live more fully-articulated lives. What each character finds in those moments forms what Woolf calls in “A Sketch of the Past” “certain background rods or conceptions” upon which a life might be based (73). In fact, these moments form the “scaffolding in the background” of their lives (73), the measuring “rod” against which a life can be traced and known.

Woolf suggests that when the moment is put into words, it loses its “power to hurt me,” perhaps because it is connected to and brought into conversation with other significant moments and “the severed parts [are brought] together,” into relation with other parts of consciousness, understood, like the world, as a single “work of art” (72). We see this in *The Waves* in two ways, which I will examine in the two main parts of my thesis. First, as I have suggested, each character builds a life, an inner landscape of being, out of an elaboration on initial shocks or insights into a wordless reality beneath. And second, and quite brilliantly and originally, Woolf unfolds a moment in which the still-severed, though fully-realized consciousnesses of each character combine to produce an even larger whole. We see this when they meet up in the center of the novel to give their last good-byes to Percival who is leaving for India. As we have seen before, they experience a moment of being which allows them to access the reality underneath, “the bottom of the vessel” (AWD 130). But this time they articulate the moment in a fuller way because they are able enter into one another’s unique picture of reality. They create or build a moment that encompasses and draws from all of their realities so that they have a wider, more complete picture of Woolf’s reality, a complete “work of art” (MB 72). The dinner party scene in *The Waves* demonstrates that although reality often floods in unexpectedly and in a manner that would tend to isolate one in something singular and inexplicable, “without a reason, without an effort,” it is also possible to see through to the “bottom of the vessel” through shared communal engagement.

Critics view Woolf's moments of being in several ways. In his 1977 book *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, Morris Baja aligns Woolf's moments of being with the modernist epiphany. Although his book came out before Jeanne Schulkind collected Woolf's autobiographical writings for *Moments of Being*, he points to references to Woolf's "moments of vision" throughout her personal writings and fiction. He sees Woolf's moments as "little daily miracles, illuminations" and "some sort of revelation" (112, 115). He argues that what is discovered in the moment ("reality") remains vague in Woolf: "Frequently she asks the question, 'What is meant by 'reality'? But—and one can hardly blame her—she never gets around to answering it" (115). Baja's text, however, is a foundational text because he stresses the importance of the "experience" of the moment: "Above all, her [Woolf's] statements show that to her the moments themselves are far more important than the meanings they involve.... That is, it is the experience of revelation that matters, not what is revealed—which, as often as not, is vague and mysterious" (115).

In her 1985 Introduction to Woolf's *Moments of Being*, Jeanne Schulkind thoroughly explores moments of being in terms of Woolf's notion of self and how these moments function in Woolf's philosophy. Like Baja, Schulkind notes that Woolf's moments of being are "very close to Joyce's notion of epiphany" (19). According to Schulkind, these moments reveal "a spiritually transcendent truth of either personal or cosmic dimensions," which emerges from Woolf's "own intense and highly individual susceptibility" (17). She also argues that, for Woolf's characters, repeated questions of selfhood and reality "lead to this one end, the spiritual continuum which embraces all life, the vision of reality as a timeless unity which lies beneath the appearance of change, separation and disorder that marks daily life" (18). For Schulkind, "unity"

occurs in these “moments of being” when the “self is transcended and the individual consciousness becomes an undifferentiated part of a greater whole” (18). That whole is, as Schulkind puts it, “the impersonal consciousness which is expressed through intricately woven patterns constructed out of recurring rhythms, symbols, images and phrases, patterns which violate the laws of probability governing the finite, material world” (22). Because of her interest in what she sees as Woolf’s notion of “the impersonal consciousness,” Schulkind’s reading has invited critics to explore the mystical side of Woolf, as Julie Kane does in her 1995 essay, “Varieties of Mystical Experience in the Writings of Virginia Woolf.” Kane views Woolf’s belief that reality is glimpsed through moments of being as proof of Woolf’s mysticism, but more importantly, like Baja, she posits that Woolf does not “attempt to resolve” her ideal of “reality” (332). For Kane, the mystical does not serve as a “rod or conception” buttressing the self (*MB* 73).

Both Ann Banfield’s 2003 essay, “Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-Impressionism, and Cambridge Time,” and Kathryn Stelmach’s 2006 essay, “From Text to Tableau: Ekphrastic Enchantment in *To the Lighthouse*,” examine moments of being in terms of their formalistic construction and suggest a significant new direction forward for thinking about this issue. Banfield views Woolf’s moments of being as “series of still moments,” “each one an impressionist canvas” (471). Banfield draws here on Roger Fry’s theory of impressionism. According to Banfield, Fry sees impressionist art as “a momentary group of sensations in perpetual flux” rather than “a separate and self-contained object” (qtd. Banfield 478). The moment contains a myriad of sensations, much as Schulkind suggested with her language about “recurring rhythms, symbols, images and phrases” (22). However, for Banfield one’s final view of the moment requires “arrested contemplation” through “an intellectual process” which she

calls “crystallization” (491, 492). She argues, “one must get a distance from it [the moment], just as one might step back from an Impressionistic canvas to grasp its formal continuity” (491). For Banfield this requires a view of the moment “from a position outside experienced time” (491). From this position, one can “discover” the moment’s “given” “extraordinariness” which is “a sudden exposure to the real” (491). Crucially, in line with Post-impressionism, one leaves behind the realm of mystical vagueness and creates something formally specific: “By an intellectual process...something real the moment contains is discovered in it” (492).

Like many of the critics I’ve mentioned, Kathryn Stelmach also treats Woolf’s moments of being as “epiphanic” moments. What she is interested in is the way, in representing the moment, Woolf “creates a moment of complex ekphrastic suspension that seeks to translate the visual representations of plastic art into a verbal representation” (305). What is interesting about Stelmach’s reading is that she calls attention to the way, in Woolf, moments of being are captured in suspended spatial and temporal frames. As many critics have noted, Woolf’s depiction of life is often fluid rather than still. Stelmach recognizes this fluidity in Woolf’s work, but notes as well that Woolf’s moments “move beyond the confines of space and time into the paradoxical *tableau vivant*, often re-composed by the imaginative motion of memory” (305-6). She uses the term “reverse ekphrasis” for this, suggesting that Woolf turns words into art, creating framed tableaux to “reinscribe...within the storehouse of memory” (306), elastic material “resistant to verbal representation” (306). In that way, Woolf can “transcend the distinction between temporal fluidity and spatial substance by blurring and ultimately reversing the visual-to-verbal pattern of earlier literary forms of ekphrasis” (305). Her essay also outlines the subject’s active role in creating such moments. She argues that one can create a moment of being or “aesthetic contemplation” through a sacrificial act which “enable[s] communal

fellowship” and “collective consciousness” (312), an idea richly applicable to the second half of my analysis of *The Waves*. Although my thesis does not draw directly on Banfield and Stelmach, they have greatly influenced my thinking in terms of understanding the moment of being as potentially framed or suspended in time.

Loraine Sim’s 2012 book *Virginia Woolf: The Patterns of Ordinary Experience* categorizes Woolf’s moments of being into positive and negative moments. For Sim, “positive moments of being” are moments of “ecstasy” (145). She argues that such moments “present images of the external world flooding into the subject, or a change in the boundary between inner and outer, self and world” (145). Unlike these positive moments, according to Sim, negative moments of being center on negative “feelings rather than clear cognitions” (151). Sim also does important work in stressing the importance of the body in terms of accessing the moment: “Although Woolf speaks ambivalently about her relationship to her body at a few points in the memoir, physical sensations and perceptions are consistently foregrounded in her detailed descriptions of childhood moments” (151). In particular, negative moments can be seen as instances of “excess meaning” which are “likened to external physical threats that inflict pain and constraint upon the body” (154). Sim’s discussion of the relationship between moments of being and the body will prove paramount to unlocking Jinny and Rhoda’s articulation and unfolding of their distinctive moments of being.

In her 2014 essay “Disturbing Epiphany: Rereading Virginia Woolf’s ‘Moments of Being,’” Naomi Toth argues, like Baja and Schulkind, that Woolf’s moments of being are epiphanies. For Toth these moments of being are characterized by “pathos”; in such moments the “shock” or “epiphany” tears the “‘cotton wool’ of normalized appearances” and the “self is opened out, exposed, and made vulnerable” (para. 6-8). Toth adds that these moments

“destabilize consciousness and thereby escape it, withdrawing ‘moments of being’ from the realm of reflexive comprehension” (para. 11). Unlike Baja and Schulkind she understands that, because “meaning is present in a form that escapes conscious understanding” (para. 10); thus, it [meaning] may only be understood...once it has been given form” (para. 16). In this she is much like Banfield and Stelmach. However, Toth adds that the completed art object is of “secondary importance” when compared to the artist’s experience of the epiphany or vision which the artist engages with through a reflexive participatory process. What is significant about Toth’s reading is that it demonstrates that meanings are both discovered and created, and that these meanings are “not transcendental or universal” (para. 25) because subjects engage with these moments in their own historical and cultural era, an idea related to my discussion of the individualized, “severed” nature of each character’s unfolding of his or her personal take on reality in the first half of my analysis.

As I have demonstrated, Woolf’s moments of being can be interpreted in several ways. Interestingly, most critics tend to focus on *Mrs. Dalloway* or *To the Lighthouse* in terms of their discussion of the role of moments of being in Woolf (see Baja, Banfield, Stelmach, and Toth). More importantly, critics have often left Woolf’s reality unexplored in terms of its ongoing role in character development in her novels. Therefore, in my thesis I intend to fully explore moments of being as they relate to Woolf’s characters in *The Waves*, giving particular attention to the way each character’s initial encounter within a specific moment of being forms “a rod or conception” against which or alongside of consciousness is formed, framed, and understood.

Louis

In the novel, Louis is the first character to experience what Woolf's refers to in her diary as "abstract" reality (AWD 130). While the other children enter the house for breakfast in the first section of the novel, Louis stands alone among the flowers. He studies the flowers very closely:

"Flower after flower is specked on the depths of green. The petals are harlequins. Stalks rise from the black hollows beneath. The flowers swim like fish made of light upon the dark, green waters" (*The Waves* 11). Louis's moment mirrors Woolf's own early moment of being in which she recognized that the "real flower" was "part earth; part flower" (MB 71). Louis too sees an intimate connection between the earth, "the black hollows beneath," and the flower (*The Waves* 11). The stalk of the flower connects the flower to the earth, and it allows access to some unseen patch of earth "beneath" (11). Woolf refers to reality as the "bottom of the vessel," "some real thing behind appearances" (AWD 130, MB 72), and here she plays with this notion by suggesting that Louis's flower literally stems from the unseen.

Louis goes on to compare himself to the flower: "I hold the stalk in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world, through earth dry with brick, and damp earth, through veins of lead and silver" (*The Waves* 11). That is, like the stalk of the flower which touches this "beneath," he experiences his own access to "the depths of the world" or reality (*The Waves* 11). In what we will learn is a characteristic move on his part, he articulates this connection with the depths as an experience of his own rootedness in the past: "Up here my eyes are green leaves, unseeing. I am a boy in grey green flannels with a belt fastened by a brass snake up here. Down there my eyes are the lidless eyes of a stone figure in a desert by the Nile. I see women passing with red pitchers to the river; I see camels swaying and men in turbans. I hear tramplings, tremblings, stirrings round me" (*The Waves* 11). The flowers' descent into the black hollows underneath, brings him to ancient Egypt, the beginnings of human history and

culture.² Bernard identifies this notion in Louis as “coherency – that sense of the generations, of women carrying red pitchers to the Nile” (283). For Louis, the reality at “the depths of the world” is the whole of human history. History is what ruptures the everyday surface of his world. Moreover, like Woolf’s “whole” flower (*MB* 70), Louis recognizes in this moment that he is also a part of a whole—that whole for him being the human past.

In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf attributes her ability to see “a token of some real thing being appearances” to “intuition” or “susceptibility” (*MB* 71). As we have seen, she writes that what she sees behind appearances forms “rods” or “conceptions” that continue to guide her as she takes in and processes life:

This intuition of mine—it is so instinctive that it seems given to me, not made by me—has certainty given its scale to my life ever since I saw the flower in the bed by the front door at St Ives. If I were painting myself I should have to find some—rod, shall I say—something that would stand for the conception. It proves that one’s life is not confined to one’s body and what one says and does; one is living all the time in relation to certain background rods or conceptions. (72-73)

Like Woolf, Louis too lives in relation to the “coherency,” the reality of a larger, all-encompassing human past that he is part of. In fact, in the second section of the novel, we see him unfold and capture for consciousness his current life in relation to the “rods or conceptions” of this reality, his “destiny” (*The Waves* 202):

This is the first day of a new life, another spoke of the rising wheel. But my body passes vagrant as a bird’s shadow. I should be transient as the shadow on the

² In his essay “Beneath *The Waves*: Diffusionism and Cultural Pessimism,” David Bradshaw argues that “the context for Louis’s Egyptomania is the somewhat more recherché 1920s vogue for diffusionism”—the idea that “all human culture could be traced back to a single cradle: ancient Egypt” (320).

meadow, soon fading, soon darkening and dying there where it meets the word, were it not that I coerce my brain to form in my forehead; I force myself to state, if only in one line of unwritten poetry, this moment; to mark this inch in the long, long history that began in Egypt, in the time of the Pharaohs, when women carried red pitchers to the Nile. I seem already to have lived many thousand years. But if I now shut my eyes, if I fail to realize the meeting-place of past and present, that I sit in a third-class railway carriage full of boys going home for the holidays, human history is defrauded of a moment's vision. Its eye, that would see through me, shuts.... (66)

At the end of the school term, Louis marks his graduation and entrance into a different kind of life. He forces himself "to state...this moment" of newness and change, and he does so by relating it to the history of the world, marking "an inch in the long, long history that began in Egypt" (66). He goes back to the vision or reality revealed to him as a child and deliberately measures this new moment against the vivid shorthand it offered him for the depths this moment rides on: "women carry[ing] red pitchers to the Nile" (66). Moreover, he knows that if he fails to "mark" the "meeting place of past and present," he "should be transient" (66); that is, he would drift away or fade except that he tethers himself to the deep history underneath him. If he shuts his eyes, then he would fail his destiny to weave the present moment into the more deeply real past.

He returns to this calling more clearly towards the end of his life:

What has my destiny been, the sharp-pointed pyramid that has pressed on my ribs all these years? That I remember the Nile and the women carrying pitchers on their heads; that I feel myself woven in and out of the long summers and winters

that have made the corn flow and have frozen the streams. I am not a single and passing being. My life is not a moment's bright spark like that on the surface of a diamond. I go beneath ground tortuously, as if a warder carried a lamp from cell to cell. My destiny has been that I remember and must weave together, must plait into one cable the many threads, the thin, the thick, the broken, the enduring of our long history, of our tumultuous and varied day. (202)

Louis has known from that first moment of being in childhood that he is not “a single and passing being” (202). To know himself he has to “go beneath” in order to “weave together...the broken, the enduring of our long history” (202). He does this “tortuously,” “plait[ing] into one cable the many threads” to come together in his life, yet it would seem he feels most deeply alive for it is his “destiny” (202)³.

Jinny

In *The Waves*, the other characters also catch similar glimpses of reality in childhood. Interestingly, these moments take place in the same section of the novel, section one, and they are all linked together in a chain in the dinner party scene of section four that I will examine

³ Critics tend to read Louis's connection to history as a way to find belonging in modern British society. For instance, in her 1998 essay “Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*: To Defer that 'Appalling Moment,’” Lisa Marie Lucenti argues, “Louis constantly feels a sense of exclusion and alienation from the social world of his peers. He sees himself as outside of some inner circle” (78). Moreover, because of his “uncritical admiration for the larger structures of inheritance and tradition,” “Louis sets himself the task of being the ‘eye’ of history” to “seal out as much difference as possible”—to belong to the society that excludes him (page number). This reading trivializes Louis's search for meaning because it hints that he puts his faith in the wrong systems—colonization, hegemonic British society, etc. However, Louis wishes to include those traditionally excluded from history—the women from ancient Egypt “carrying pitchers on their heads” and the impoverished, disenfranchised “women with bad teeth” (*The Waves* 238, 128)—in his alternate, inclusive model of human history. The latter reading gives a more positive picture of Louis's search for meaning. For more on this reading see Bradshaw's excellent essay on Louis and diffusion.

later. I will read each of the characters in turn. Jinny's reality underneath is unseen but moving forces. After breakfast, in the novel's first section, Jinny runs through the garden alone. She says, "I saw leaves moving in a hole in the hedge. I thought, 'That is a bird on its nest.' I parted them and looked; but there was no bird on a nest. The leaves went on moving" (13). Jinny is startled by this unseen force that can move the leaves, that forces the leaves to bear witness to its invisible presence. At first, she says this revelation scares her: "I was frightened. I ran past Susan, past Rhoda, and Neville and Bernard in the too-house talking. I cried as I ran, faster and faster. What moved the leaves? What moves my heart, my legs?" (13). Surely she saw the wind, but what spoke to her was unseen forces that moved even her material body. When she meets Louis underneath the hedge, however, she realizes that her body's movement in response to the unseen thing behind appearances is something to be embraced, even celebrated:

And I dashed in here, seeing you green as a bush, like a branch, very still, Louis, with your eyes fixed. 'Is he dead?' I thought, and kissed you, with my heart jumping under my pink frock like the leaves, which go on moving, though there is nothing to move them. Now I smell geraniums; I smell earth mould. I dance. I ripple. I am thrown over you like a net of light. I lie quivering, flung over you.
(13)

Desire or love stirs Jinny's heart as the wind stirs the leaves. Her body responds. This testament to love or desire steepers her in pleasure—"I dance. I ripple" (13)—because she finds beauty and solace and power in unseen forces breaking through the surface of the everyday. As she puts it later:

Here is another day, here is another day, I cry, as my feet touch the floor. It may be a bruised day, an imperfect day. I am often scolded. I am often in disgrace for

idleness, for laughing; but even as Miss Matthew grumbles at my feather-headed carelessness, I catch sight of something moving—a speck of sun perhaps on a picture, or the donkey drawing the mowing machine across the lawn; or a sail that passes between the laurel leaves, so that I am never cast down. (55)

In all of this, she realizes: “There is nothing staid, nothing settled in this universe. All is rippling, all is dancing; all is quickness and triumph” (46).

Jinny builds a life outward from her moment of being with the leaf in the hedge, just as Louis did from his shocking introduction to the depths of history. At school, Jinny looks in the mirror and sees her body entire, consciously articulating her growing awareness of the vitality of her own body in terms of her childhood insight into the unseen forces at play across material surfaces:

I see my body and head in one now; for even in this serge frock they are one, my body and my head. Look, when I move my head I ripple all down my narrow body; even my thin legs ripple like a stalk in the wind. I flicker between the set face of Susan and Rhoda’s vagueness; I leap like one of those flames that run between the cracks of the earth; I move, I dance; I never cease to move and dance. I move like the leaf that moved in the hedge as a child and frightened me. I dance over these streaked, these impersonal, distempered walls with their yellow skirting as firelight dances over teapots. I catch fire even from women’s cold eyes. (42)

Jinny spells out her difference from Susan and Rhoda by recalling “the leaf that moved in the hedge as a child” (42). Having absorbed its meaning, she refuses to cease her constant motion, testifying to these unseen forces, this reality at the “bottom of the vessel” (*MB* 142): “I cannot be

prevented from pirouetting behind Miss Mathews into prayers” (*The Waves* 55). As her life unfolds she will, at critical moments, allow the unseen forces to move her:

There will be parties in brilliant rooms; and one man will single me out and will tell me what he has told no other person. He will like me better than Susan or Rhoda. He will find in me some quality, some peculiar thing. But I shall not let myself be attached to one person only. I do not want to be fixed, to be pinioned. I tremble, I quiver, like the leaf in the hedge, as I sit dangling my feet, on the edge of the bed, with a new day to break open. I have fifty years, I have sixty years to spend. (55)

Always, however, that insight will be the gauge or rod against which she measures and takes in each new encounter with reality. She will refuse “to be fixed, to be pinioned”; she will “tremble” and “quiver” “like the leaf in the hedge” because she, like Louis, wishes to live both for the moment and in its relation to a larger reality (55).

Susan

In a similar manner, Susan also experiences a moment of being that guides the way she experiences the world, a moment that Woolf sets up with the scene of Jinny kissing Louis in the garden. Early in *The Waves*, Susan sees Jinny kissing Louis in the garden in the scene I’ve just examined:

Through the chink in the hedge...I saw her [Jinny] kiss him. I raised my head from the flower-pot and looked through the chink in the hedge. I saw her kiss him. I saw them, Jinny and Louis, kissing. Now I will wrap my agony inside my pocket-handkerchief. It shall be screwed tight into a ball. I will go to the beech

wood alone, before lessons. I will not sit at a table, doing sums. I will not sit next Jinny and next Louis. I will take my anguish and lay it upon the roots under the beech trees. I will examine it and take it between my fingers. They will not find me. I shall eat nuts and peer for eggs through the brambles and my hair will be matted and I shall sleep under hedges and drink water from ditches and die there.

(14)

The moment Susan sees Jinny kissing Louis comes as blow. She feels her “anguish” and “agony” so intensely that they become tangible. Susan hides from the others in the woods, unable to cope with her emotion. This instance also brings with it feelings of inadequacy or insignificance: And I am squat, Bernard, I am short. I have eyes that look close to the ground and see insects in the grass. The yellow warmth in my side turned to stone when I saw Jinny kiss Louis. I shall eat grass and die in a ditch in the brown water where dead leaves have rotted. (15)

She feels “squat” because her world has changed; the object of her love kisses someone else, and the life within her dies: “The yellow warmth in my side turned to stone” (14). Consequently, in her childish fancy, she believes that she has no way of living without her passion, which for Susan is her “love” and “hate” for the world around her (16). She feels trapped within a doomed pursuit whose inevitable coming up short reduces her to elemental emotions: “I am already set on my pursuit. I see insects in the grass. Though my mother still knits white socks for me and hems pinafores and I am a child, I love and I hate (16). Susan perceives the world through these basic filters—“love and hate,” and she recognizes that she cannot change this. So when she experiences jealousy, “anguish,” and the cooling of her passion, she thinks, as if admitting a great weakness, “I shall sleep under hedges and drink water from ditches and die there” (14).

However, shortly after this experience Susan finds articulation for what is coursing through her by means of a moment of being that allows her to catch a glimpse of “some real thing behind appearances” (*MB* 71):

I saw Florrie in the kitchen garden...as we came back from our walk, with the washing blown out round her, the pyjamas, the drawers, the night-gowns blown tight. And Ernest kissed her. He was in his green baize apron, cleaning silver; and his mouth was sucked like a purse in wrinkles and he seized her with the pyjamas blown out hard between them. He was blind as a bull, and she swooned in anguish, only little veins streaking her white cheeks red. Now though they pass plates of bread and butter and cups of milk at tea-time I see a crack in the earth and hot steam hisses up; and the urn roars as Ernest roared, and I am blown out hard like the pyjamas, even while my teeth meet in the soft bread and butter, and I lap the sweet milk. I am not afraid of the heat, nor of the frozen winter. (*The Waves* 25)

As Ernest embraced Florrie “blind as a bull” and Florrie “swooned in anguish,” Susan looked on, caught up within their elemental desire. Susan remembers the earlier moment when she sees Florrie and Ernest now at tea time. In that moment looking back, she says, “I see a crack in the earth and hot steam hisses up” (25). The language here is similar to that of “A Sketch of the Past” where Woolf says that “without a reason, without an effort, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality” (*MB* 143). This flood of reality gives Susan the strength to say, “I am not afraid of the heat, nor of the frozen winter” (*The Waves* 25). This play on Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*—“Fear no more the heat o’ the sun, / Nor the furious winter’s rages”—captures the reality that

Susan now embraces: nature's passions, as elemental as the heat of the sun and rages of winter, just what she herself has been caught up in when her passion cooled and when "the yellow warmth in my side turned to stone" (15). We see now why she had turned, in anguish, to the thoughts of sleeping under hedges and eating grass and drinking from ditches: the natural world and its elemental passions are life to her, always about to burst into view. Such elemental passions can always be accessed, even when she eats soft bread and butter, or even when their residue has "turned to stone" (14) or "formed itself as a weight in my side" (70).

Susan's moment is the foundation from which she builds a self. She loves and hates and experiences both hot and cold as intensely as Ernest and Florrie do. This moment returns again and again in the novel. At one point, Susan says, "The only sayings I understand are cries of love, hate, rage and pain" (131). She adds, "I shall never have anything but natural happiness. It will almost content me. I shall go to bed tired. I shall lie like a field bearing crops in rotation; in the summer heat will dance over me; in the winter I shall be cracked with the cold. But heat and cold will follow each other natural without willing or unwilling" (132). She understands this alternating pattern of "heat and cold," "love and hate" as states of "natural happiness" defining her life (132). It is what she spends her life seeking:

I cannot float gently, mixing with other people. I like best the stare of shepherds met in the road; the stare of gipsy women beside a cart in a ditch suckling their children as I shall suckle my children. For soon in the hot midday when the bees hum round the hollyhocks my lover will come. He will stand underneath the cedar tree. To his one word I shall answer my one word. What has formed in me I shall give him. I shall have children; I shall have maids in aprons; men with pitchforks; a kitchen where they bring the ailing lambs to warm in baskets, where

the hams hang and the onions glisten. I shall be like my mother, silent in a blue apron locking up the cupboards. (98-99)

She realizes that her embrace of natural passions, first articulated when Florrie kisses Ernest, sets her apart. Yet she “shall have children” and a lover. She will build a life out of this insight.

Furthermore, Susan comments on the way her life has taken shape from her revelation: I have lost my indifference, my blank eye, my pear shaped eyes that saw to the root. I am no longer January, May or any other season, but am all spun to a fine thread around a cradle, wrapping in a cocoon made of my own blood the delicate limbs of my baby. Sleep, I say, and feel within me uprush some wilder, darker violence, so that I would fell down with one blow any intruder, any snatcher, who should break into this room and wake the sleeper. (172)

The “fine thread” she spins around the cradle to protect her children “made of my own blood” echoes Louis’s “plait[ing] into one thread” the many strands of history that pass through him or Jinny moved by a current of desire for fifty or sixty years, passing through lover after lover (172, 202). She is “glutted with natural happiness,” drawing life from the reality she glimpsed in the kitchen garden articulated for herself at tea (173).

Bernard

In “A Sketch of the Past” Woolf tells of a “clear moment” from her childhood which may help to shed light on Bernard’s moment of being, to which I now turn (*MB* 93). Woolf writes, “I began to read some poem. And instantly and for the first time I understood the poem (which it was I forget). It was as if it became altogether intelligible; I had a feeling of transparency in words when they cease to be words and become so intensified that one seems to experience

them” (*MB* 93). Woolf describes here a moment when words ceased to function as pointers to reality and become “transparent,” reality itself (93). Like Woolf, Bernard experiences reality in that way as well. We see Bernard’s first entrance into his version of reality in childhood when he tells Susan: “Put your foot on this brick. Look over the wall. That is Elvedon. The lady sits between the two long windows, writing. The gardeners sweep the lawn with giant brooms. We are the first to come here. We are discoverers of this unknown land” (*The Waves* 17). Bernard creates a magical land for Susan through language. In his essay, “The Meaning of Elvedon in *The Waves*: A Key to Bernard’s Experience and Woolf’s Vision,” Joseph Allen Boone argues that “Bernard is not merely taking Susan into the woods, but narrating a world into existence as he creates it in his mind” (632). For Bernard, in this moment, like Woolf, words are not mere mimetic devices, but that they have power to create experience. For Bernard, words themselves have a tangible existence. They are reality itself, as real as Ernest kissing Florrie or the presence of the past. In her 2012 essay “Between Sensation and Sign: The Secret Language of *The Waves*,” Maureen Chun argues, “. . . within the world as art, words are both sounds and paint-like things” (54). Chun adds, “*The Waves* embodies Woolf’s attempts to unsettle the ineradicable symbolic function of language, to disturb the abstractions of signification, by renewing a sense of words as things. This project recalls the practices of many modern writers, among them Baudelaire, Mallarmè, the Surrealists and Dadaists, and Gertrude Stein, in whose work the unsymbolical aspect of language—its sounds and its materiality as writing—emerges as representation is unsettled and metaphor transformed” (55).

Bernard enters this moment created by language by falling “through the tree-tops to the earth”; he and Susan sink “like swimmers” (*The Waves* 16). As Boone notes, “For the child

Bernard continually presents storytelling as the process of travelling beneath the surface of daily life, into the ‘secret territory’ or ‘underworld’ that is his special ‘universe’ (Boone 630, *The Waves* 22). We have seen this underworld separately named in each of the characters.

Additionally, when Bernard visits the underneath, the “real thing behind appearances,” he does it through language, but also discovers there—he says, “...let us explore” (16)—a “universe” formed out of words (22). Like all the other characters, his initial introduction to reality in childhood begins a lifelong process of unfolding the long chain of consciousness in those same terms: “I am astonished, as I draw the veil off things with words, how much, how infinitely more than I can say, I have observed. More and more bubbles into my mind as I talk, images and images” (84).

Interestingly, however, this moment of being is deeply fraught. We see this in the other characters as well. Words are both reality itself and linguistic things—mere phrases, the lady writing and the gardener sweeping. While Bernard fashions life out of language, he is also the maker of phrases. He often seems stuck between the two realities:

A phrase. An imperfect phrase. And what are phrases? They have left me very little to lay on the table besides Susan’s hand; to take from my pocket, with Neville’s credentials. I am not an authority on law or medicine, or finance. I am wrapped round with phrases, like damp straw; I glow, phosphorescent. And each of you feels when I speak, ‘I am lit up. I am glowing.’ The little boys used to feel, ‘That’s a good one, that’s a good one,’ as the phrases bubbled up from my lips under the elm trees in the playing-fields. They too bubbled up; they also escaped with my phrases. But I pine in solitude. Solitude is my undoing. (217)

On the one hand, phrases allowed the others to light up, to glow. The boys “bubbled up,” caught in currents of life even as his phrases bubbled from his lips (217). From such words and phrases, Bernard continually creates the world for his friends. For instance, later in life Susan remembers visiting Elvedon: ‘I hold scissors and snip off hollyhocks, who went to Elvedon and trod on rotten oak-apples, and saw the lady writing and the gardeners with their great brooms. We ran back panting lest we should be shot and nailed like stoats to the wall’ (192). Neville experiences Bernard’s words in the same way: “Bernard goes on talking. Up the bubble—images...One floats, too, as if one were that bubble; one is freed; I have escaped, one feels” (38). These characters have distinct experiences involving Bernard’s phrases, which suggests that his phrases have life in themselves, apart from him even. However, Bernard also realizes that his phrases do not work apart from other people; “solitude” is his “undoing” (217). He admits, “The truth is that I need the stimulus of other people. Alone, over my dead fire, I tend to see the thin places in my own stories” (80). He later expands on this sentiment:

But I only come into existence when the plumber, or the horse-dealer, or whoever it may be, says something which sets me alight. Then how lovely the smoke of my phrase is, rising and falling, flaunting and falling, upon red lobsters and yellow fruit, wreathing them into one beauty. But observe how meretricious the phrase is – made up of what evasions and old lies. Thus my character is in part made of the stimulus which other people provide. (133)

His phrases seem to borrow the life of other phrases, and without that source of life, they become inert—“made up of what evasions and old lies” (133). Like Woolf’s poem, which we began with, his words and phrases need an audience for them to become living experiences.

Neville

Early in the novel, in the same sequence we've been examining, Neville experiences his own moment of being which reveals a deeply traumatic insight into the nature of what resides underneath appearances:

I will use this hour of solitude, this reprieve from conversation, to coast round the purlieus of the house and recover, if I can, by standing on the same stair half-way up the landing, what I felt when I heard about the dead man through the swingdoor last night when cook was shoving in and out the dampers. He was found with his throat cut. The apple tree leaves became fixed in the sky; the moon glared. I was unable to lift my foot up the stair. He was found in the gutter. His blood gurgled down the gutter. His jowl was white as a dead codfish. I shall call this stricture, this rigidity, "death among the apple trees" for ever. There were the floating, pale-grey cloud; and the immitigable tree; the implacable tree with its greaved silver bark. The ripple of my life was unavailing. I was unable to pass by. There was an obstacle. "I cannot surmount this unintelligible obstacle," I said. And the others passed on. But we are doomed, all of us by the apple tree, by the immitigable tree which we cannot pass. (*The Waves* 24)

Neville overheard the cook speaking about the man with his throat cut. He paused on the landing, unable to move. The man's death forced him to recognize that human beings are subject to death: "we are doomed" (24). Moreover, he thought, "The ripple of my life was unavailing" (24). In the face of death his own life is meaningless or insignificant, perhaps because he recognized for the first time that all living things must die including himself.

Neville's moment is strikingly similar to a moment that Woolf experiences in her own childhood where she hears of Mr. Valpy's suicide:

It seemed to me that the apple tree was connected with the horror of Mr. Valpy's suicide. I could not pass it, I stood there looking at the grey-green creases of the bark—it was a moonlit night—in a trance of horror, I seemed to be dragged down, hopelessly, into some pit of absolute despair from which I could not escape. My body seemed paralyzed. (*MB* 71)

We looked at this before. Woolf refers to her intense feelings of paralysis and passivity before “the sledge-hammer force of the blow” (*MB* 71) of this news, and Neville experiences this moment as a blow as well. Sim aligns Neville and Woolf's moments in *Patterns of Ordinary Experience*, and labels both instances “negative moment of being” (152). She argues that for Neville and Woolf the “inability to come to cognitively come to terms with or analyze the reality of death is experienced as physical trauma” (153).

However, what is crucial here is that Neville's initial experience of the traumatic moment is absent from the text; we see him reflecting on and returning to the moment afterward. Sim points to the following passage in Woolf's essay as evidence that “unanalyzed or unintelligible meanings—about death and violence for example—are felt as sensations of pain, and that pain is alleviated through the discovery of meanings of reasons” (153): “I only know that exceptional moments brought with them a peculiar horror and a physical collapse; they seemed dominant; myself passive. This suggests that as one gets older one has a greater power through reason to provide an explanation; and that this explanation blunts the sledge-hammer force of the blow” (72). Sim argues that Woolf can later blunt the force of the blow through reason. Neville does the same thing here by returning to the stairway where he heard the news and naming it “death among the apple trees”—“what I felt when I heard about the dead man” (*The Waves* 24). It would seem that Neville feels paralyzed because he cannot at first explain the sensation he feels.

He gains control of it when he establishes the connection between death and the apple tree.

According to Ann Banfield, in her 2006 essay “Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-Impressionism, and Cambridge Time,” one must experience moments of being “from a position outside experienced time” (491). Banfield argues that “one must get a distance from it, just as one might step back from an Impressionistic canvas to grasp its formal continuity” (491). We see this here as Neville recreates the memory so that he can get a holistic view of the moment: death, the apple tree, his sensation of reality overwhelming the moment.

When Neville reflects on that earlier moment, he says, “The ripple of my life *was* unavailing” (24, italics mine); “was” places this moment in the past. Despite that fact that his reality underneath appearances is death or change, he sees a more abstract reality which will allow him to make sense of life as it continues to unspool. His distance from the moment allows him to frame it. Kathryn Stelmach argues that Woolf’s moments of being are moments of “complex ekphrastic suspension” (305). We certainly see this with Louis here; he “pauses by the door,” and everything is still (*The Waves* 24). He calls back the memory, names it, and then it is as if he uses it to gauge himself or measures himself in relation to it in the present moment: “We are doomed all of us by the apple tree, by the immitigable tree which we cannot pass” (24). The point, of course, is that he can move one; he has framed the traumatic moment and can now use it. Stelmach argues that Woolf’s ekphrasis takes the form of “reverse ekphrasis” where still moments are “often re-composed by the imaginative motion of memory” (305-306). She posits, “The paradox of ‘reverse ekphrasis’ reinscribes itself within the storehouse of memory, which functions as another site of perpetual moment and stasis. Characters later revivify scenes suspended in the mind’s eye, often envisioning the scenes as painting and reading them as texts” (306). Neville’s moment, in just these terms, is at first framed as a painting and then named as a

text: “death among the apple trees” (*The Waves* 24). In that sense, he, like Louis who forges the connection between past into present, “marks” his moment by drawing from a moment of being a stabilized frame so that it lasts “for ever” (24).

This ability to frame and fix moments becomes Neville’s “scaffolding in the background” in a number of different ways (*MB* 73). For instance, in the grip of another overwhelming emotion he frames a moment during his school days in a similar way:

Yesterday, passing the open door leading into the private garden, I saw Fenwick with his mallet raised. The steam from the tea-urn rose in the middle of the lawn. There were banks of blue flowers. Then suddenly descended upon me the obscure, the mystic sense of adoration, of completeness that triumphed over chaos. Nobody saw my poised and intent figure as I stood at the door. Nobody guessed the need I had to offer my being to one god; and perish, and disappear. His mallet descended; the vision broke. (52)

Neville looks back and recreates this moment just as the moment on the stairs. He frames Fenwick in an open door, poised for a moment on the lawn. Fenwick, the steam from the tea-urn, and the blue flowers form a timeless image which he experiences as “completeness triumphed over chaos” (52). He feels a “mystic sense of adoration” which will lead him to “offer[ing] my being to one god; and perish[ing], and yet the sense of personal dissolution is understood, controlled (52). Although Fenwick’s mallet descends, Neville can recall and build on this aesthetic moment through “the imaginative motion of memory” (Stelmach 305-306), and, in that way, Neville contains the scene in such a way that Fenwick’s mallet is eternally raised, much like Keats’s urn which Woolf evokes with her play on tea-urn. Thus, his initial moment of reality

gives him a kind of power over change. It also allows him to momentarily triumph over death by dying forever.

After Percival dies, Neville thinks, “All is over. The lights of the world have gone out. There stands the tree which I cannot pass” (151). As in the moment with the dead man and the apple tree, which he here recalls, Neville cannot, at first, move past the death of his friend: I will not lift my foot to climb the stair. I will stand for one moment beneath the immitigable tree, alone with the man whose throat is cut, while downstairs the cook shoves in and out of the dampers. I will not climb the stair. We are doomed, all of us. Women shuffle past with shopping-bags. People keep on passing. Yet you shall not destroy me. For this moment, this one moment, we are together. I press you to me. Come, pain, feed on me. Bury your fangs in my flesh. Tear me asunder. I sob, I sob. (152)

When he receives the news of Percival’s death, Neville thinks, “Barns and summer days in the country, rooms where we all sat—all now lies in the unreal world which is gone. My past is cut from me” (151). Yet, when he allows himself to feel the full force of his emotion— “Come, pain, feed on me” (152)—Percival can return: “this one moment, we are together” (152). The “you” here is both Percival and the traumatic anguish of reality first experienced as a child: “I press you to me,” “Yet you shall not destroy me” (152). By reframing the moment in terms of the initiating one, the “sledge-hammer force of the blow,” the reality of Percival’s death, is managed, woven into his life (*MB* 71). So although Neville’s moments of being are often felt violently, these moments when framed allow him a semblance of permanence or solidity, intensely felt but strikingly ordered.

Rhoda

Rhoda's moment of being, experienced in childhood and forming her "scaffolding in the background" is equally traumatic (*MB* 71). Looking back, she describes it as "the breath of wind...like a tiger panting" (124). Here is how it felt as a child:

Now the terror is beginning. Now taking her lump of chalk she [Miss Hudson, her teacher] draws figures, six, seven, eight, and then a cross and then a line on the blackboard. What is the answer? The others look; they look with understanding. Louis writes; Susan writes; Neville writes; Jinny writes; even Bernard has now begun to write. But I cannot write. I see only figures. The others are handing in their answers, one by one. Now it is my turn. But I have no answer. The others are allowed to go. They slam the door. Miss Hudson goes. I am left alone to find an answer. The figures mean nothing now. Meaning has gone. The clock ticks. The two hands are convoys marching through a desert. The black bars on the clock face are green oases. The long hand has marched ahead to find water. The other painfully stumbles among hot stones in the desert. It will die in the desert. The kitchen door slams. Wild dogs bark far away. Look, the loop of the figure is beginning to fill with time; it holds the world in it. I begin to draw a figure and the world is looped in it, and I myself am outside the loop; which I now join – so – and seal up, and make entire. The world is entire, and I am outside of it, crying, "Oh, save me from being blown for ever outside the loop of time! (21-22)

This "terror" is what she later calls the "tiger panting" (21, 124). Unlike the others, she cannot find the answers; she literally does not understand how the symbols, the numbers, correspond with a particular quantity or meaning: she sees only "figures" (21). When she looks at the clock the loop of one of the figures on the board begins to "fill with time"; she see the two hands as

convoys marauding, painfully, toward the “green oasis” on the black hour bars (21). She, on the other hand, feels herself “blown for ever outside the loop of time” because this reality remains abstract. She cannot translate it as the others do, for instance, as Jinny does through her body. Sim argues that for Woolf “excess meaning, whilst left unanalyzed is linked to external physical threats that inflict pain and constraint upon her body” (154). Rhoda experiences reality as the “shock” of sensation, as Woolf often did in childhood (*MB* 72). She feels the “terror” of being “blown” “outside” the world and time: “The breath of the wind was like a tiger panting” (21-22, 124).

Rhoda connects this terror with loneliness. In the above passage, the other children leave and “They slam the door” (22). Then, she hears the slam of the “kitchen door” (22). This sound signifies her aloneness. She forever connects doors with her terror of reality: “The door opens; the tiger leaps. The door opens; terror rushes in; terror upon terror, pursuing me” (105). Even when the door slamming is the sound of people entering, she remains alone and outside of the loop of time and the world: “But here the door opens and people come; they come towards me. Throwing faint smiles to mask their cruelty, their indifference, they seize me” (105). “Indifference” modifies “cruelty,” which means that she is wounded by others as they pay her no attention. Among the crowd, then, in London, she is still alone and is, therefore, always subject to the leap of the tiger. As with Louis connecting himself to the past or Jinny throwing herself in and out of relationships, Rhoda weaves a life in and out of this vertiginous sense of nothingness. When, later, at the dinner party, she is able to make sense of their shared sense of reality because the others allow her to communicate her vision, a truly momentous action occurs. I intend to explore this in more detail later.

Unlike Neville, who could return to his moment later in order to make sense of it in an ongoing way, Rhoda cannot because she “cannot make one moment merge in the next. To [her] they are all violent, all separate” (130). In fact, she continually “falls under the shock of the leap of the moment” (130). The other characters use their instances of revelation throughout their lives. They drum them up and reframe and refigure them in order to make sense out of their lives as they grow older. However, throughout much of the novel, Rhoda cannot seem to make these moments “merge” (130).

The Dinner Party

In *The Waves*, if “moments of being” allow access to the “essence of reality” and this access forms “the scaffolding in the background” of individual lives, then it follows that an even deeper revelation of the “real thing behind appearances” might come about when we realize, in Woolf’s words, that “all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art” (*MB* 71). When we turn to the dinner party scene in the fourth section of the novel, we see a version of this larger “work of art”—multiple perspectives and voices responding to a single light (71).

In the fourth section of the novel, Woolf explores this notion of the “severed parts” becoming whole through the final engagement between her six speaking characters and Percival who is leaving for India. She begins by sketching each character, save Neville, through the others’ perspectives, staggering their entrances into the crowded restaurant. Neville arrives early in anticipation of Percival’s arrival. Louis enters second and Neville sees him pausing in the doorway: “That is his strange mixture of assurance and timidity. He looks at himself in the looking-glass as he comes in; he touches his hair; he is dissatisfied with his appearance. He says,

‘I am a Duke—the last of an ancient race.’” (119). As we have seen, Louis builds his life out of the depth that history provides him. When Neville notices that Louis is “the last of an ancient race,” he unconsciously acknowledges Louis’s access to history. However, he does not have any real insight into the way Louis touches the “depths of the world” or “the bottom of the vessel” through the past (*The Waves* 11, *AWD* 129). Rather Neville see externalities only. According to Neville, Louis’s need to say, “I am a Duke” merely reveals his vanity and that he is “domineering” and “difficult” (119). In his 2011 essay “Misperceiving Woolf,” Jonathan Harker argues, “Woolf’s fiction and essays show a rhetorical reliance on misperception—it is a central theme in her fiction, and it is also central to her conceptions of the work of author and reader” (2). He adds, “Both textually and metatextually, Woolf’s experiments are attuned to the limitations of the senses and cognitive facilities” (2). At the opening of the dinner party, then, Neville only achieves limited access to Louis’s “self,” the “self” he forms as a result of his deeply personal experience with the “real thing being appearances” (*MB* 71). Woolf explores subjects’ limited access to others’ true “selves” in her other fiction as well. For instance, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa thinks, “And the supreme mystery which Kilman might say she had solved, and Peter might say he had solved, but Clarissa didn’t believe either of them had the ghost of an idea of solving, was simply this: here was one room; there another” (124-125). Other rooms quietly indicate that others have private lives, and Clarissa’s sense that the way to access those private lives remains “a supreme mystery” dominates the initial impression of the fourth section of *The Waves* (124).

Woolf repeats this unknowing misperception, or inability to perceive, as the rest of the characters enter the restaurant. Susan arrives after Louis, and Louis observes her: “She does not see us. She has not dressed because she despises the futility of London. She stands in the door,

looking like a creature dazed by the lamp. Now she moves. She has the stealthy yet assured movements of a wild beast” (*The Waves* 119). Louis accurately perceives Susan’s naturalness. Moreover, he thinks, “To be loved by Susan would be to be impaled by a bird’s sharp beak” because he senses her violent passion—her love and hate (120). What he does not understand is that her passion, her naturalness, are merely her way of processing the same underneath which Louis seeks as well. Misunderstanding her passion, he accentuates her difference and disparages Susan by calling her “a wild beast” (119). Next, Louis sees Rhoda “taking cover now behind a waiter, now behind some ornamental pillar, so as to put off the shock of recognition” (120). He understands that sensations shock her, but he does not fully understand that Rhoda finds reality itself painful. Instead, Louis muses, “We torture her,” misunderstanding her falling outside the loop of the world as mere social anxiety (120).

After Rhoda, Woolf shifts to Jinny through Susan’s perspective: “Now she sees us and moves, and all the rays ripple and flow and waver over us, bringing in new tides of sensation” (120-119). Naturally, Susan would notice Jinny’s bodily movement and flow, but she does not understand her movement as a testament to the same unseen reality beneath appearances. Instead, Susan takes Jinny’s movement as a kind of haughtiness, as if her bodily excess mocks those around her; thus Susan muses, “[I] feel her derision steal round me, feel her laughter curl its tongue of fire round me and light up unsparingly my shabby dress, my square-tipped fingernails, which I at once hide under the table-cloth” (121).

To complete the scene, Woolf circles back to Neville who contemplates Bernard’s entrance: “He half knows everybody; he knows nobody (I compare him with Percival). But now, perceiving us, he waves a benevolent salute; he bears down with such benignity, with such love of mankind (crossed with humour at the futility of ‘loving mankind’)...” (120-21). Interestingly,

Neville knows Bernard best for they were classmates in college, yet he does not see his great need to for an audience to call him into language and life. He translates what he sees as Bernard's "love of mankind," not understanding what Bernard says of himself: "I only come into existence when the plumber, or the horse-dealers, or whoever it may be, says something which sets me alight" (121, 133).

The characters are deeply, almost painfully, aware of how the others see them. We know this because when all of the characters, save Percival, take their seats at the table, Neville muses, "Now is our festival; now we are together. But without Percival there is no solidity. We are silhouettes, hollow phantoms moving mistily without a background" (*The Waves* 122). Woolf uses the term "phantom" earlier in the third interlude. When "the rising sun came in at the window....The real flower on the window-sill was attended by a phantom flower. Yet the phantom was part of the flower, for when a bud broke free the paler flower in the glass opened a bud too" (75). The "phantom flower" is the reflection of the flower. It has no life on its own. The characters seem to recognize that the others only see outlines of the selves that have formed from the "rods" or "conceptions" carried forward from their initial moments of being (*MB* 72). In the essay, "Modernism, Subjectivity, and Narrative Form: Abstraction in *The Waves*, Tamar Katz argues that in *The Waves*, "[t]he single identities by which others know us" are "outlines are imposed on us, restrictively without form" (238); thus, in the fourth section of the novel, the characters gather together as "phantoms" or "silhouettes" (122).⁴

⁴ In her essay, "Meals and Mourning in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*," Janine Utell interprets the dinner party in the fourth section of the novel as Percival's "symbolic funeral" or "proleptic funeral" (10-11); thus she reads Neville's reference to "phantoms" here as "ghosts": "In thinking of himself and the others without Percival, they are transformed into ghosts. This is not just sadness over their friend's death to India, but a premonition of their own dissolution, the consciousness of their own mortality that will be awakened with the death of their friend" (11). However, "phantom" show up as the phantom flower, as we have seen, and it also shows up again as a semblance, outline, or as a part of identity or self in *The Waves*: "Our friends – how distant, how mute, how seldom visited and little known. And I, too, am dim to my friends and unknown; a *phantom*, sometimes seen, often not" (italics mine

Percival's entrance changes all that. Rhoda observes his arrival first: "But here he is" (122). Neville echoes her, "Now...my tree flowers. My heart rises. All oppression is relieved. All impediment is removed. The reign of chaos is over. He has imposed order" (122). According to Bernard, Percival is able to impose order because he is their "hero" (123):

Here is Percival. . .smoothing his hair, not from vanity (he does not look in the glass), but to propitiate the god of decency. He is conventional; he is a hero. The little boys trooped after him across the playing-fields. They blew their noses as he blew his nose, but unsuccessfully, for he is Percival. Now, when he is about to leave us, to go to India, all these trifles come together. He is a hero. Oh, yes, that is not to be denied, and when he takes his seat by Susan, whom he loves, the occasion is crowned. We who yelped like jackals biting each other's heels now assume the sober and confident air of soldiers in the presence of their captain. We who have been separated by our youth (the oldest is not yet twenty-five), who have sung like eager birds each his own song and tapped with the remorseless and savage egoism of the young our own snail-shell till it cracked (I am engaged), or perched solitary outside some bedroom window and sang of love, of fame and other single experiences so dear to the callow bird with a yellow tuft on its beak, now come nearer; and shuffling closer on our perch in this restaurant where everybody's interests are at variance, and the incessant passage of traffic chafes us with distractions, and the door opening perpetually its glass cage solicits us

275). When Bernard is "unknown" he is a "phantom," in other words he is a shadow or outline of true self, the self that formed in relation to his moment of being as we see with all of the characters in the fourth section (275).

with myriad temptations and offers insults and wounds to our confidence—sitting together now we love each other and believe in our own endurance. (123)

In his essay, “Manuscript Revision and the Heroic Theme in *The Waves*,” J.W. Graham explains Percival’s heroic status.

The banality of Percival’s career and upbringing...may signify that he embodies the values of the community, such as physical strength and beauty, the ability to lead and the readiness to serve. So much attention has been given recently to Woolf’s ironic attack on a decadent society that we may oversimplify her persistent interest in the men and women of action who arrange on Friday what will happen on Monday. This interest was derided as snobbery by her friends, but perhaps it also reveals her recognition that the real community of English life issued not from rational principles which Bloomsbury espoused but from the irrational adherence to traditional values so apparent in the conventional Percival, the strong silent youth who goes to a far country in the service of Empire, as one of its culture-heroes. (314)

Graham’s crucial insight here, I think, has to do with Percival’s position within the “real community of English life” (314). In his book *The Interrupted Moment: A View of Virginia Woolf’s Novels*, Lucio P. Ruotolo argues that the characters’ reliance on Percival is “an inauthentic means of triumphing over a modern world” (154). Similarly, in his essay “Percival and the Porpoise: Woolf’s Heroic Theme in *The Waves*,” John F. Hulcoop views Percival as the embodiment of a failed quest which Bernard later completes (484). However, it is not necessary to read him as a failed or inauthentic hero, for, as Graham argues, “he is at the center of their

communion, whether in flesh or in memory” (316). He is life itself. We might go so far as to say that what shines forth from him is reality, and that in being drawn to him, the characters are drawn to a communal moment of being. In that way, Percival is much like Clarissa Dalloway or Mrs. Ramsay in Woolf’s earlier novels *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. They are similarly “conventional,” yet they have depth and allow life to flourish around them (*The Waves* 123). Like Clarissa of Mrs. Ramsay, Percival draws the six out of their “separat[ion]” and “single experiences” and causes them to shuffle “closer on our perch in this restaurant” (123). He lacks “vanity” and allows the others to stop wounding one another like “jackals biting each other’s heels” (123). When Percival arrives, Bernard thinks, “...now we love each other” (123). By his presence, Percival lights up each character, giving them the “solidity” and “background” they lack (*The Waves* 122). Lucio P. Ruotolo argues, “To be perceived, even silhouettes require some background of light; this Percival supplies. Light is also a central motif for the Percival of Arthurian romance, the mysterious light of the Holy Grail in the forest, which inspires his quest” (157). Percival provides the light, and in doing so turns shadows into real objects: “After the capricious fires, the abysmal dullness of youth,” said Neville, “the light falls upon real objects now. Here are knives and forks. The world is displayed, and we too, so that we can talk” (*The Waves* 127). Percival’s light and “order” allow them to step out of the shadows and see one another truly, to “say brutally and directly, what is on our minds” (122-123).⁵ In Percival’s presence the characters begin to speak about themselves honestly and without self-

⁵ In her essay, “Community/Communication in Woolf’s *The Waves*: The Language of Motion,” Allison Hild argues, “Often...the characters are most isolated linguistically when they are closest physically (73). In fact, she does not acknowledge that the characters speak to one another at all, much as Chun sees the characters speaking an “obscure, impossibly non-linguistic language” that “operates beneath narrative language” and “resist[s] the human work of signification” (56). Rather, Hild argues that “community consciousness weaves itself through individual identity by way of threads created from replicated linguistic phrases” (73). However, after Percival arrives, the characters can “say brutally and directly what is on own minds” (*The Waves* 23). So it would seem that the characters do speak to each other in the fourth section.

consciousness. They tell one another about their “furtive days of secrecy and hiding, the revelations on staircases, moments of terror and ecstasy” (124). That is to say, after Percival arrives, they begin to talk about their moments from childhood which formed “the scaffolding in the background,” their “revelations” and “moments of terror and ecstasy” (*MB 73, The Waves* 24):

“The boot boy made love to the scullery-main in the kitchen garden,” said Susan, “among the blown out washing.”

“The breath of the wind was like a tiger panting,” said Rhoda.

“The man lay livid with his throat cut in the gutter,” said Neville. “And going upstairs I could not raise my foot against the immitigable apple-tree with its silver leaves held stiff.”

“The leaf danced in the hedge without any one to blow it,” said Jinny.

“In the sun-baked corner,” said Louis, “the petals swam in the depths of green.”

“At Elvedon the gardeners swept with their great brooms, and the woman sat at a table writing,” said Bernard. (124)

It is as if each character in the presence of this new onrush of being must access and share the initiating moments through which he or she has learned to see and feel, explaining why Susan loves and hates, why Rhoda fears sensation, etc. They do not speak of shared moments, as one would expect from old friends meeting after a long absence; but, rather, they speak of their individual instances of “revelations” as a way to explain themselves and bring their unique insights into play (124).

After they speak, Louis says, “From these close-furled balls of string we draw now every filament...remembering when we meet” (124). Beginning with their own moments of being, they each unravel the “close furled balls” of their lives for one another by speaking of their memories

(124): Bernard’s departure from school, Jinny’s “monumental ladies” at boarding school, Susan’s ringing bells, and her “distant view of a field” from the window at school (124-125). In addition, Neville talks about college and his first poem: “I flung my poem, I slammed the door behind me” (126). Louis tells the others about the solitary days spent in his office: I, however,...losing sight of you, sat in my office and tore the date from the calendar, and announced to the world of ship-brokers, corn-chandler and actuaries that Friday the tenth, or Tuesday the eighteenth, had dawned on the city of London” (126). The memory Rhoda relays is perhaps most telling: “We clasped the flowers with their green leaves rustling in garlands” (125). This memory refers to an instance when Rhoda loses herself in poetry, and she realizes that she wants to share her vision of the world with others:

I will go into the library and take out some book, and read and look; and read again and look. Here is a poem about a hedge. I will wander down it and pick flowers, green cowbind and the moonlight coloured may, wild roses and ivy serpentine. I will clasp them in my hands and lay them on the desk’s shiny surface. I will sit by the river’s trembling edge and look at the water-lilies, broad and bright, which lit the oak that overhung the hedge with moonlight beams of their own watery light. I will pick them and present them—Oh! to whom? (56-57) In this passage, Rhoda steps into the world of the poem, and “clasp[s]” the flowers she finds there. At the time, she cannot share her vision, though she wishes to “give,” “enrich,” and

“present” her flowers to someone (57). Now, at the dinner party, she senses a dawning ability to communicate this vision because of the strong light of Percival.

In the middle of the section where the characters speak about their memories, Louis explains that their differences stem from their fundamentally different initiating moments of being:

We changed, we became unrecognizable...Exposed to all these different lights, what we had in us (for we are all so different) came intermittently, in violent patches, spaced by black voids, to the surface as if some acid had dropped unequally on the plate. I was this, Neville that, Rhoda different again, and Bernard too. (125-126)

They “changed,” unfolding themselves in different patterns, each of them a unique combination of “violent patches, spaced by blank voids” (126). The “violent patches” are called forth by Woolf’s “sudden violent shock(s)” or moments of being, and the “black voids” testify to “nonbeing,” the unremembered instances in-between her moments of revelation (*The Waves* 26, *MB*

70-71).⁶

Bernard explains that their dissimilarities allow them look at Percival and the moment through multiple-vision:

We have come together, at a particular time, to this particular spot. We are drawn into this communion by some deep, some common emotion. Shall we call it,

⁶ In his essay “Breaking Habits, Building Communities: Virginia Woolf and the Neuroscientific Body,” Craig Gordon interprets the characters process of differentiation through neuroscience and William James’ “philosophy of habit” (28). Gordon argues that physical sensations are interpreted through the body’s central nervous system, and that the nerves create patterns for subsequent interpretations of sensation. This certainty could explain why each character experiences “moments of being” differently; however, the way character’s experience moments as sensation is outside the scope of my paper although it would certainly be interesting to look at “moments of being” through this lens.

conveniently, 'love'? Shall we say 'love of Percival' because Percival is going to India?

No, that is too small, too particular a name. We cannot attach the width and spread of our feelings to a small mark. We have come together (from the North, from the South, from Susan's farm, from Louis's house of business) to make one thing, not enduring—for what endures?—but seen by many eyes simultaneously. There is a red carnation in that vase, a seven-sided flower, manypetalled, red, puce, purple-shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves—a whole flower in which every eye brings its own contribution. (*The Waves* 127)

Percival allows the characters to come together and to speak through their differences.

"Percival," Bernard adds, is perhaps "too particular a name" for what they are speaking of—the light that radiates, reality itself. Once they explain these differences, they seem to recognize that others' visions of the world allow them to see life or the moment from multiple perspectives. In her essay, "The Metaphysics of Flowers in *The Waves*: Virginia Woolf's 'Seven-sided Flower' and Henri Bergson's Intuition," Laci Mattison explains, "In this passage from *The Waves*, we recognize again that multiplicity is not opposed to unity (and vice versa), that, through intuition, Bernard, Susan, Neville, Jinny, Louis, Rhoda, and Percival have experienced the interconnections of their 'selves' and, in so doing, have composed (or, created) 'a whole flower'" (italics hers 74). Moreover, after Bernard speaks, Louis says, "The whole world is displayed, and we too, so that we can talk" (*The Waves* 127). The flower becomes a larger metaphor for the "whole world" or the whole framed by all of their lives, working together—Woolf's whole work of art" (*MB* 72).

In order to explore their differences in full, the characters then explain how their entrance into the restaurant hinged on their “moments of being.” Louis speaks first: “I smoothed my hair when I came in, hoping to look like the rest of you. But I cannot, for I am not single and entire as you are. I have lived a thousand years already” (127). He adds that he attempts to impress them because of his “terror lest you should laugh at me, in veerings with the wind against the soot storms, in efforts to make a steel ring of clear poetry that shall connect the gulls and the women with bad teeth, the church spire and the bobbing billycock hats as I see them...” (128). He “smoothed [his] hair” because he fears that they might laugh at his attempts to connect his surroundings and “the women with bad teeth” in a “steel ring of clear poetry” (128). As we saw earlier, he uses “poetry” to “mark this inch in the long, long history that began in Egypt” and by doing so marries “past [history] and present [the gulls, the women, etc.]” (66). He forges this connection as a testament to the unity he sees behind appearance, a habit so deeply part of him that it animates even his walk into the dinner party.

Jinny explains her entrance next:

When I came in just now everything stood still in a pattern. Waiters stopped, diners raised their forks and held them. I had the air of being prepared for what would happen. When I sat down you put your hands to your ties, you hid them under the table. But I hide nothing. I am prepared. Every time the door opens I cry

‘More!’ But my imagination is the bodies. I can imagine nothing beyond the circle cast by my own body. My body goes before me, like a lantern down a dark lane, bringing one thing after another out of darkness into a ring of light. (128-129)

Jinny tells them that she believes her body reveals “one thing after another,” bringing the previously unseen—the “real thing behind appearances” (*MB* 71)—“out of darkness” (129). She tells them this as a way to explain why they often feel self-conscious in her presence; it is not that her bodily excess mocks them, but that it illuminates one aspect of the unseen.

Neville comments on his experience with the “essence of reality”: “You stand by the door making us notice you. But none of you saw me approach. I came early; I came quickly and directly, *here*, to sit for the person whom I love. My life has a rapidity that yours lacks” (129). He goes on to explain, “I see everything with complete clarity. That is my saving. That is what makes me dictate, even when I am silent. And since I am, in one respect, deluded, since the person is always changing, though not the desire, and I do not know in the morning by whom I shall sit at night, I am never stagnant; I rise from my worst disasters, I turn, I change” (130). Because Neville sees change behind appearances, he always holds himself ready to take in the “disasters” of loss, framing and “ris[ing] from” their shocking jolts to the system. He works to explain this here (130).

Rhoda explains herself as well:

You did not see me come. I circled round the chairs to avoid the horror of the spring. I am afraid of you all. I am afraid of the shock of sensation that leaps upon me, because I cannot deal with it as you do—I cannot make one moment merge to the next. To me they are all violent, all separate; and if I fall under the shock of the leap of the moment you will be on me, tearing me to pieces. I have no end in view. I do not know how to run minute to minute and hour to hour, solving them by some natural force until they make the whole and indivisible mass that you call life. (130)

Unlike the others, Rhoda cannot connect moment to moment to build “the whole and indivisible mass that you call life” (130). Each of them “leaps upon” her, leaving her always vulnerable, always exposed. Instead, she fears each moment of being because “they are all violent” (130).

Yet, she suggests that reality that frightens her is not unlike what drives them as well.

Susan enters the conversation and explains her naturalness and her passion: “When I came into the room tonight...I stopped, I peered about like an animal with its eyes near to the ground” (131). She adds, “I shall never have anything but natural happiness. It will almost content me. I shall go to bed tired. I shall lie like a field bearing crops in rotation; in the summer heat will dance over me; in the winter I shall be cracked with cold. But heat and cold will follow each other naturally without my willing or unwilling” (131-132). For Susan this hot and cold is the unseen thing behind appearances, and she lives her life as a testament to that force even though she recognizes that without her “heat and cold will follow each naturally” (132). She adds her vulnerability to the testimonies being gathered.

Bernard speaks last, highlighting his need for making phrases:

When Louis is alone he sees with astonishing intensity and will write some words that may outlast us all. Rhoda loves to be alone. She fears us because we shatter her sense of being which is so extreme in solitude—see how she grasps her fork— her weapon against us. But I only come into existence when the plumber, or the horse-dealers, or whoever it may be, says something which sets me alight. Then how lovely the smoke of my phrase is, rising and falling, flaunting and falling, upon red lobsters and yellow fruit, wreathing them into one beauty. But observe how meretricious the phrase is—made up of what evasions and old lies. Thus my character is in part made up of the stimulus which other people provide, and is not mine as yours are. (133)

He acknowledges the others' differences and then explains his own. He tells them that although his phrases are testament to a kind of unity, "wreathing them [his surroundings] into one beauty," they come at a cost—reality being linguistic for him, it draws him into "evasions and old lies" and a desperate need for "stimulus" (133).

At last, the characters seem to fully understand one another, and, as I mentioned, they begin to see the world through seven sets of eyes. They begin to draw one another into their shared version of "the essence of reality" (*AWD* 100). They do this first by entering a collective moment of being through heightened experience. In her essay, "Virginia Woolf's 'cotton wool of daily life,'" Liesl M. Olson refers to moments of being as "heightened experience" as opposed to Woolf's "non-being"— "ordinary experiences in a world full of ordinary things" (43). Similarly, Sim argues, "Her [Woolf's] positive moments of being present images of the external world flooding into the subject, or a change in the boundary between inner and outer, self and world" (145). In her essay "Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World," Louise Westling likewise argues that in Woolf "experience is immersed in Being, formed and continuing in dynamic participation with things and beings, all coextensive together, displaying themselves and calling us into relation with them. Thus our sensations are the active expression of relationship, a continuing communion with the living world" (Westling 864). As we have seen in the experiences of each character individually, in these moments of heightened experience, each character communes with the newly revealed "external world" or "living world" (Sim 145, Westling 864).

As Woolf began writing *The Moths* which became *The Waves*, she wrote in her diary: "The idea has come to me now that I want to saturate every atom. I mean to illuminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes. Say the moment is a

combination of thought; sensation; the voice of the sea” (*AWD* 136). Each character brings to this moment with Percival his or her own particular mergings of thought, sensation, and reality itself—“the voice of the sea” (136). For instance, Louis thinks through sensation, primary sight and bodily impressions: “flower after flower is specked on the depths of green” and “all tremors shake me” (*The Waves* 11). His revelation hinges on the outside world: “flowers,” “green waters,” “green leaves” (11-12). Jinny, too, thinks through sensation (“smell,” “quivering”) and the outside world (“geraniums,” “earth mould”). Susan notices the wind blowing through the washing in her moment of being (25). Neville sees the “implacable tree with its greaved silver bark” (24). In addition, Bernard’s Elevation is lush with sensation: the ferns that “smell very strong,” the “rotten oak apples,” etc. (17). Lastly, in Rhoda’s moment she thinks of “a desert” and “green oases”; she also feels “blown outside the loop of time” (21). Therefore, as we have seen their individual moments of being have been moments of revelation that ultimately stem from each character’s “heightened experience” of and “communion” with the external world (Olsen 43, Westling 864).

In the fourth section of *The Waves*, what is startling and new is that the characters collectively reach a state of heightened experience as they visit “the bottom of the vessel,” sharing and bringing into active conversation their own ways of processing the world (*AWD* 129). Rhoda speaks first:

Look. . .listen. Look how the light becomes richer, second by second, and bloom and ripeness lie everywhere; and our eyes, as they range round this room with all its tables, seem to push through curtains of colour, red, orange, umber and queer ambiguous tints, which yield like veils and close behind them, and one thing melts into another. (135)

The present is flooded with reality for Rhoda, and she points this out to the others. As I mentioned earlier, during Rhoda's school days she once wished to share her vision of the flowers with the others. She seems to do exactly that here by allowing them to see the "bloom and ripeness" of the moment (135). She draws in all of the colors of the room to unfold the present moment.

Jinny sees what Rhoda sees: "Yes...our senses have widened. Membranes, webs of nerve that lay white and limp, have filled and spread themselves and float around us like filaments, making the air tangible and catching in them far-away sounds unheard before" (135). By saying "yes," Jinny tells Rhoda that she too shares her vision. She then widens their senses further through her language of the body: "membranes" and "webs of nerves" extend and catch "in them far-away sounds, just as the sail of her body had often found itself moved by the wind of the spirit (135).

Directly after Jinny speaks, Louis widens their perception even further by whipping the vivid sounds of London into "one turning wheel of a single sound" (135). Louis, who sees underneath, allows the others to see this aspect of the reality unfolding around them by letting them hear how the "roar of London," "vans," "omnibuses," and "the cries of drunkards" "are merged" and present (135).

Finally, Neville tells his friends, "Percival is going...We sit here, surrounded, lit up, many-coloured; all things—hands, curtains, knives, forks, other people dining—run into each other. We are walled in here. But India lies outside" (135). Neville acknowledges Rhoda's colors; he also notices Jinny and Louis's melting and merging by noticing that everything "run(s) into each other" (135). He points out how ordinary, tangible objects—curtains, knives and forks—have been transformed (135). He then positions their present, fully-achieved moment

against the flood of change. Neville notes that although they are “surrounded” and that “We are walled in here,” the present moment is surrounded with a universe of change.

Bernard speaks last: “I see India...I see the low, long shore; I see the tortuous lanes of stamped mud that lead in and out among the ramshackle pagodas” (136). He draws India and Percival’s future there into the moment, through story just as he had for Susan with Elvedon: “But now, behold, Percival advances; Percival rides a flea-bitten mare, and wears a sun-helmet. By applying the standards of the West, by using the violent language that is natural to him, the bullock-cart is righted in less than five minutes” (136). Crucially, the others see his vision too; even Rhoda, for instance, declares that she can see Percival “riding alone on a flea-bitten mare” (137).⁷

When everything is included in the present moment—sights, sounds, change, Percival and India even—the characters sink down to the “bottom of the vessel,” reality itself (AWD 129):
Unknown, with or without a secret, it does not matter. . .he is like a stone fallen into a pond round which minnows swarm. Like minnows, we who had been shooting this way, that way, all shot round him when he came. Like minnows, conscious of the presence of a great stone, we undulate and eddy contentedly. Comfort steals over us. Gold runs in our blood. One, two: one, two: the heart beats in serenity, in confidence, in some trance of well-being, in some rapture of benignity; and look—the outermost parts of the earth—pale shadows on the utmost horizon, India for instance, rise into our purview. The world that has been shrived rounds itself. . . (*The Waves* 137)

⁷ Hild argues, “For while Percival’s destination, India, is never reached in the geography of *The Waves*, the words and images sparked by its signifier also now help carry us beyond the physical English setting” (74). Because Rhoda can see Percival on his “flea-bitten mare,” it would seem that Bernard’s words carry both the reader and the other characters “beyond the physical English setting” (*The Waves* 137, Hild 74).

Rhoda tells them that it does not matter now whether they knew each other or not upon entering the room; what matters is that they are now able to sink down as “the outermost parts of the world...rise into our purview” (137). Ruotolo points out, “Rhoda, submerged in oceanic fantasies, looks on Percival as some huge underwater stone around which they can all swim contentedly like minnows” (153). However, this is no fantasy; rather, Percival seems to pull the characters to the underneath, to the “bottom of the vessel” the entire novel has been preparing for (AWD 129). Louis echoes Rhoda; he tells them that now “there is a chain whirling round, round, in a steel-blue circle beneath” (137).

Susan gives her own version of Louis’s “steel-blue circle” (137): “It is hate, it is love...That is the furious coal-black stream that makes us dizzy if we look down into it. We stand on a ledge here, but if we look down we turn giddy” (*The Waves* 137). Jinny acknowledges Susan’s vision of the underneath: “It is love...it is hate, such as Susan feels for me because I kissed Louis once in the garden” (138). Neville echoes each of the characters in calling the underneath “these roaring waters” and Bernard similar refers to the now present reality behind appearances as “the mill race that foams beneath” (138).

Bernard then asks Rhoda to give them the language for their moment of being, an extraordinary moment in the novel:

Now I can look steadily into the mill-race that foams beneath. By what particular name are we to call it? Let Rhoda speak, whose face I see reflected mistily in the looking-glass opposite; Rhoda who I interrupted when she rocked her petals in a brown basin, asking for the pocket-knife that Bernard had stolen. Love is not a whirlpool to her. She is not giddy when she looks down. She looks far away over our heads, beyond India. (138-139)

Rhoda responds:

Yes, between your shoulders, over your heads, to a landscape...to a hollow where the many-backed steep hills come down like birds' wings folded. There, on the short, firm turf, are bushes, dark leaved, and against their darkness I see a shape, white, but not of stone, moving, perhaps alive. But it is not you, it is not you, it is not you; not Percival, Susan, Jinny, Neville, or Louis. When the white arm rests upon the knee it is a triangle; now it is upright—a column; now a fountain, falling. It makes no sign, it does not beckon, it does not see us. Behind it roars the sea. It is beyond our reach. Yet there I venture. There I go to replenish my emptiness, to stretch my nights and fill them fuller and fuller with dreams. And for a second even now, even here, I reach my object and say, "Wander no more. All else is trivial and make-believe. Here is the end." But these pilgrimages, these moments of departure, start always in your presence, from this table, these lights, from Percival and Susan, here and now. Always I see the grove over your heads, between your shoulders, or from a window when I have crossed the room at a party and stand looking down into the street. (139)

Rhoda has had immense difficulty communicating her visions; earlier in the novel, Susan notes "Rhoda's strange communications when she looks past us, over our shoulders" (98). In this moment of being, however, Rhoda sees "between your shoulders" and communicates this knowledge to all those who are part of her community. What Rhoda sees is Woolf's often quoted "fin passing far out" (*AWD* 100). Its shape is "a triangle" "beyond our reach," above the roaring sea, marking a presence invisible to the eye (139). In Woolf's diary it is the vision that signifies that there is an unseen "essence of reality" (*AWD* 100). In this passage, the reality Rhoda sees remains abstract—it is a "column," a "fountain, falling"; the characters will later explain what

the “essence of reality” seems to them to be before the dinner party ends. But before they do, the characters celebrate this reality together because, as Rhoda articulates, the vision is an end in itself: “I reach my object and say, ‘Wander no more. All else is trivial and make-believe’” (*The Waves* 139).

After they reach this moment, Louis observes, perhaps of each of them present in the shared experience, “Look, Rhoda...they have become nocturnal, rapt. Their eyes are like the moth’s wings moving so quickly that they do not seem to move at all” (140). They gaze fixedly at this reality now risen into view, and they begin to dance around it like moths fluttering around a lamplight: “Horns and trumpets...ring out. Leaves unfold; the stage blares in the tickets. There is a dancing and a drumming, like the dancing and the drumming of naked men with assegais” (140). They dance “Like the dance of savages...round the camp fire” (140). Rhoda calls the moment “The flames of the festival” (140).

Of course, the moment cannot last. Louis comments: “For one moment only...Before the chain breaks, before disorder returns, see us fixed, see us displayed, see us held in a vice” (142). The chain must break, “the circle” must be “destroyed” for they cannot stay at the restaurant with Percival forever (143). They cannot stay this alert. But before the ephemeral thing they have made is dissolves, each of the characters articulates what he or she sees as they look down into the essence of reality. Louis, for example, depicts this reality as solid:

Now once more. . .as we are about to part, having paid our bill, the circle in our blood, broken so often, so sharply, for we are so different, closes in a ring.
Something is made. Yes, as we rise and fidget, a little nervously, we pray, holding in our hands this common feeling, “Do not move, do not let the swing-door cut to piece the thing that we have made, that globes itself here, among these

lights, these peelings, this litter of bread crumbs and people passing. Do not move, do not go. Hold it forever” (145).

Despite the fact that the “essence of reality” is “abstract” (*AWD* 100), it is, for a moment, tangible; they can hold it “in our hands” (145). Moreover, the moment of being, made tangible here, is something “made” out of “difference” (145). Jinny also comments on the concrete nature of the moment: “Let us hold it for one moment,” said Jinny; “love, hatred, by whatever name we call it, this globe whose walls are made of Percival, of youth of beauty, and something sunk so deep within us that we shall perhaps never make this moment of one man again.” (145). A “globe” is “made of Percival,” but Percival does not matter as much as what the moment he has accessed contains:

“Forests and far countries on the other side of the world,” said Rhoda, “are in it; seas and jungles; the howlings of jackals and moonlight falling upon some high peak where the eagle soars.”

“Happiness is in it,” said Neville, “and the quiet of ordinary things. A table, a chair, a book with a paper-knife stuck between the pages. And the petal falling from the rose, and the light flickering as we sit silent, or perhaps, bethinking us of some trifle, suddenly speak.”

“Week-days are in it,” said Susan, “Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday; the horses going up the fields, and the horses returning; the rooks rising and falling, and catching the elm trees in their net, whether it is April, whether it is November.”

“What is to come is in it,” said Bernard, “That is the last drop and the brightest that we let fall like some supernal quicksilver into the swelling and splendid moment created by us from Percival.” (145)

Everything is included in this “moment created by us from Percival”: “far countries,” “happiness,” “ordinary things,” even daily life (“Week-days are in it”), and the future (“What is to come”) (145). Tamer Katz argues, “Unlike the world it transcends...the moment of unity is all inclusive, leaving nothing out” (243). I would argue, however, that the moment does not necessarily transcend the world; rather, it encompasses it, and the characters seem to sink down into it. According to Woolf, in a passage I began this study with, “we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of that work of art” (*MB* 72). In section four of *The Waves*, it is as if the characters see the whole of life or the whole of reality all at once through this moment of being, the larger work of art they articulate together.

It is significant that the characters see the moment as a created or “made” “globe” (*The Waves* 145). In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf writes that when she experiences a moment of being, “a revelation of some order,” “I make it real by putting it into words”:

It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. (72)

What we have seen here is the “severed parts” coming together. We have been witness to the genesis of a work of art. Although the characters only mark the moment by experiencing it together, by celebrating or dancing around it, what they have created is art:

What is to come? I ask, brushing the crumbs from my waistcoat, what is outside? We have proved, sitting eating, sitting talking, that we can add to the treasury of moments. We are not slaves bound to suffer incessantly unrecorded petty blows on our bent backs. We are not sheep either, following a master. We are creators. We too have made something that will join the innumerable congregations of past time. We too, as we put on our hats and push open the door, stride not into chaos, but into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illuminating and everlasting road (*The Waves* 146).

Together, they draw everything into the moment and become “creators” of something that cannot last—they depart, and Percival dies in India—but that somehow endures (146). It endures in the sense that it adds “to the treasury of moments” (146); it becomes something much like Louis’s “unwritten poetry” which marks “this inch in the long, long history that began in Egypt” (66).

Conclusion

Critics who read Woolf’s reality in terms of abstraction miss the importance of *The Waves* in Woolf’s oeuvre. For instance, in his 1986 book *Singing in the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf’s Fiction*, Mark Hussey sees “abstraction” in Woolf’s “entries about the new work [*The Waves*]” and views the novel through that lens (83). He, consequently, sees the novel as “useful as a storehouse of typical ideas, but not much more than this” (83). He adds, “It is a kind of warehouse in which are found the materials from which novels such as *To the Lighthouse* or *Between the Acts* may be created” (83). For Hussey, the novel is an “aesthetic failure” because as puts it, “Bernard seeks ‘one true phrase’ that will sum up life; he feels that all his stories are ancillary to the ‘true story’ or ‘final statement’ that will fix the elusive ‘reality’ of life....*The*

Waves must fail: ‘reality’ is ‘no-thing,’ but writing is naming, an attempt to substantize, to give form to that which has no form” (85). In the novel, however, the characters do not attempt to sum up as much as they attempt to “combine, to create” the “severed parts” of reality as Clarissa does with her guests or life in *Mrs. Dalloway* (MB 73, *Mrs. Dalloway* 119). In fact, when Bernard says, “Now to sum up...Now to explain to you the meaning of my life” (*The Waves* 238), he articulates “this globe, full of figures,” and the significant moments which “seemed to lift the corner of a curtain concealing the populous undifferentiated chaos of life” (238, 249). At the end of the novel, Bernard is able to reveal reality by putting the “severed parts” of each character’s life or reality together because he has experienced what he and the others experience at the dinner party: “But it is a mistake, this extreme precision, this orderly and military progress; a convenience, a lie. There is always a deep below it, even when we arrive punctually at the appointed time with our white waistcoats and polite formalities, a rushing stream of broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half-finished sentences and sights—elm trees, willow trees, gardeners sweeping, women writing—that rise and sink even as we hand a lady down to dinner” (255).

In that way, Bernard is like Woolf herself who combines and creates her idea of reality by bringing the six pieces of reality together through the six characters who, as Warner argues, might be “Virginia Woolf herself” (81). Crucially, Woolf herself did not see the novel as an aesthetic failure, but saw it as what perhaps continues to draw readers to *The Waves*; she saw that “the book itself is alive,” in part, because *The Waves* captures what she thought her literary predecessors failed to capture in their works—“life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing” (“Modern Fiction” 22). When Woolf “might have done something easy and fluent,” she instead “reach[ed] after that vision” she “had, the unhappy summer—or three weeks—at

Rodmell, after finishing the Lighthouse” (*AWD* 155) — “the fin passing far out,” “the essence of reality” (100). In addition, upon close inspection that essence of reality is not wholly abstract, but is the “severed parts” of a concrete reality coming together (*MB* 72). For Woolf, reality is what we might see when we peer over the ledge into “the mill race that foams beneath” (*The Waves* 138). It is that which makes us “dizzy” or “giddy” when we “look down” (137), when we see something real, whatever that might be our place in “the long, long history that began in Egypt” (66). Reality is the desires that move our bodies like the wind in the hedge, our natural passions, death and change, or memories of moments when words became real as we “bubbled up” with them (217). For Woolf, reality is all of these deeply human truths which, as we have seen, indicate that “the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art....we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself” (*MB* 72).

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