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**VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE CONSOLATIONS OF ABSTRACTION**

**by**

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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As the painter Lily Briscoe suggests in Virginia Woolf's 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse*, the "human apparatus" for creating art is "a miserable, an inefficient machine [. . .] it always broke down at the critical moment; heroically, one must force it on" (193). This contradiction underpins and troubles all of Virginia Woolf's writings: it is impossible to faithfully represent the ephemeral, boundless, subjective thing called "life" within the stability of art. But despite this impossibility, despite the heroic sacrifices artistic creation demands, one *must* forge on. Why? To reconcile the evidence of art's formal strictures with Woolf's "obscure" sense that "by writing I am doing something far more necessary than anything else" (*Moments of Being* 73) we must consider the possibility that these seemingly contradictory ideas are not, in fact, opposed.

Although it is always Woolf's ambition to transmute the subjective "jar on the nerves" or the shadowy reflection on the mirrored surface of consciousness into the exacting molds provided by language, she dramatizes—and even satirizes—the futility of this pursuit through her portrayals of surrogate artist figures in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), *The Waves* (1931), and *Between the Acts* (1941). Woolf believed that there are "two spheres: the novel; and life," and her "great difficulty is the usual one—how to adjust the two worlds" (*A Writer's Diary* 203, 208). But with this "great difficulty" comes great possibility; by pointing to the separation of these two spheres within and throughout her works, Woolf finds ways to create meaning from this border. Even as Woolf's novels deal with the tragic restrictions of social conventions, the insurmountable barriers to communication and intimacy, the petty insignificance of human life and death within the context of an uncaring universe, the abstraction of both their form and their content holds out the possibility of consolation—for the characters, for the author, for the reader. In *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, Woolf provides relief from life's nebulous complexity in art's delineated stability and wholeness; she relegates elements from her life to the world of

fiction, taking away their power over her mind and her creative faculties in the process; she defines the boundary between art and life with meta-textual invocations so that the reader might find comfort in their power at the locus of interpretation, in their ability to elude signification, in their comparative unfathomability. Woolf's works of the late nineteen twenties and early thirties suggest that the effort involved in creating art and imbuing it with meaning might prove humanity's worth, making life on the edge of the void tolerable. As the second world war loomed larger and the annihilation of society began to seem not only plausible but immanent, Woolf's only recourse against this terror was to re-create a figment of English culture in *Between the Acts*, granting it the protection and the freedom of words. Seeking out the seeds of human continuity in that inescapable void, Woolf "seethes wandering bodies and floating voices in a cauldron and makes rise up from its amorphous mass a re-created world" (*Between the Acts* 153), sustaining the possibility of consolation through abstraction.

In her early attempts to paint the Ramsays' summer home in *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe suffers deeply from the effort of truthfully representing the reality of the scene before her: "she could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked; it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears" (*Lighthouse* 19). The brush is the painter's tool for translating the real—in this case, the Ramsay's house—into something else entirely; house, sky, tree, and people all become globs of colored paint dashed across a flat canvas surface, "clods with no life in them" (*Lighthouse* 49). Lily is so committed to preserving the immaculate truth of her "vision" that the mere act of holding the paintbrush, the physical reminder of this transmutation, changes the whole scene in her mind before it can

change it on her canvas, deferring the moment when she must come to terms with the futility of the task. For in trying to remain faithful to the reality of her vision, she invariably corrupts it, reduces it, strips it of vibrance and splendor; “she saw the colour burning on a framework of steel; the light of a butterfly’s wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral. Of all that only a few random marks scrawled upon the canvas remained” (*Lighthouse* 48). As Gillian Beer notes in “Hume, Stephen, and Elegy in *To the Lighthouse*,” “the major process of Lily’s picture throughout the book is *away* from representationalism towards abstraction” (38); mother and child in her painting are ultimately “reduced to a shadow without irreverence. A light here required a shadow there” (*Lighthouse* 53). By relinquishing the desire to realistically depict Mrs. Ramsay and James, Lily is free to represent the impressions—the shadows—they leave on the mind. This shift toward abstraction marks a larger change in the way that Lily sees both her painting and her reality. Asking her to explain her picture, Mr. Bankes “indicated the scene before them. She looked. She could not show him what she wished to make of it, could not even see it herself without a brush in her hand” (*Lighthouse* 53). The brush, which previously muddied her vision of the real, has become her lens onto another sphere. For Lily has realized that the scene before her and the painting she is creating are fundamentally irreconcilable entities. To be faithful to one requires leaving the other behind. The novel ends as Lily “looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the center. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision” (*Lighthouse* 209). This line—which Lily draws with uncharacteristic intensity, resolving all her previous doubts and struggles—eludes signification. Is it the tree she earlier decided to move “further towards the middle” (*Lighthouse* 93)? Is it a rod—Woolf wrote that “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" (*Moments of Being* 73)—serving paradoxically as the artist's signature and negation of the artist's individuality? Is it the lighthouse? We cannot know. The novel ends without offering clarification, eliminating our ability to link image with referent.

Troubling the notion that paint might capture reality, *To the Lighthouse* also foregrounds language's limitations in representing both objectivity and subjectivity. For language is fundamentally arbitrary; words have no essential relation to the things in the world they describe. Because of the way words are naturally abstracted from their referents, Lily, the painter, may have an advantage in representing "objective" reality that Woolf, the writer, does not. Lily can mix her colors until she arrives at almost the exact bright violet of the jacmanna and the startling white of the wall in front of her, whereas the writer has to match her vision to those intermediary words—"bright violet," "startling white,"—and trust the reader to conjure the shades in their mind. Woolf makes a joke of this very problem in *Orlando* (1928), that novelistic "writer's holiday" in which Woolf's "own lyric vein is to be satirized" (*A Writer's Diary* 122, 104). Overflowing with poetic ambitions and attempting to describe, "as all young poets are forever describing, nature," Orlando studies a laurel bush in the hope of precisely matching its shade of green in writing. But just as Lily's commitment to the reality of the scene before her prevents her from painting, Orlando's glance at "the thing itself" stills his pen: "of course, he could write no more. Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another. Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy. Bring them together and they tear each other to pieces" (*Orlando* 17). Unable to free abstract concepts like "truth," "love," and "life," from the metaphors that proliferate in literature—which are all "utterly false"—Orlando throws her hands up at the novelist's perennial problem: "Life? Literature? One to be made into the other? But how monstrously difficult"

(*Orlando* 285)! For while the associative bond that links signifiers with tangible phenomena is already tenuous, the arbitrary nature of the relationship between signifier and signified becomes even more apparent when it comes to describing the intangible, the ephemeral, the subjective. In the process of writing *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf performed a thought experiment in her diary, musing that the greatest book in the world would be “made entirely and solely and with the integrity of one’s thoughts. Suppose one could catch them before they became ‘works of art?’ Catch them hot and sudden as they rise in the mind [. . .] Of course, one cannot; for the process of language is slow and deluding. One must stop to try to find a word. Then, there is the form of the sentence, soliciting one to fill it” (*AWD* 93). The process of forcing “hot and sudden” thoughts and emotions into the exacting molds provided by the social construct of language necessarily destroys the integrity of the original subjective impression, making it disingenuous, making it entirely new.

This difficulty lies at the root of the many communicative barriers that the characters encounter within the novel. Mr. Ramsay, for example, hides himself “under the phrase ‘talking nonsense’ [. . .] It was a disguise. It was the refuge of a man afraid to own his feelings, who could not say, This is what I like—this is what I am” (*Lighthouse* 45). Mr. Ramsay is prevented from saying these things about himself by two conventions: first, the gender norms that threaten his masculinity if he looks deeply into feelings; second, the convention of language, which makes it nearly impossible to voice his subjective ideas and offers the ironic platitude “talking nonsense” as substitute. While Mr. Ramsay leans particularly heavily on “cracked” linguistic conventions and clichés (*Lighthouse* 33), the majority of the characters in the novel “talk nonsense.” Sitting around the dinner table, they discuss trivialities like the weather, the lighthouse, the “square root of one thousand two hundred and fifty three” while their real

meanings go unsaid. The notable exception to this rule is Mrs. Ramsay, who seems to understand on some fundamental level that “all this phrase-making was a game” (*Lighthouse* 69). While her thoughts occasionally bend against her will to fit linguistic and social conventions—“suddenly she added, We are in the hands of the Lord. But instantly she was annoyed at herself for saying that. Who had said it? Not she; she had been trapped into saying something she did not mean” (*Lighthouse* 63)—she actively resists using trite phrases to express herself; she cannot even tell Mr. Ramsay she loves him. For Mrs. Ramsay believes that the real “summoning together” happens beneath the surface of these nonsense interactions where “it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep” (*Lighthouse* 62); in other words, in a place where darkness and unfathomability make it impossible for language to distort this thing we call “intimacy.” Lily arrives at a similar conclusion in the final section of the novel. Longing to say something to Mr. Carmichael but struggling to find words to express herself, Lily wonders “who knows what we are, what we feel? Who knows even at the moment of intimacy, This is knowledge? Aren’t things spoilt then, Mrs. Ramsay may have asked (it seemed to have happened so often, this silence by her side) by saying them” (*Lighthouse* 171)? In the same way that Lily’s shift toward abstraction in her painting indicates an acceptance of the hard divide between art and the real, the assertion that phrases “spoil” things has resounding implications for the novel, which is, of course, made up of phrases. What does it mean to “spoil” reality through art? As Lily struggles to “get hold of something” that evades her, “Phrases came. Visions came. Beautiful pictures. Beautiful phrases. But what she wished to get hold of was that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything” (*Lighthouse* 193). In the process of being “made” by the novelist, that intangible “jar upon the nerves” is filtered through the author’s subjectivity, the convention of



language, and the reader's subjectivity. By the time it is codified on paper and made intelligible to other humans, "the thing itself" has ceased to be itself.

While *To the Lighthouse* explores the ways different artistic mediums break from reality, it also raises the question of how we understand "the thing itself" in the first place: what authority can humans claim to represent the inhuman when we're irrevocably mired in the conventional and the subjective? Woolf confronts this problem directly in the second section of *To the Lighthouse*, "Time Passes," which collapses ten years (including the first world war) into eighteen pages depicting the gradual dilapidation of the Ramsays' vacant home. Woolf described "Time Passes" in her diary as "the most difficult piece of abstract writing—I have to give an empty house, no people's characters, the passage of time, all eyeless and featureless with nothing to cling to" (*AWD* 87). In the absence of the human, the inhuman reigns. Little "airs detached from the body of the wind," mount the staircase of the house, "bend over the bed," go to the window "nosing, rubbing," and "desisting, all ceased together, gathered together, all sighed together; all together gave off an aimless gust of lamentation to which some door in the kitchen replied; swung wide, admitted nothing" (*Lighthouse* 127). The overwhelming volume of anthropomorphism throughout "Time Passes" calls attention to the self-conscious solipsism of the novel's imagination; given "nothing to cling to," the narrative clings to human behavior, the only thing about which the novelist can claim any particular knowledge. Woolf further critiques humanity's tendency to impose itself upon the unknown by introducing God-like entities into the narrative. "Nature" surveils man's "misery, his meanness, and his torture" with equal complacency (*Lighthouse* 134); divine goodness "covers his treasures in a drench of hail and so breaks them, so confuses them, that it seems impossible that their calm should ever return or that we should ever compose from their fragments a perfect whole or read in the littered pieces the

clear words of truth. For our penitence deserves a glimpse only; our toil respite only” (*Lighthouse* 128). Invoking the religious concepts of sin (man’s meanness, his torture) and penitence, Woolf calls attention to humanity’s tendency to conceive of higher powers in our own image; we want to project a sensibility like our own onto the unknown so that we might commune with it. By forcing the abstract into the realm of the familiar and the human, we can “marvel how the beauty outside mirrored beauty within” (*Lighthouse* 134). But any hope of unifying the human and inhuman, the mortal and immortal, is rendered impossible by the glassy surface of the human consciousness which divides the “outside” (the objective) from the “within” (the subjective). For “in those mirrors, the minds of men, in those pools of uneasy water in which clouds forever turn and shadows form, dreams persisted, and it was impossible to resist the strange intimation [. . .] that good triumphs, happiness prevails, order rules” (*Lighthouse* 132). Like the shadows on the wall in Plato’s cave, the shadows forming on the uneasy surface of human consciousness are merely flickering impressions of reality, tainted by humanity’s insatiable desire to project harmony and order upon an indifferent world.

And so, if we can never understand the “objective” and if we struggle to represent the subjective with our broken apparatuses—language, paint—for doing so, why does art maintain its allure? For just as soon as Woolf shows us art’s limitations, she reminds us of its enduring attraction:

Impatient, despairing yet loth to go (for beauty offers her lures, has her consolations), to pace the beach was impossible; contemplation was unendurable; the mirror was broken.

[Mr. Carmichael brought out a volume of poems that spring, which had an unexpected success. The war, people said, had revived their interest in poetry] *Lighthouse* 134.

Although the war lurks beyond the frame of *To the Lighthouse*, it shapes the course of the entire novel, wreaking devastation within the microcosm of the Ramsay family and making the characters acutely hungry for meaning, permanence, and continuity. In the face of such

destruction, “people” turn to poetry to experience a stability essentially foreign to reality. And indeed, the question of ‘what will survive’ forms the core of “Time Passes” and perhaps of the entire novel. Mrs. Ramsay, Prue, and Andrew do not survive: Woolf mentions their deaths only in brackets, ruthlessly underscoring their insignificance within the vast scope of nature and time. Attempting to find meaning in this family’s private tragedy, Lily looks to the poet himself, Carmichael, for an answer. Wondering “what does it mean? How does one explain it all,” Lily imagines that Carmichael would respond “‘you’ and ‘I’ and ‘she’ pass and vanish: nothing stays: all changes; but not words, not paint” (*Lighthouse* 179). While art itself is not impervious to the effects of time, while “the very stone one kicks with one’s boot will outlast Shakespeare” (*Lighthouse* 35), the fact that it momentarily codifies something through its medium is so comforting that it hardly matters that the existential question “what does it mean” goes unanswered. The stability is enough. For it is profoundly “satisfying” and “restful” to read a sonnet, for instance, and find it “beautiful and reasonable, clear and complete, the *essence sucked out of life* and held rounded here” (*Lighthouse* 121). By feeding on real concerns like “a parasite which draws sustenance from life”—as Woolf describes it in her 1927 essay “The Art of Fiction” (*The Moment and Other Essays* 92)—art digests the “real” into something whole and beautiful, providing a robust alternative to the chaos and uncertainty of life while simultaneously permitting us to imagine life itself may be whole and beautiful. And although “beauty had this penalty—it came too readily, came too completely. It stilled life—froze it” (*Lighthouse* 177), the “penalty” of beauty is precisely what people crave in times of turmoil: stillness and control.

By hinting at its own fictionality at times, *To the Lighthouse* appeals to its readers’ interpretative authority, inviting them to revel in their ability to transcend the realm of the text. In one such instance, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay are watching their children throw catches when

suddenly the “meaning” which “descends on people, making them symbolical, making them representative, came upon them, and made them in the dark standing, looking, the symbols of marriage, husband and wife. Then, after an instant, the symbolical outline which transcended the real figures sank down again, and they became, as they met them, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay”

(*Lighthouse* 72). Gillian Beer interprets this moment as yet another Woolfian critique of the anthropocentrism of writing: “The act of symbolizing is one of the major means by which in language we seek to make things hold, to make them survive. But, above all, it is the means by which we make things serve the human. Symbol gives primacy to the human because it places the human at the centre, if not of concern, yet of signifying” (41). I would argue that in this moment, Woolf is also giving primacy to the *reader*, placing the *reader* at the center of the signifying act by making the implicit process of interpretation explicit. The only way Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay can transcend their reality on the page is through the reader’s ability to make them symbolic, to give them new significations; as characters, they provide static “outlines” which the reader is free to fill in as she pleases. At the Ramsay’s dinner party, in another moment of meta-textual irony, “Lily felt that something was lacking; Mr. Bankes felt that something was lacking. Pulling her shawl around her Mrs. Ramsay felt that something was lacking. All of them bending themselves to listen thought, ‘Pray heaven that the inside of my mind may not be exposed’” (*Lighthouse* 94). In allowing the reader to permeate the character’s subjectivities, the free indirect third-person narration of *To the Lighthouse* makes this prayer deeply ironic, for we can clearly see the connections between Lily’s, Mr. Bankes’s, and Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts when *they* cannot. In “The Rise of Fictionality,” Catherine Gallagher argues that through reading, we seek the “contradictory sensations of *not being a character* [. . .] an ability to be, we imagine, without textuality, meaningfulness, or any other excuse for existing” (361). Bringing this

sensation to the surface—when, for example, characters inexplicably begin chanting “*Damn your eyes, damn your eyes*” (*Lighthouse* 74) as if fruitlessly railing against an invisible reader—*To the Lighthouse* makes us aware of our unbounded immanence, our comparative unfathomability as part of a nebulous reality that escapes signs and symbols.

For Woolf herself, “adjusting” the boundary between the separate spheres of art and life provided a powerful form of catharsis: by writing *To the Lighthouse*, she was able to relegate her persistent memories of her parents to the realm of the fictional, taking away their power over her day-to-day life. Her intention, when she began work on the novel in 1925, was to “have father’s character done complete in it; and mother’s” (*AWD* 75) in the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, and her representation of Leslie and Julia Stephen appears to have been quite faithful to reality; upon reading the finished novel, Woolf’s sister Vanessa Bell “found the rising of the dead almost painful” (*AWD* 106). But for Woolf, raising the dead was an essential step toward disposing of them. In the midst of writing *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf mused in her diary: “I have an idea I will invent a new name for my books to supplant ‘novel.’ A new———by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy” (*AWD* 78)? As Gillian Beer notes, “in elegy there is a repetition of mourning and an allaying of mourning. Elegy lets go of the past by formally transferring it into language, laying ghosts by confining them to a text and giving them its freedom” (31). Woolf describes her father, the renowned author and thinker Leslie Stephen, as “spartan, ascetic, puritanical” (*Moments* 68). He died in 1904, a “mercy” for Woolf and her writing since “his life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books—inconceivable” (*AWD* 135). In capturing his character ‘complete’ in her portrait of Mr. Ramsay, she takes the epithet often assigned her father—“man of letters”—and literalizes it: Mr. Ramsay conceives of thought itself as an alphabet ranged neatly in twenty-six letters. His “splendid mind

had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. [. . .] Z is only reached by one man in a generation” (*Lighthouse* 33-34). Irrevocably mired in convention—both the patriarchal romanticization of “great men” and the convention of language itself—Mr. Ramsay’s mind cannot conceive of ambiguities or unknowns outside the artificially ordered framework of his world. And of course, as a “character” in a novel, Mr. Ramsay can never escape from this system; he is truly *of letters*. In this manner, Woolf escapes her father’s stifling influence by sentencing him to the sentence. Woolf repeats this process (although perhaps less sardonically) in immortalizing Julia Stephen through Mrs. Ramsay. Julia died when Woolf was thirteen, and up until Woolf had the idea for *To the Lighthouse*, she could often “hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say” (*Moments* 80) in much the same way that Lily experiences Mrs. Ramsay’s memory in the last section of the novel. Only through the process of creating art can Lily and Woolf overcome their obsessions with these dead mothers. While Lily’s memory had previously conjured an image of Mrs. Ramsay knitting on the steps of the house, she disappears at the moment Lily completes her painting: “she looked at the steps; they were empty” (208). Similarly, the process of completing the novel exorcised Julia from Woolf’s mind: “I wrote the novel very quickly; and when it was written I ceased to be obsessed with my mother. I no longer hear her voice. I do not see her” (*Moments* 81). Though transmuting the dead into the realm of art, Woolf takes away their power in that other sphere, this more uncertain realm called “real life.”

If *To the Lighthouse* was an elegy for Woolf’s parents, *The Waves* (1931), can be read in part as an elegy for Woolf’s brother Thoby, who died in 1906 and whose character might be glimpsed in the heroic specter of Percival at the gravitational center of the novel. As Woolf began to sketch out the first draft in 1929, she records feeling “engaged with my anguish, as I was after Thoby

died; alone, fighting something alone” (*AWD* 144). Fourteen months later, after flying over the last few pages with a fluency more reminiscent of her process for *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf finished the novel and took to her diary to record her accomplishment: “it is done; and I have been sitting these 15 minutes in a state of glory, and calm, and some tears, thinking of Thoby and if I could write Julian Thoby Stephen 1881-1906 on the first page. I suppose not. How physical the sense of triumph and relief is!” (*AWD* 165). Just as Lily enacts her vision and exorcises the ghost of Mrs. Ramsay by drawing the line that escapes signification, Woolf completes this arduous artistic project by embracing a similar kind of abstraction; she marvels at the “freedom and boldness with which my imagination picked up, used and tossed aside all the images, symbols which I had prepared. I am sure that this is the right way of using them—not in set pieces, as I had tried at first, coherently, but simply as images, never making them work out; only suggest” (*AWD* 165).

Abstraction not only catalyzes the completion of Woolf’s vision, but it also forms the underlying current of *The Waves*, which Woolf describes alternatively as “prose yet poetry; a novel and a play,” a “serious, mystical poetical work,” and an “abstract, mystical eyeless book: a playpoem” (*AWD* 103, 104, 134). Her inclination toward poetry during the late nineteen twenties seeps into *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), in which she derides the novel—with no small irony, given her advocacy for the form elsewhere—as merely a convenient receptacle for the Victorian woman’s thoughts, since “it would be easier to write prose and fiction [in the sitting-room] than to write poetry or a play. Less concentration is required” (66). Again and again, in her discussions of Shakespeare’s sister, Charlotte Brontë (who had, according to Woolf, “more genius in her than Jane Austen” (*ROO* 69), and burgeoning novelist Mary Carmichael (who “will be a poet . . . in another hundred years’ time” (*ROO* 94)), Woolf links artistic genius to the

“original” poetic impulse, as if she is suggesting on some level that all novels aspire to the more abstract condition of poetry. At the same time, in her essay “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” Woolf acknowledges poetry’s failure to capture what she identifies as the dominant psychology of the modern age, characterized by an increased freedom of curiosity; “feelings which used to come single and separate no longer do so. Beauty is part ugliness; amusement part disgust; pleasure part pain. Emotions which used to enter the mind whole are now broken up on the threshold” (*Collected Essays* 222). When lofty poetry—which is always “on the side of beauty,” never used for “the common purpose of life”—is tasked with representing this discord and incongruity, “she does not keep pace with the mind” in the way that humble prose might prove itself capable given the opportunity, “rising high from the ground, not in one dart, but in sweeps and circles, and keeping at the same time in touch with the amusements and idiosyncrasies of human character in daily life” (“Narrow Bridge” 223, 224). In this essay, Woolf looks toward the invention of a new genre, the lovechild of poetry and prose, admitting only the best qualities from each. It is this which she attempted through writing *The Waves*, which she was determined to liberate from the “appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner: it is false, unreal, merely conventional. Why admit anything to literature that is not poetry—by which I mean saturated” (*AWD* 136)? The saturated experimental work that emerged from this endeavor is, as her friend and contemporary E.M. Forster suggests, “trembling on the edge. A little less—and it would lose its poetry. A little more—and it would be over into the abyss, and be dull and arty” (*Virginia Woolf* 17).

If *The Waves* is trembling on the edge of a formal abyss, its substance mirrors its style; chaos, darkness, dissolution, and death lurk continuously on the other side of language. Already seeded in the ripening and rotting described in the interludes, death crashes into the narrative



with Percival's fall in India, forcing the novel's six soliloquizing voices to reckon with their own mortality. It looms larger as these voices grow older and become more hopelessly entrenched in their societal niches; it surfaces again with Rhoda's suicide, and punctuates the end of the novel as Bernard confirms what was previously implicit: "It is death. Death is the enemy" (*Waves* 297). Even as *The Waves* fully acknowledges the futility inherent in the charge against death, its representations of abstract art—as well as the abstract nature of the novel itself—provide small consolations for the living, holding out the possibility that, even teetering on the end of an abyss, life might be made "tolerable."

Percival's death in India coincides with the birth of Bernard's son, and both events force Bernard to reckon with his own mortality and the banality of his remaining life: "I am now at the zenith of experience. It will decline" (*Waves* 155). For Bernard, this decline is inexorably tied to "the usual order" that strengthens its hold on the individual as life progresses, dictating his actions (he must hurry, he must catch trains) and crystalizing his mind; it steals the "exaltation, the flight of doves descending," makes him "no longer amazed names written over window shops" (*Waves* 155), and dulls his sense of reality until even his characteristic urge to make phases abandons him—eventually, "things will become too difficult to explain" (*Waves* 155). Grappling with this bleak premonition, Bernard vows to temporarily reject "the sequence of things" (*Waves* 155) and seeks respite from the 'machine' of convention in the National Gallery. There, he encounters "saints and blue madonnas. Mercifully these pictures make no reference; they do not nudge; they do not point. Thus they expand my consciousness of him and bring him back to me differently" (*Waves* 156). In her article "Modernism, Subjectivity, and Narrative Form: Abstraction in *The Waves*," Tamar Katz makes the argument that Woolf's "modernist elaboration and examination of abstraction ultimately spells out a critique of that abstraction"

(234), pointing to the way “Bernard goes, curiously and problematically, to referential art,” and suggesting that these paintings “do not offer transcendence, a world apart, because they cannot be divided from Bernard's emotions” (242). Katz is right, of course, that these paintings reference the (already somewhat abstract) idea of the Madonna. However, she ignores both the way that Bernard himself perceives the pictures—they “make no reference”—and the phantasmic event they engender: Percival’s return. Through their abstraction, these pictures allow Bernard access to a metaphysical plane—a world apart, to borrow Katz’s parlance—where Percival, who no longer exists in the flesh, is brought “back to me differently. I remember his beauty. ‘Look, where he comes,’ I say” (*Waves* 156). Woolf employs almost this exact phrasing in her diary to describe the way the elegiac project of *To the Lighthouse* had altered her father in her mind: “now he comes back sometimes, but differently” (*AWD* 135). Simultaneously abstract and referential, Bernard’s blue madonnas—like Woolf’s novels—have the power to raise the dead, bring them back differently, and alter the way the living view their reality. In the wake of *To the Lighthouse*’s publication, Leslie Stephen came back to Woolf “as a contemporary” (*AWD* 135) allowing her to allay personal grievances through professional distance. For Bernard, Percival’s return through abstraction allows him to brush aside his fear of physical and mental deterioration within a prescriptive conventional system—“lines and colors almost persuade me that I too can be heroic” (*Waves* 156)—and embrace the possibility of continuity beyond the realm of the concrete real: “Lines and colours they survive, therefore . . .” (*Waves* 158).

Despite his distaste for the dictates of the social system, Bernard genuinely enjoys the tangible comforts of “life round me, and books, and little ornaments,” and he eventually finds it too arduous to hold himself “alone outside the machine” (*Waves* 158). As his revelatory sojourn into the National Gallery concludes, Rhoda—who does not share his resilient attachment to the

concrete and the conventional—similarly attempts to process Percival’s death and transcend the sordid fact of embodiment through immersing herself in music, the most abstract of arts. Battling through throngs of Londoners, Rhoda becomes hyper-aware of the way that death indiscriminately saps individuals of humanity, stripping them to basest flesh—she foresees being “hung with other people like a joint of meat among other joints of meat” (*Waves* 162). As Janine Utell notes in “Meals and Mourning in Woolf’s *The Waves*,” food in this novel is “intricately connected to processes of waste and decay, processes that reveal the permeability of the body and the potential of its dissolution” (8). Woolf illustrates these natural processes throughout the interludes, as the vital “*hot breath of mutton and beef*” becomes a ‘*slow steam*’ oozing from the rubbish heap (*Waves* 109) and “*drops formed on the bloated sides of swollen things. The skin of rotten fruit broke, and matter oozed too thick to run*” (*Waves* 75). Plunging into a music hall in an attempt to “recover beauty, and impose order upon my raked, my disheveled soul” (*Waves* 161), Rhoda finds the corporeal horrors of Oxford Street mirrored within. The audience has “eaten beef and pudding enough to live for a week without tasting food”; “we cluster like maggots” born of decay to feed upon dead flesh. Nor can they escape their *own* flesh. “Debased and hide-bound” like Susan (*Waves* 132), the concertgoers are “like walruses stranded on rocks” (*Waves* 162), destined for the same end as the meat and fruit “oozing” in the interludes; they swell and ripen inevitably to rot. But while Susan’s grounded physicality and perceived linguistic limitations make it impossible to “rise up higher, with words and words in phrases” (*Waves* 16), Rhoda, whose body is “porous,” “unsealed, incandescent” (*Waves* 57), ultimately attains transcendence through entering an abstract world of her own invention.

Significantly, it is music, the art that eliminates all distinctions between matter and form, that allows Rhoda an escape from the realm of the corporeal: “the sea-green woman comes to our

rescue,” crying “Ah” (*Waves* 162)! The singer (herself somewhat abstract, sea-green) flings her voice out like a lifeline, providing the audience with wordless, incomprehensible cries which Rhoda cannot accurately qualify or describe in words—for “what is a cry” (*Waves* 162)?

Comparing the sound of the accompanying violins to “ripple and laughter like the dance of olive trees” (*Waves* 163), Rhoda—like Mrs Ramsay, like Lily, like Orlando—becomes frustrated with the insufficiency of language, the undue pressure placed on simile to pin down that which eludes description: “‘Like’ and ‘like’ and ‘like’—but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing” (*Waves* 163)? But now, catalyzed by the abstract music, Percival’s senseless death “has let me see the thing. There is a square; there is an oblong” (*Waves* 163). In *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, Hermione Lee argues that Woolf’s characters think constantly of the ‘thing beneath the semblance of the thing’ because they are “being used in the service of an abstract argument about the difficulty of infusing shapes with sense” (124). While Lee applies this insight to her discussion of *To the Lighthouse*, it is equally apt for *The Waves*, where shapes dominate the characters’ imaginations from the first page onward: the loop, the globe, and the ring appear and reappear across different soliloquies filtered through the characteristic sensibilities of each voice. Tethered to the earth, Susan sees a caterpillar forming a “green ring . . . notched with blunt feet” (*Waves* 9); Jinny, who thinks always in terms of the fleshy and social, imagines “nothing beyond the circle cast by my body” (*Waves* 128); Louis, the poetical businessman who longs to impose order, imagines “a chain whirling round, round, in a steel-blue circle” (*Waves* 137) and a “steel ring of clear poetry” (*Waves* 128). Bernard and Rhoda return again and again to more ephemeral, intangible shapes—smoke rings and bubbles made of words and images, the loop of light or time, the inscrutable oblong and square. Rhoda suffers throughout the novel because for her, the conventional *is* abstract. Struggling with her writing exercises at the beginning of the

novel, Rhoda begins to “draw a figure and the world is looped in it and I myself am outside the loop. [. . .] The world is entire, and I am outside of it, crying ‘Oh, save me, from being blown forever outside the loop of time!’” (22). Combined with the palpable child-like terror of exclusion, Rhoda’s agony stems from her literal inability to infuse conventional shapes (letters) with their correct meaning; “the figures mean nothing now. Meaning has gone” (20). As Maria DiBattista suggests in *Virginia Woolf’s Major Novels: The Fables of Anon*, “all inherited figures of thought, those complex notations by which the mind reduces ‘this interminable life’ into an ordered and stationary image of plentitude, remain a source of terror and alienation” for Rhoda (180). The oblong and square differ significantly from these ‘inherited’ figures of thought in that they affirm Rhoda’s membership and faith in a larger human project: “We are not so various or so mean; we have made oblongs and stood them upon squares. *This is our triumph; this is our consolation*” (*Waves* 163, emphasis mine). While DiBattista attributes this “triumph” to Rhoda’s creative faculties—she substitutes conventional shapes with an “idiosyncratic geometry of being in which the figures of the body are not circular and compressive” (180)—I would argue that the square and oblong offer consolation not just because they represent Rhoda’s ability to project her own version of order on the inchoate world, but because they are unapologetically incomprehensible, impervious to interpretation in the same way that “life is not susceptible perhaps to the treatment we give it when we try to tell it” (*Waves* 267). It is Percival’s death, his ignominious fall from a horse, that makes this lack of meaning clear to Rhoda; any attempt to explain this event—as Rhoda suspects Bernard “will have out his notebook; under D he will enter ‘Phrases to be used on the deaths of friends’” (*Waves* 161)—reads as both callous and naïve. Eschewing all ties to the tangible real, the epiphanic appearance of the oblong and square “liberates understanding. Wander no more, I say; this is the end” (*Waves* 163). By putting an end

to interpretation, these inscrutable abstractions “liberate” understanding from the purview of the human, allowing Rhoda to temporarily cease her desperate, wandering search for meaning.

While the oblong and square elude signification, they *do* perform a function which contributes to their power to console—the players use them to create a ‘perfect dwelling place’: “The players take the square and place it upon the oblong. They place it very accurately; they make a perfect dwelling place. Very little is left outside. The structure is now visible; what is inchoate is here stated; we are not so various or so mean; we have made oblongs and stood them upon squares” (*Waves* 163). Unlike the figure filling with time, which Rhoda feels unable to penetrate, the square and oblong are simultaneously concrete—the structure is “visible,” dividing the chaos of the real with neat lines—and permeable; they offer shelter without excluding or imprisoning. Woolf’s curious choice of diction in describing this “dwelling place” raises several questions. What does it mean to “dwell” in this abstract space? To occupy with the body? Presumably not. The oblong and square exist beyond the realm of the physical—they “rescue” the concertgoers from embodiment. To occupy with the mind, then? In this respect, the oblong and the square might provide a metonym for the novel itself. Recording her progress with *The Waves* in her diary in March of 1930, Woolf muses that “the test of a book (to a writer) is if it makes a space in which, quite naturally, you can say what you want to say. As this morning I could say what Rhoda said. This proves that the book itself is alive: because it has not crushed the thing I wanted to say, but allowed me to slip it in, without compression or alteration” (*AWD* 153). Just as music allows Rhoda this epiphanic vision of the oblong and the square, music facilitates and organizes Woolf’s conception of *The Waves*, which she describes as an “angular shape in my mind” (*AWD* 139): the characters’ voices are layered and interwoven like “a symphony, with its concord and its discord” (*Waves* 256); Woolf is “writing to a rhythm and not

to a plot” (*Letters IV*, 204), with soliloquies and interludes rolling after each other like the crashing of waves; it even occurred to Woolf “while listening to a Beethoven quartet that I would merge all the interjected passages into Bernard’s final speech and end with the words O solitude: thus making him absorb all these scenes and having no further break. This is also to show that the theme effort, effort dominates: not the waves: and personality: and defiance” (*AWD* 159). Although the “dwelling place” made by the square and the oblong is abstract, the *effort* required to bring it into existence is concrete. The singer “assumes an air of intensity, inflates herself and hurls herself”; the players “are mopping their faces” as they place one shape upon the other (*Waves* 162, 163). And it is this effort to create art, to define a space apart from reference and the “real” where abstract thoughts and emotions might find a natural home, that ultimately convinces Rhoda of humanity’s merit: “we are not so various or so mean” (*Waves* 163).

Throughout *The Waves*, meta-textual invocations to the reader highlight the divide between the world within the novel and the world outside of the novel, making the structure of the literary dwelling place “visible,” so to speak. Out of the six voices, Bernard seems to possess an especially intense awareness of his own fictionality. Like the characters in *To the Lighthouse* who chant, “Damn your eyes, damn your eyes” (74) as if reviling invisible reader, he feels oppressed by “the perpetual solicitation of the eye” (*Waves* 157) which haunts him throughout the novel and eventually becomes manifest in the unnamed listener to whom he addresses his last soliloquy. Describing this mysterious figure, Bernard says, “you look, eat, smile, are bored, pleased, annoyed—that is all I know. Yet this shadow which has sat by me for an hour or two, this mask from which peep two eyes, has the power to drive me back, to pinion me down among all those other faces” (*Waves* 293). Bernard’s assessment of his relation to this shadowy surrogate for the reader makes explicit the metatextual dynamic Gallagher identifies in “The Rise

of Fictionality”: while the characters’ most intimate thoughts are borne to light, the reader enjoys the privilege of distance and anonymity, looking on from behind an impenetrable mask. But even as he resents being “pinioned” down, Bernard is aware of his existential dependence on this gaze: “I need eyes on me to draw out these frills and furbelows. To be myself (I note) I need the illumination of other people’s eyes, and therefore cannot be entirely sure what is my self” (*Waves* 116). In his influential essay *What is Literature?* (1948), Jean-Paul Sartre writes that “the literary object is a peculiar top which exists only in movement. To make it come into view a concrete act called reading is necessary, and it lasts only as long as this act can last. Beyond that, there are only black marks on paper” (41). Circumscribed entirely by these black marks—“when I cannot see words curling like rings of smoke around me I am in darkness—I am nothing” (*Waves* 132)—Bernard seems aware that he needs others to bring him into view through the concrete act of reading. For each reader who lends their consciousness to the work—drawing out some “frills,” disregarding some “furbelows”—Bernard is newly embodied, imbued with fresh significance: “I am made and remade continually. Different people draw different worlds from me” (*Waves* 134). Through these invocations to the reader and meta-textual references to the “soliloquies” (*Waves* 39, 115) that constitute the narrative structure, Woolf marks the permeable boundary between the contingent world of the novel and the independent world outside the novel, allowing the reader to more fully appreciate their role in filling its outline: “In a word, the reader is conscious of disclosing in creating, creating by disclosing” (Sartre 43).

If the novel itself forms a kind of abstract “dwelling place,” it is one that the reader enters freely and can leave behind just as easily; this freedom holds out the possibility of consolation through transcendence, even at the novel’s bleak conclusion. Bernard, an old man with most of



his life behind him, wrenches himself out of the numb monotony of “another day; another Friday; another twentieth of March” (296) to valiantly face his impending death head on:

It is death. Death is the enemy. It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back, like a young man's, like Percival's, when he galloped in India. I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!”

*The waves broke on the shore. (Waves 297)*

Like Mr. Ramsay, whose patriarchal self-figuration as the “leader of a doomed expedition” is satirized in *To the Lighthouse*, Bernard's charge against his indomitable enemy contains within its heroic rhetoric a reminder of the indignity of Percival's fall from his horse, a reminder of the indignity of *all* death. Reminiscent of “Time Passes,” in which characters' deaths are bracketed against the indifferent momentum of nature, the last line of *The Waves* underscores the insignificance of human life within the scope of eternity and infinity. In his assessment of humanity's existential condition, Sartre writes, “if we turn away from this landscape, it will sink back to its dark permanence. [. . .] there is no one mad enough to think that it is going to be annihilated. It is we who shall be annihilated, and the earth will remain in its lethargy until another consciousness comes along to awaken it. Thus, to our inner certainty of being ‘revealers’ is added that of being inessential in relation to the thing revealed” (*What is Literature?* 39). Even as *The Waves* makes this unpleasant truth a central part of its project—none of the voices, for example, are essential to the inhuman world of the interludes—the constraints of the novel's form (made explicit through metatextual invocations) may provide readers a small consolation: if they are inessential to this landscape of reality, they are at least partially essential to the landscape of the novel. Thus, Woolf invites the reader to freely enter this dwelling place so that “they may re-adapt the totality of being to man and may again enclose the universe within man” (Sartre 58). This universe certainly includes death: flesh rots and dissolves on the compost heap,

Percival's and Rhoda's lives end in tragedy, Bernard's individual voice is subsumed into the crashing of the waves. But death, captured by the Woolfian imagination, is often a call to the living. Just as Septimus's death "made [Clarissa] feel the beauty; made her feel the fun" (*Mrs Dalloway* 186), Percival's death makes Bernard acutely aware of his own continued vitality, attuned to the joys of a world that his friend would never again experience: "To see things without attachment, from the outside, and to realize their beauty in itself—how strange! And then the sense that a burden has been removed; pretense and make-believe and unreality are gone" (*Waves* 263). Bernard's fictional life ends with the novel, as does 'make-believe' and 'unreality'. But the reader emerges from the "free dream" of reading unscathed; she triumphs over death for a moment in her extra-textual immanence and comes back to the world—differently, perhaps.

If the process of reading allows the reader to both reveal and escape the world of the novel, the process of writing allows the author to experience an even greater control over the world she is creating. While Woolf satirizes the notion of an Author-God in her depiction of Bernard—who "moulds his bread into pellets and calls him 'people'" (*Waves* 25), making one man and one woman like God creating Adam and Eve (*Waves* 70)—her authorial ethos shines throughout the entire novel: believing that an author's mind must be "incandescent" to produce great art (*ROO* 56), Woolf has combined form and matter in the pseudo-divine light that waxes and wanes through the interludes, making and unmaking the world of the novel. Reminiscent of Genesis, *The Waves* begins with darkness rent suddenly by light, "as if the arm of a woman couched beneath the horizon had raised a lamp" (*Waves* 7). In her analysis of how Woolf's 'Eos' rejects Christian patriarchalism by feminizing the nominally masculine sun, DiBattista suggests that this creatoress was born of "Woolf's desire to invoke a masterful female presence as the controlling voice of *The Waves*" (149) and links Woolf herself to this veiled goddess of dawn: "Woolf's

dissimulation is the dissimulation of the chaste and pure speaker who conceals herself behind a veil of anonymity in order to speak the truth” (DiBattista 151). I would argue, however, that this symbolic figure’s dissimulation is less concerned with preserving the credibility lent by chastity and purity and more concerned with the possibilities created by this veiling: unbound from its source, her light is free to pervade the novel without reflexively pointing back to its ever-present creatress. Many of the authors Woolf particularly admired—like Shakespeare, Austen, and Spenser—had this ability to simultaneously pervade and disappear from their work, achieving what Woolf’s contemporary T.S. Elliot called “not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 79). Reading *The Waves*, we get the impression (as Woolf originally wrote of *The Faerie Queene*) that we are “confined in one continuous consciousness,” that the author has “saturated and enclosed this world, that we live in a great bubble blown from the poet’s brain” (*The Moment and Other Essays* 9). This feeling is created, in part, by the way that the six voices of the novel bleed into one another. But for the attributions (“said Bernard,” “said Rhoda”) and the repeating motifs assigned to each “character,” the homogenous syntax and tone would make it almost impossible to distinguish between each individual. And like *The Faerie Queene*, the interludes of *The Waves* depict “a world of astonishing physical brilliance and intensity; sharpened, intensified, as objects are in clearer air” (“Faerie Queene” 9); the intensity of the rising sun “sharpened” the walls of the house and the edges of tables and chairs, hardens “rocks which had been misty and soft” (*Waves* 29). At the same time, it renders the surface of the sea and the leaves on the trees in the garden “transparent,” a word—like “saturated” (*AWD* 136)—that Woolf used in the exploratory stages of the drafting process to characterize her intentions for *The Waves*: “it must include nonsense, fact, sordidity: but made transparent” (*AWD* 136). And indeed, the entire project of *The Waves*

hinges on transparency. Apart from the interludes, which are illuminated by this symbolic authoress, the world of the novel is entirely filtered through the transparent interiorities of six voices with their source in one mind—Woolf’s.

For in the same way *To the Lighthouse* provides a portrait of Woolf’s mother and father, *The Waves* might be considered, as Woolf proffers in her diary, a portrait of “a mind thinking [. . .] Autobiography it might be called” (AWD 140). As Jean Guiguet suggests in his attempt to define the narrative voice carrying through the novel—which he calls “the whole problem of *The Waves*”—“these are not six voices in search of characters, but a single being in search of voices” (*Virginia Woolf and Her Works* 285). The autobiographical undercurrents of the work become more apparent when we read the first section of *The Waves* alongside Woolf’s memoir “A Sketch of the Past” (1939), which threads her earliest and most powerful childhood memories into an introspective consideration of the author’s motivations for writing. Several of the memories Woolf details in this memoir surface in *The Waves*, divided and filtered through the subjective impressions of the six voices. For instance, early in the novel Neville recounts his reaction to learning that a dead man 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. [. . .] we are doomed, all of us by the apple trees, by the immitigable apple trees which we cannot pass” (*Waves* 24- 25). After learning that one of her parents’ friends had killed himself, a young Virginia Stephen wandered into the garden and was struck by the overwhelming feeling that “the apple tree was connected to 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” (*Moments of Being* 71, emphasis mine). By giving this early childhood trauma over to Neville, Woolf transmutes the real horror of that moment—replete with moonlight, the apple tree linked to the solid

inevitability of death, the feeling of paralysis created by this first encounter with an unintelligible obstacle—into the realm of the fictional. She repeats this process with other voices: we can glimpse her hatred of the “small looking-glass in the hall at Talland House” (*Moments* 67) in Jinny and Rhoda’s aversion to “the small looking-glass on the stairs” of the girls’ school, which “shows our heads only; it cuts off our heads” (*Waves* 41). Woolf also recreates the sensory experience of “lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St Ives” as the waves crashed outside her window and “feeling the “purest ecstasy I can conceive” (*Moments* 65) in the two soliloquies that end the first section of the novel. Bernard lies in bed “afloat in the shallow light which is like a film of water drawn over my eyes” (*Waves* 24) just as Woolf remembers “seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow” (*Moments* 65); Woolf’s nursery, made up of “curved shapes, showing the light through, but not giving a clear outline” (*Moments* 66), becomes Rhoda’s, in which “all is soft and bending. Walls and cupboards whiten and bend their yellow squares” (*Waves* 27). Significantly, Woolf splits this first and “most important of all my memories” (*Moments* 65) between Bernard and Rhoda, the two characters that seem to most directly embody Woolf’s creative impulse and her extreme sensitivity to the horrors and joys of the real.

Woolf describes many of these significant memories as “shocks,” which “brought with them a particular horror and physical collapse; they seemed dominant; myself passive” (*Moments* 72).

But Woolf theorizes that

the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. [. . .] It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost the power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because it takes away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. (*Moments of Being* 72)

Woolf mitigates the subjective jar on the nerves by forcing it into words, creating wholeness by “condensing relationships, by introducing order where there was none, by imposing the unity of mind on the diversity of things” (Sartre 39). In doing so, she removes the pain of passivity and becomes dominant, essential to her creation. This capacity to process and compartmentalize subjective impressions ultimately constitutes the crucial difference between Bernard and Rhoda. Rhoda, who “cannot write” (*Waves* 21), is desperately “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 into the next” (*Waves* 130). Unable to put the disparate parts of her subjective reality together—as Bernard does through “summing up” and as Woolf does through the very process of writing *The Waves*—she has no recourse to defend herself against the pain of these shocks, and her unidirectional flight away from the real ultimately results in her suicide. But Bernard, who oscillates in his affinity toward the world of phrases and ideas and the world of the concrete, made up of “bare things, this coffee-cup, this knife, this fork, things in themselves” (*Waves* 295), is able to take refuge from abstract in the real, from the real in the abstract. His life is made “tolerable” because he, like Woolf, can exorcise the reality that fascinates and torments, “the reality within oneself as well as the external reality” (Guiguet 62): “We are creators,” Bernard says, who “stride not into chaos, but into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illumed and everlasting road” (*Waves* 146).

In the decade following the publication of *The Waves*, the outbreak of the second world war and the looming threat of apocalyptic ruin posed a serious test for Woolf’s faith in fiction’s consolatory reach. By her own admission, Woolf was not a “patriot” in the typical sense of the word. E. M. Forster would later say of her—perhaps unjustly, given the cultural import of her criticism—that “improving the world she would not consider, on the ground that the world is

man-made, and that she, a woman, had no responsibility for the mess” (*Virginia Woolf* 9).

Forster is referring to the philosophy Woolf articulates in *Three Guineas* (1938), in which she locates the “egg of the very same worm” of fascism in the patriarchal ‘atmosphere’ pervading and shaping every aspect of her country. Noting that it falls to women to “fight that insect, secretly and without arms,” she asks “should we not help her to crush him in our own country before we ask her to help us crush him abroad?” (*Three Guineas* 53). But in the twilight of the 1930s, as Woolf wrote her final novel, *Between the Acts*, the question was no longer how to prevent war—for war had arrived—but “what would war mean? Darkness, strain: I suppose conceivably death” (*AWD* 291). Maintaining that “any idea is more real than any amount of war misery” (*AWD* 306), Woolf finds a small consolation in her creative faculties. Her writing—which had previously alleviated the pain of everyday existence by combining the “severed parts” of Woolf’s individual, subjective reality—is now “the only contribution one can make” (*AWD* 306). And so, with *Between the Acts*, Woolf casts her net wider, tentatively employing her writing’s conciliatory capabilities for a greater good; “this little pitter patter of ideas is my wiff of shot in the cause of freedom. So I tell myself. Thus bolstering up a figment—a phantom: recovering that sense of something pressing from outside which consolidates the mist, the non-existent” (*AWD* 306). If *To the Lighthouse* was an elegy for Woolf’s parents and *The Waves* was an autobiographical “portrait of a mind thinking,” Woolf’s final novel *Between the Acts* might be read as a preemptive elegy for a version of English culture she perceived to be on the edge of extinction, an attempt to preserve both the mythology and the everyday idiosyncrasies of “Britannia” by giving it life in words. For if Woolf could not “improve the world” in the sense that E.M. Forster spoke of, she could at least re-create a “figment” of it in language, conjuring

“from the mist something stark, something formidable and enduring” (Woolf, “Life and the Novelist” 131).

A pastiche of the traditional English country house novel, *Between the Acts* spans a single June day in 1939 and centers on a remote English village’s annual pageant. We can see the bones of the completed novel, which was published posthumously in 1941, in a sketch Woolf makes in April of 1938: “‘I’ rejected: ‘We’ substituted: to whom at the end there shall be an invocation? ‘We’ . . . the composed of many things . . . we all life, all art, all waifs and strays—a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole—the present state of my mind?” (*AWD* 279, ellipses in original). As with *The Waves*, Woolf set out with the intention to work across and between genre, stitching together “dialogue: and poetry: and prose; all quite distinct” (*AWD* 275). But unlike *The Waves*, where the six discordant voices eventually coalesce in the encompassing “I” of Bernard’s final soliloquy, the “We” in *Between the Acts* remains dispersed throughout. Suffused with snippets of “talk,” music, nursery rhymes, quotations from English literature, and reports from contemporaneous newspapers—“history in the raw” (*Three Guineas* 7)—the novel seems to grow increasingly entropic as it progresses; as Alex Zwerdling notes, the “forces of dispersal are shown to be steadily in the ascendant and moving with the power of historical inevitability” (*Virginia Woolf and the Real World* 320). To pull these waifs and strays—“the present state of my mind”—into a unified whole, Woolf creates yet another authorial surrogate: the swarthy theatre director Miss La Trobe. While La Trobe’s depiction is largely parodic and her dissimulation is far less romantic than the veiled “Eos’s”—she hides behind trees and squats in the bushes to avoid attention—her analogical imagination alone is capable of loosely organizing “the unstable, chaotic materials of the self and its history” (DiBattista 206) through the village’s annual pageant.



Although Miss La Trobe's pageant constantly verges on chaos and incoherence in its portrayals of English "history," she briefly succeeds in consoling her audience by evoking the integral essence of human emotion which endures beneath the superficial changes wrought by time. In the early stages of writing *Between the Acts*, Woolf records "trying to anchor my mind on Greek. Rather successful" (*AWD* 307). And indeed, the village captured in these pages of closely mirrors the Greek villages of yore that Woolf imagined in her 1925 essay "On Not Knowing Greek," pastoral microcosms where "life has cut the same grooves for centuries; customs have arisen; legends have attached themselves to hill-tops and solitary trees, and the village has its histories, its festivals, and its rivalries" (*Collected Essays Vol I* 2). Life has cut grooves in the village around Pointz Hall, both literally (the land bears "scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough" (*BtA* 4)) and metaphorically: Figgis's Guide Book—written over a century before the pageant takes place—"still told the truth. 1833 was true in 1939" (*BtA* 52), and "had Figgis been present to call roll, villagers, ladies, and gentlemen alike would have called "*Adsum*; I'm here in place of my grandfather or great grandfather" (*BtA* 75). Like the village, La Trobe's pageant has roots in Woolf's conception of the Greek tradition. Just as Sophocles's "Queens and Princesses were out of doors, with the bees buzzing past them, shadows crossing them, and the wind taking their draperies" ("Greek" 3), La Trobe's "Queen Elizabeth—Eliza Clark, licensed to sell tobacco" (*BtA* 83) must contend with similar distractions throughout her performance, struggling to "steady the ruffle which threatened to blow away" (*BtA* 85). According to Woolf, the savvy Greek poet who hoped to circumvent the obstacles nature threw at him would write something emphatic and familiar, and "naturally would choose one of those legends, like our Tristram and Iseult, which are known to everyone in outline, so that a great fund of emotion is ready prepared,

but can be stressed in a new place by each new poet” (“Greek” 3). Drawing characters from English historical and literary lore, creating allegorical figures like “Reason” and “England” which are outlines in themselves, La Trobe briefly triumphs over the mishaps created by the wind, the failures of illusion (we can never forget that Queen Elizabeth is really Eliza Clark), and the incoherence overcoming the performance as “all together bawled, and so loud that it was difficult to make out what they were saying” (*BtA* 90). For it does not matter what they’re saying. The “plot was only there to beget emotion” (90), and having already primed her audience, La Trobe succeeds in producing something of a revelation: “Love. Hate. Peace. Three emotions made the ply of human life” (*BtA* 92). For this society teetering on the brink of war, the subjective experience of “Peace” transcends the specific political and militaristic conditions that constitute peacetime or wartime, offering consolation in its purity, in its integrity. The ageless intensity of emotion found in Greek literature is, Woolf suggests, what causes modern readers to return again and again to the classics, especially in times of upheaval; their heroes are “even more aware than we are of a ruthless fate. There is a sadness at the back of life which they do not attempt to mitigate. Entirely aware of their own standing in the shadow, and yet alive to every tremor and gleam of existence, there they endure, and it is to the Greeks that we turn when we are sick of the vagueness, of the confusion, of Christianity and its consolations, of our own age” (“Greek” 13).

The “ruthless fate” plaguing *Between the Acts* is nothing less than the approaching war’s potential to obliterate all of society and humanity, to create mass extinction. Like the ancient Greeks, the younger generation in *Between the Acts* are entirely aware of their standing in the shadow, for “the future shadowed their present, like the sun coming through the many-veined transparent vine leaf; a criss-cross of lines making no pattern” (*BtA* 114). Devoid of pattern or

sense, the future is simultaneously unforgettable and utterly unimaginable. In September of 1939, on the morning that Woolf experienced her first air raid warning, she records her despondent sense that “all meaning has run out of everything” (*AWD* 305) and “all the blood has been let out of common life” (*AWD* 306), as if the war—terrible in its incoherence, its abstraction—is sapping reality itself of its color and vitality. Mirroring Woolf’s premonition in June of 1940 that “we pour to the edge of a precipice . . . And then? I can’t conceive that there will be a 27<sup>th</sup> June 1941” (*AWD* 325), Isa’s apocalyptic refrain toward the end of the novel becomes “this year, last year, next year, never,” as if this year might be *the* last year, and next year might come never. Living, as they are, beneath the terrifyingly abstract shadow of war, the characters in *Between the Acts* strike a more ambivalent attitude toward artistic representationalism and abstraction than characters in *The Waves* and *To the Lighthouse*. The tension between these two modes is encapsulated in the two paintings that hang, side by side, in the dining room of Pointz Hall. One is a portrait of an “ancestor,” a “talk producer” whose likeness evokes canonical history, patriarchal authority, and quirks of human personality (he thought it was a “damned shame” that the painter left his prized hound Colin out of frame). The other is an abstract “picture” of a lady, a real work of art: “In her yellow robe, leaning, with a pillar to support her, a silver arrow in her hand, and a feather in her hair, she led the eye up, down, from the curve to the straight, through glades of greenery and shades of silver, dun and rose into silence” (*BtA* 36). The progression away from feathers and pillars towards line and color leads the onlooker further and further into a world unadulterated by human influence, a world outside of time or space. But unlike the paintings in the National Gallery that bring Percival back to Bernard or the music that catalyzes Rhoda’s triumphant vision of the oblong the square, this picture produces no such comforting revelation. Instead, it makes the room into “a

shell, singing of what was before time; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the distilled essence of emptiness, silence” (*BtA* 37). This is a world devoid of the human, encapsulating both a prehistoric time before life and a future when inanimate human artifacts—the vase, the house—have survived their makers. And so, the characters are ultimately “delighted” when Mrs. Manresa begins to fill this void with trivial chatter: “now they could follow in her wake and leave the silver and dun shades that led to the heart of silence” (*BtA* 50).

While the characters beat back the lifeless, timeless terror of silence with talk in this moment, elements of prehistory continually surface in the present day of the narrative, providing alternatively grotesque and comforting evidence of life’s continuity through the ages. Mrs. Swithin reads about a time when the continent “was all one,” populated by “heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the “iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom presumably [. . .] we descend” (*BtA* 9). In confirmation of this lineage, Bartholomew transforms into a “terrible peaked eyeless monster” (*BtA* 12) by rolling his newspaper—a quintessential symbol of present time—into a grotesque snout, and Giles capitulates to his suppressed bloodthirst through an act of senseless violence, stamping a snake choked with a toad in mouth: “the mass crushed and slithered. The white canvas on his tennis shoes was bloodstained and sticky. But it was action. Action relieved him” (*BtA* 99). But if the continuity of the prehistoric surfacing in the “savagery” of these men condemns and disgusts, it also provides a small consolation in its other expressions: as Gillian Beer notes, “clouds, sky, swallows, pike, sea, earth, appetites, and perceptions figure the simultaneity of prehistory and the present, and yet also sustain the idea of a future” (“Virginia Woolf and Prehistory” 27). While *Between the Acts* marks Woolf’s most extensive exploration of prehistory, her fascination with this topic stretches back to *Mrs. Dalloway*, which includes a disquieting description of a battered

woman who sings of “love which has lasted a million years” (81) opposite Regent’s Park Tube station. This “voice of no age or sex, the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth” is characterized, somewhat disturbingly, by an “absence of all human meaning” (*Dalloway* 80). But precisely because it does not cohere to any established system of meaning, the voice achieves a universality foreign to all established human languages, which evolve alongside the localized social mores of its speakers. It is simply the voice of life itself, flowing up from the “knotted roots of infinite ages” to the paved Marylebone Road of the present, “fertilizing, leaving a damp stain” (*Dalloway* 81) as it goes. The future depends on this allegorical singer’s sustained effort to project noise into silence and dark matter. For when at last she lays “her hoary and immensely aged head on the earth, now become a cinder of ice [. . .] *then the pageant of the universe would be over*” (*Dalloway* 81, emphasis mine).

Throughout the pageant in *Between the Acts*, characters resist the silence of oblivion and assert their humanity—and more specifically, their Englishness—by forcing the abstract into words. This effort manifests most clearly, perhaps, in way that language emerges from music throughout the novel. During one of the intervals, as Isa and William contemplate “the doom of sudden death hanging over us,” music floats through the open greenhouse door: “A.B.C., A.B.C., A.B.C.—someone was practicing scales. C.A.T. C.A.T. C.A.T. . . . Then the separate letters made one word. “Cat.” Other words followed. It was a simple tune, like a nursery rhyme” (*BtA* 114). Letters attach to the music, forcing abstract sound into the realm of the representational by making it signify “Cat,” then “Dog” (*BtA* 117). “Cat” and “Dog” then inspire nursery rhymes that might be used “to help a child” (*BtA* 71), and finally give way to scraps of original poetry, as if tracing the formation of linguistic consciousness from infancy onward. Springing from the music blaring from the gramophone as if of their own accord, rhymes proliferate wildly

throughout the pageant: “the tune changed; snapped; broke; jagged. Fox-trot, was it? Jazz? [. . .] what a cackle, a cacophony! Nothing ended. So abrupt. And corrupt. Such an outrage. Such an insult: And not plain. Very up to date, all the same. What is her game? To disrupt? Jog and trot? Jerk and smirk?” (*BtA* 183). It goes on. In “*Between the Acts: Resisting the End*,” Beer compellingly notes how “access to half-consciousness, communal and individual, is given by the anarchic neatness of rhyme, which pins together the unlike, making the ear the arbiter of significance,” and identifies the rhyming throughout the novel as a “tribute to music which alone, and briefly, can make things whole” (133). I agree that rhyming succeeds in uniting as music does; in the interlude immediately following the Elizabethan age, Mrs. Manresa, Isa, William, and Giles “took up the strain” (*BtA* 96) by passing rhymes between them in dialogue, a rhetorical strategy often employed by Shakespeare to indicate strong inter-personal emotional bonds. I would argue, however, that rhyming in this novel is not simply a “tribute” to music; while music transcends locality, rhyming is rooted in the socially constructed and inherited medium of language, allowing it to unite in a way that is distinctly *English*.

Thus, the patchwork cacophony of *Between the Acts*—made up of English colloquialisms, scraps of poetry and literature, strains of nursery rhymes—reflects Woolf’s singular brand of patriotism, her attempt to place “Britania” beyond the reach of guns and bombs by re-creating a quintessential figment of it in language. For words, as Woolf asserted in her 1937 BBC broadcast “Craftsmanship,” “survive the chops and changes of time longer than any other substance, therefore they are the truest. Buildings fall; even the earth perishes. What was yesterday a cornfield is today a bungalow. But words, if used properly, seem able to live on forever” (*Collected Essays II* 247). Like the audience in *Between the Acts*—captured and fractured at the pageant’s finale by looking-glasses which “darted, flashed, exposed” (*BtA* 184)—the abstract

“truth” that words attempt to catch is “many-sided, and they convey it by being themselves many sided, flashing this way, then that. They mean one thing to one person, another thing to another person; they are unintelligible to one generation, plain as a pikestaff to the next. And it is because of this complexity that they survive” (“Craftsmanship” 251). By taking scraps of English literature and culture out of old contexts and laying them in new configurations throughout the pageant and the text, Woolf gives them new life, allowing them to amass a seemingly infinite variety of significances in their complexity. The panoply of anonymous interpretations emerging from the audience (*BtA* 197-201) dramatize how words mean different things to different people; Woolf even conveys generational discord by placing Mrs. Swithin’s pious optimism against the younger generation’s sense of impending doom. But words only survive so long as they are allowed to remain abstract, untethered from any single meaning; for “when words are pinned down, they fold their wings and die” (“Craftsmanship” 251). Woolf satirizes the attempt to do just that through the Reverend Streatfield’s effort to extract a “message” from the spectacle. Representing “Christianity and its consolations” (“Greek” 13), his tentative assertion that “we are members of one another. Each is part of the whole” (*BtA* 192) may read as a fair distillation of the chaos occurring on and off stage. But his mere ascent to the soap box, his presumption to elevate one interpretation over the rest marks “an intolerable constriction, contraction, and reduction to simplified absurdity (*BtA* 190). For the characters in *Between the Acts*—made entirely of the words Woolf describes in “Craftsmanship”—“hate being lectured about in public. In short, they hate anything that stamps them with one meaning or confines them to one attitude, for it is their nature to change” (“Craftsmanship” 250). Mercifully, “one fact mitigated the horror”: the Reverend’s finger is “stained with tobacco juice” (*BtA* 190). He is just a man, a flawed member of the audience, a “character” among characters; he ultimately lacks the

authority to confine the rest to one attitude. As the audience disperses, the chatter resumes, modulates, and trails into the future, promising “Next time . . . Next time . . .” (*BtA* 201).

Through La Trobe’s epiphanic vision of a next play—and the subsequent realization of that vision in the final pages of the novel—we come to understand darkness and silence not solely as the terrifying harbingers of a lifeless world but as the matter from which new worlds might arise. After the play, as La Trobe seeks “oblivion” at the local bar, “words of one syllable sank down into the mud. She drowsed; she nodded. The mud became fertile. Words rose above the intolerably laden dumb oxen plodding in the mud. Words without meaning—wonderful words” (*BtA* 212). Words, as Woolf suggests in “Craftsmanship,” always trace their origins to such murky recesses of the mind, for “our unconscious is their privacy, our darkness is their light . . . . That pause was made, that veil of darkness was dropped, to tempt words to come together in one of those swift marriages which are perfect images and create everlasting beauty” (251, ellipses in original). Bubbling up from the mud of the unconscious, words combine to give La Trobe her vision. She sees “the high ground at midnight; there the rock; and two scarcely perceptible figures. Suddenly the tree was pelted with starlings. She heard the first words” (*BtA* 212). As if springing directly from La Trobe’s brain, the last page of *Between the Acts* brings this vision to fruition, transforming Isa and Giles into enormous, mythical progenitors framed against a “sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks” (*BtA* 219). The veil of darkness has dropped. Will these figures come together in one of those “swift marriages” that create everlasting beauty? The closing tableau offers a conditional answer. After Isa and Giles have fought, “they would embrace. From that embrace another life *might* be born” (*BtA* 219, emphasis mine).



Woolf's final novel ends as "the curtain rose. They spoke" (*BtA* 219), preventing the reader from attaching any one significance to these last mysterious words and thus allowing them to "live on forever" ("Craftsmanship" 247) in the mind. As readers, as members of the audience, the curtain rising marks our re-emergence into an unfathomable world. Just as Pointz Hall has "lost its shelter," so has the "dwelling place" of the novel; our comforting "sense of something pressing from outside which consolidates the mist, the non-existent" (*AWD* 306) dissipates with the final words. But while the amorphous obscurity of the real is terrifying, Woolf's novels suggest that it is also rich with possibility. If human effort prevails, new worlds might arise from this darkness. We might reveal them. We might create them. And ultimately, this is our triumph; this is our consolation.

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