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**The Luminous Halo:
The Place of Language in *The Waves* and *The Years***

Rachel Luban
Honors Essay
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Advised by David Walker

Virginia Woolf had an abiding interest in what she called “the thing itself.” The phrase appears across her fiction (*To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando*, “A Mark on the Wall”) and her essays (“On Not Knowing Greek,” “George Moore,” *A Room of One’s Own*, “A Sketch of the Past”). What is the thing itself? This concept seems straightforward enough: it is the objective world, if only we could see it, the ahuman landscape Wallace Stevens says “One must have a mind of winter / To regard.”¹ For Woolf, the thing itself has a special connection to language; each time it appears in her work she relates it to words or writing. Perhaps because she is a writer or perhaps just because language is a distinctly human form of communication, she is dedicated to exploring the power of words to communicate the thing itself. Thus, for instance, “By the bold and running use of metaphor [Aeschylus] will amplify and give us, not the thing itself, but the reverberations and reflection which, taken into his mind, the thing has made; close enough to the original to illustrate it, remote enough to heighten, enlarge, and make splendid” (“On Not Knowing Greek” 31). Or in *Orlando*, “Was not writing poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice? So that all this chatter and praise and blame and meeting people who admired one and meeting people who did not admire one was as ill suited as could be to the thing itself—a voice answering a voice” (325). And, famously, in “A Sketch of the Past,” the blow that accompanies moments of being

is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and 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....From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean 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. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven;

¹ I say “ahuman” rather than “inhuman” or “unhuman” to avoid the connotations of the latter words of brutality or the supernatural, which show their submission to the measurements of a human scale. “Ahuman” indicates a world totally estranged from human concerns.

certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. (72)

This passage represents her most detailed and explicit exploration of the thing itself: it is, she confirms, the truth about the world, the “real thing behind appearances.” In this passage, too, are the hallmarks of her understanding of the world: the whole composed of “severed parts”; the buried pattern of interhuman connection; the apprehension (or recreation, or representation) of this connection through words.

But this passage complicates the nature of the thing itself and its relationship to words. The parallelism in the last sentence implies the equivalence of words, music, and the thing itself. But are these items equivalent? Her other writings indicate that words can get “close enough to the original” but always remain outside it. Aeschylus uses metaphor to “illustrat[e]” the thing itself, even “heighte[n]” it, but not actually to reveal it. He offers something between an approximation and an amplification. Lily Briscoe’s experience in *To the Lighthouse* suggests a similar principle. She tries in her painting to capture “something that evade[s] her” (193): “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.” The equivalence in this passage is between phrases and pictures, which the chiasmus of the first four sentences serves to conflate. These beautiful bits of art stand in opposition to the thing itself. The examples of Aeschylus and Lily Briscoe support the common-sense notion that the thing itself belongs not to art or language but to the world, that “phrases” and “visions” can only mediate between this essence and human understanding.

Yet in “A Sketch of the Past” Woolf does not illustrate the thing itself by putting it into words—she “make[s] it real by putting it into words.” Words do not alter but rather help constitute the thing. Whence this contradiction? If the thing is itself “before it has been made

anything,” how can it remain itself after it has been “made...whole”? Perhaps the disparity in these passages is just a matter of timing—she wrote “Sketch” at the end of her career, in 1939—and the two models are irreconcilable. But paradoxes for Woolf are productive forces whose opposing sides must be pushed together at different angles until, like magnets, they attract rather than repel each other. Usually, that is, she finds a path to reconciliation. This particular paradox pits truth against transcendence. As Wallace Stevens recognizes in “The Snow Man,” the thing has no meaning “before it has been made anything”; our attempts to lay hold of the thing itself are futile, for we cannot avoid projecting human meaning onto the world. But if the thing itself is the “truth about...the world,” what sort of meaning can our lives possess? Does this meaning entail falsehood? Or can we transcend the meaningless fragments of our world—can we find a way to make the thing itself whole without obscuring its true nature?

The passage from “Sketch” suggests that we can. She explores the possibility that “mak[ing] it real” and “mak[ing] it whole” can coincide, and the power of “putting it into words” to achieve this harmony, in two of her late works. This exploration, though present in all her novels, finds its fullest expression in the odd couple of *The Waves* and *The Years*. Her seventh and eighth of nine novels, the two look so different as to be nearly opposite; but the gulf between them belies their shared concerns. The two seem to conform to a dichotomy various critics have identified using various terms. On one side of this dichotomy lie vision, impressionism, transcendence, and, the theory goes, *The Waves*; on the other, fact, realism, fragmentation, and *The Years*.² In this scheme “mak[ing] it whole” and “mak[ing] it real” are incompatible, as the

² Woolf used but never defined “fact” and “vision,” a task Alice van Buren Kelley takes up in her analysis of this duality in Woolf’s writing. “The factual world is, most simply,” she says, “the world of solid objects...[It] is also the world of the intellect that perceives the isolation of men and objects and attempts to find order, using only the tools of objective reason” (3-4). On the other hand, “in the world of vision, physical objects are not bounded, but instead transcend themselves to take on universal significance. Identity in the world of vision is unity, merging, a combining of all things” (4).

whole belongs to the former side and the real belongs to the latter. Thus the thing itself cannot be made whole—with words or otherwise—because transcendence stands in opposition to the truth about the world.

But the dichotomy falls apart under inspection. *The Waves* unfolds in whole and transcendent language but ultimately rejects the power of language and asserts the importance of the thing itself. In other words, it does not refute Woolf's sometimes-expressed notion that the thing itself lies outside of language. *The Years*, taking up where *The Waves* leaves off, emerges from linguistic failure and shows thing itself in all its meagerness. By eschewing the method of the earlier novel and putting language in its place, however, it offers the possibility of real transcendence. This transcendence is quite different from the beautiful but false integrity of *The Waves*. It is a fractured transcendence, a fragmented whole—the thing itself woven into a grand and unifying pattern that sometimes, briefly, words can grasp.

The Unlikely Kin

How different are the two books? *The Waves*, at least formally, is her most intimate, subjective book, what might be called the clearest example of the “novel of vision”; *The Years*, as many critics have noted (usually with distaste), deals much more with exteriority, apparently embodying the “novel of fact.” The disparity between the consecutive (and late) books has proved confusing for readers and critics. (*Night and Day*, Woolf's second novel and the target of criticisms similar to those of *The Years*, is easy to dismiss as the immature work of a writer still finding her feet.) Woolf is known for her chameleonic narrative voice, one that inhabits her characters at will. She spurned the “appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner,” which she called “false, unreal, merely conventional” (*Diary* 28 November

1928, 209). She wanted instead to trace the contours of subjective experience, a project Susan Dick describes as rooted in one of “Woolf’s firmest assumptions about how the realist novel needed to be reformed” (“Literary Realism” 50).

The Waves follows naturally from this assumption: each chapter comprises the internal soliloquies of six characters, preceded by an “interlude” (Woolf’s word) describing a richly symbolic landscape over the course of a day. The ten chapters follow the soliloquists from childhood to old age. Exteriority is virtually nonexistent—the closest the book gets to objectivity is in the descriptions of the landscape in the interludes, but these too include evaluations like “the sun burnt uncompromising, undeniable” and “fear was in [the birds’] song, and apprehension of pain, and joy to be snatched quickly now at this instant” (148, 73). “Thus, in almost every respect,” says James Naremore, “*The Waves* represents the ultimate refinement of Virginia Woolf’s so-called subjective novels” (175). The soliloquies themselves represent a strange and subjective kind of language. Although Woolf presents them as literal speech, enclosing them in quotation marks and attributing them with the word “said,” it quickly becomes clear that no one actually utters or hears them. Naremore shows convincingly (if doubt existed) that the form of *The Waves* lacks verisimilitude—that whatever truth it expresses is not a naturalistic one. He points out that the elegance, structure, and self-consciousness of the narratives rule out all familiar points on the continuum between speech and stream of consciousness (154, 160-64). The characters seem to narrate their lives in real time, yet with a distance from themselves that is absent in life. So the child Bernard says, “But when we sit together, close... we melt into each other with phrases. We are edged with mist. We make an unsubstantial territory” (16). Clearly these are not the words of a child—but nor are they the retrospective narrations of an adult, as they are spoken in the present tense and betray no knowledge of the future. They also

demonstrate an impossible self-consciousness. Later, for instance, Bernard says of the social hierarchy at school, “But I am unaware of these profound distinctions,” thereby betraying an awareness of the very thing of which he claims ignorance (49). If the soliloquies are neither direct reports of experience nor, exactly, mediated vocalizations of consciousness, the speakers cannot be identical with the characters. Rather they are what Naremore describes as out-of-body “spokesmen” for their living selves, “ghostly representatives of their personalities” (164). The strangeness of the soliloquies establishes them as a sort of alternate-universe form of expression in which language is liberated from its worldly baggage.

If *The Waves* is the natural, even inevitable, conclusion of Woolf’s progression toward exploring internal experience, *The Years* seems like an aberration. As Avrom Fleishman says, “A suspicion lingers about this fiction” (172). It is loudly absent from most studies of her major novels; those books that do discuss it usually address all her novels, and many of those agree that its quality and importance do not equal that of *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves* (a list that some critics extend to include *Orlando* and *Between the Acts*). Fleishman speaks of “the impression that *The Years* is not an authentic product of the Woolfian imagination” (172). After the internal submergence of *The Waves*, the subsequent book looks jarringly external, even realist: it looks like the factual side of the dichotomy. Its form resembles that of a family saga, following the Pargiters from 1880 to the “present day” (presumably the mid-1930s). The scope balloons from seven characters in *The Waves* (including the silent but central Percival) to dozens. *The Years* gives voice even to such incidental characters as the couple Sara Pargiter observes at the party next door (137). The book also includes historical detail absent from its predecessor: the death of Parnell and King Edward, air raids and the end of World War I. Considering her position on the “appalling narrative business of the realist,” there is a suspicious quantity of

“getting on from lunch to dinner” here. Indeed, Woolf conceived *The Years* as her novel of fact. She wrote as she embarked on the novel, “What has happened of course is that abstaining from the novel of fact all these years...I find myself infinitely delighting in facts for a change, & in possession of quantities beyond counting”; she admitted to feeling “the tug of vision” but resolved to resist it (*Diary* 2 Nov 1932, 129). The apparent departure of vision explains the novel’s mixed critical reception. T. E. Apter writes that “the conviction with which this failure of imagination is presented accounts for the inferior quality of *The Years*” (133).

The linguistic differences between the two novels are profound, too. The soliloquies in *The Waves* look even stranger next to the dialogue of *The Years*. Where the speakers in the former novel deliver long, smooth, complete pronouncements—Bernard’s peroration runs sixty pages—the characters in the latter novel can barely finish a sentence without being interrupted or losing their place. Where the soliloquists possess an uncanny self-awareness, the Pargiters can articulate only the vaguest shape of their internal lives, forever losing the imminent revelation. The first scene, when “Colonel Pargiter shut[s] his mouth on the thing he might have said,” introduces the sort of thwarted moment that pervades the book (5). And where the soliloquies (and *The Waves* as a whole) feel orderly and cyclical, the scraps of speech (and *The Years* as a whole) feel uneven and erratic. The worldly baggage from which the soliloquies are liberated weighs heavy on the speech in the later book.

Yet *The Years* is no *Forsyte Saga*. Its realism has sharp limits; it cannot justly be called her “novel of fact.” Certainly it contains a “torrent of fact,” but as Woolf wrote she came to see her project as giving “the whole of present society—nothing less: facts, as well as the vision. And to combine them both. I mean, *The Waves* going on simultaneously with *Night & Day*” (*Diary* 19 Dec 1932, 133; 25 Apr 1933, 151-52). Her intention was to erode the dichotomy, not

to explore its other half. The hallmarks of Woolf's writing are not absent from *The Years*.

Although Alice van Buren Kelley and Josephine O'Brien Schaefer characterize the language and the portrayal of life in the book as ugly, this assessment is not wholly true (Kelley 202, Schaefer 143). The examples Kelley cites—the “pouched and heavy” face of the dying Rose Pargiter, the eczematous dog of Abel Pargiter's mistress—exist alongside examples of familiar Woolfian poetry and epiphany (21, 8). Kitty's visit to her country home may be the most easily discernible of the admittedly rare revelatory moments: she “looked over the billowing land that went rising and falling, away and away, until somewhere far off it reached the sea.... A deep murmur sang in her ears—the land itself, singing to itself, a chorus, alone.... Time had ceased” (278). Here are the beautiful imagery, pulsing rhythm (“rising and falling, away and away”), paradox (“a chorus, alone”), and subjective view of time characteristic of Woolf's writing—and uncharacteristic of traditional realism. Vision and impressionism, not fact and realism, dominate this passage.

Still other, more significant qualities distinguish *The Years* from the novel of fact. It is a family chronicle, insofar as it is, primarily in form; the incidents it depicts are hardly the most important in the characters' lives. After Rose Pargiter's death in 1880, all the deaths occur between chapters. We never see marriages or courtships, the birth of children or transcontinental journeys. Only in the abrupt transformation of Kitty to Lady Lasswade, in the materialization of Maggie's children, in Eleanor's travel-tanned skin, do we glimpse these momentous events. And identifying a climax is difficult—Kitty's time-stopping moment may be the closest thing, yet its significance to the novel as a whole is not readily clear; coming midway through the book, it seems to have no bearing on the rest of the Pargiters. And indeed Kitty Lasswade, no longer a Pargiter in name, is not one of the book's central characters. What propels *The Years*, then, if not the weight of the events it depicts or the traditional dramatic structure of buildup, climax, and

denouement? It is a force much stranger than that of a realist novel, perhaps stranger even than that of *The Waves*. It is an underlying pattern, composed of accumulated repetitions, fragments of sound, transferences of feeling—the roar of the machine that Bernard hears in *The Waves*, the permeating traffic, church bells, birdsongs, cut-off sentences, street cries, poems.

While numerous critics have noted this pattern, few have expounded its implications. This unifying force as much as anything else indicates that *The Years* does not revert to an old form but creates a new one, does not represent a regression to a more traditional novel but “break[s] the mould made by *The Waves*” (*Diary* 28 July 1934, 233).³ The pattern is more significant and mysterious—even mystical—than the book’s detractors allow. The “failure of imagination” Apter condemns may apply to the characters, but there is another imagination, another consciousness, present alongside them. The suggestion of a superhuman (or at least extrahuman) consciousness smacks of God—but “certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.” Yet while the words and the music that bind together *The Years* and constitute the book’s vibrant imagination may break the mold of *The Waves*, they have their lineage in the earlier book. *The Waves* provides the seeds from which *The Years* grows: it paves the way for the pattern of sounds in *The Years*, both by its conclusion that language is inadequate to apprehend the thing itself and by its own inability to illustrate the consequences of this conclusion.

Narrative and its Discontents: *The Waves*

The most salient manifestation of language in *The Waves* is not poetry or street cries, as

³ She began *The Years* as an “essay-novel” (posthumously published as *The Pargiters*, Woolf’s first working title) with interpolated commentary on the workings of the fiction. The book’s development is not central to this paper, as I am concerned with the novel she ultimately published; Charles G. Hoffman’s article “Virginia Woolf’s Manuscript Revisions of *The Years*” provides information on the edits.

in *The Years*, but narrative. The centrality of narrative, that linguistic form that connects events into a seamless body, accords with the conventional view of *The Waves* as the novel of vision. The form of the book imbues all the characters with narrative or authorial power. No account of events exists but theirs; the only figure resembling the omniscient narrator of *The Years* is the voice of the interludes. But Bernard sits at the top of the pyramid as the kind of master narrator: he is the story-teller, constantly making phrases; he has the first and last word in the book (and the first word in nearly every chapter); perhaps most important, the last chapter, which “sum[s] up,” belongs to him alone (238). Naremore characterizes Bernard as “a man trying to stave off a death he partly longs for by making lovely rhythmical phrases” (176). Bernard sees language as a weapon to fight chaos and disorder. He makes sense of the world by “carry[ing] a notebook—a fat book with many pages, methodically lettered,” in which he “shall enter [his] phrases” (36). “If I could measure things with compasses I would,” he says, “but since my only measure is a phrase, I make phrases” (277). When his measurements succeed, he feels he has “despatched the enemy for a moment” (270).

Narrative is not the only way to order the world in *The Waves*. Comparing Bernard’s method to those of the other characters can help clarify its place in the book. The six characters, while they are not completely schematic, do possess a kind of symmetry. Three are men, three women, and each half represents a continuum of participation in or withdrawal from society. Bernard and Jinny enjoy and require the company of other people (Bernard for making stories, Jinny for the thrill of the “great society of bodies” [63]); Neville and Susan hover on the threshold of society and solitude (Neville withdrawing into academia, Susan preferring the natural rhythms of the pastoral, both desiring the company of one person); Louis and Rhoda feel perpetually attacked by the world, isolated and even annihilated (Louis responds by striving to

assimilate, becoming a businessman, while Rhoda, always wishing to disappear, eventually kills herself). Each character uses different methods of ordering his or her life. Bernard's narrative impulse takes various forms: phrase-making, alphabetizing (as in his notebook), storytelling (which differs from phrase-making in its emphasis on sequence, "a wandering thread, lightly joining one thing to another" [49]), self-biographizing, letter-writing. Neville understands his life through poetry; he wants to "step firmly on the well-laid sentences" of Virgil and Lucretius (32). But he feels keenly that not all things are (or should be) susceptible to the narrative treatment Bernard gives them, and protests that "nothing should be named lest by doing so we change it" (51, 81). Louis, the most fixated on order of all the characters, organizes in a distinctly mathematical fashion. Attracted to conformity, to unity ("I note the simultaneity of their movements with delight"), he himself feels shut out of the mainstream (47). To cope he becomes a (rather literally) calculating observer. He says of the people he watches in an eating-shop, "That is the mean; that is the average" (93). (Perhaps he intuits the connection between "order" and "ordinary" just as he implicitly links the two senses of the word "average"; his soliloquy in the eating-shop addresses both connections.) Neville describes Louis as "adding us up like insignificant items in some grand total which he is for ever pursuing, in his office. And one day taking a fine pen and dipping it in red ink, the addition will be complete; our total will be known; but it will not be enough" (92). Despite this arithmetic approach to life, words remain Louis's medium for ordering. As a schoolboy he laments the "clamour" and "despair" of childhood, and says the landscape and the ring of seated boys "hint at some other order, and better, which makes a reason everlastingly. This I see for a second, and shall try tonight to fix in words, to forge in a ring of steel" (40). As an adult he harbors the same hope: "Let us suppose that I make reason of it all—one poem on a page, and then die" (202). What he desires—reason, order—are aspects of

the Woolfian transcendence I described earlier; they recall Mrs. Ramsay's sonnet, "beautiful and reasonable, clear and complete." Yet lacking the poetic power he desires, all he can do is "reduce you to order" (95).

Both order and (perhaps correspondingly) language seem less important for the female characters, who think more in terms of the physical world.⁴ Jinny detests the divisions night and sleep impose; she likes the solidity of daylight and her body ("I feel my body harden" at dawn [54-55]). Naturally, then, she thinks about order only in physical terms: "I bind my hair with a white ribbon," she says, so that it will "curl round my neck, perfectly in its place. Not a hair shall be untidy" (43). Susan also resists the dictates of time, but in a different fashion and for different reasons. She hates the artificial regimentation of the school, "all these restrictions that wrinkle and shrivel—hours and order and discipline, and being here and there exactly at the right moment" (53). She counts each day just so she can tear it off and screw it into a ball (40, 53). Yet she does not resent order per se—rather she prefers the natural rhythms of farm life, the cyclical order of the pastoral. In her fantasy this life excludes speech (54). Rhoda, like Louis, sees the "fissures" in the world and particularly in time (64). But unlike him she lacks the solace of mathematical organization, for numbers and clocks have no meaning for her (21). She also cannot order with words, which have the power to assault her (56). Rhoda's insurmountable problem is that she "cannot make one moment merge in the next," and so experiences them as "all violent, all separate" (130). This separateness constitutes chaos rather than order. And the only way she can stave off this chaos—for the dreams into which she escapes offer her only the

⁴ This duality is perhaps the best evidence for Naremore's claim that Woolf divides the world into the masculine, ego-asserting, and active on the one hand, and the feminine, unifying, and passive on the other (245). Yet even within this most artificially structured set of characters, the dichotomy breaks down: Jinny may in some senses be passive, for instance, but she certainly asserts her ego; Susan actively pursues the life she desires; Louis wants to subvert his ego to the "mean."

feeblest protection—is to attach herself to something physically hard to draw herself “back into [her] body” (64, 27).

Yet narrative holds a special place among these varied ways of apprehending life. Its primacy partly derives from the phenomena I described earlier: even the characters who are not storytellers in life become storytellers by virtue of the novel’s form; Bernard’s centrality to the book makes narrative central by extension. But narrative’s most important feature is its ability to make a whole of fragments. “I must open the little trap-door,” Bernard says as he prepares to tell a story, “and let out these linked phrases in which I run together whatever happens so that instead of incoherence there is perceived a wandering thread, lightly joining one thing to another” (49). Louis and Rhoda both lack this power to weave moments together. For Louis the smallest shock “breaks...the thread”; he cannot “reduce” the world “to one line capable of linking all in one” (218-19). Thus he resorts to his grand summation of human life to achieve continuity. Rhoda has no thread even to break, seeing each moment as a tiger leaping (64, 105-07, 124-26, 130). The obstruction of a puddle is enough to defeat her (“Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell”), and presumably her powerlessness to access narrative continuity proves her ultimate defeat, causing her suicide (64). It is no coincidence that for Bernard identity is “robust” (257, 262). Where Rhoda cannot hold onto identity, he cannot hold off identity: “Yet behold, it returns. One cannot extinguish that persistent smell. It steals in through some crack in the structure—one’s identity” (115). Bernard’s triumphant assertion that “we are creators” who “stride not into chaos, but into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illuminated and everlasting road,” applies equally to the world and to the self (146). This assertion illustrates several important aspects of his understanding of the world: that it can be ordered; that doing so

entails “force” and “subjugat[ion]”; that this order brings light, continuity, and permanence. His understanding, which clearly is not universal, is bound up in narrative.

And while this understanding makes Bernard unusually resilient, it comes with its share of defects. For all his fondness, even his real need, for stories and phrases, he becomes increasingly aware of the flaws of narrative. The crescendo of attention to these flaws complicates the notion of *The Waves* as the novel of vision and transcendence; narrative supplies the foundation for its transcendence, and this foundation crumbles before our eyes. Its chief flaws appear to contradict each other: narrative is both too mathematical, succumbing to logic and sequence, and too poetic, succumbing to romance and symbolism. But both of these flaws come down to an inability to deliver the thing itself. First let us examine each problem on its own. We have seen already that the arithmetic approach to life is consistent with the linguistic: Louis, the great tallier, wants to impose order with words. This compatibility points to a latent connection between number and narrative. In his essay on *The Winter's Tale* Stanley Cavell notes the “saturation or shadowing of language by the economic, or the computational,” which “one might say...has to do with the thought that the very purpose of language is to communicate, to inform, which is to say, to tell” (201). Number and narrative (or computation and communication) share a notable body of words: tell; statement; reckon; figure; evaluate; sum up; count, account, recount. The double usage of these words suggests that aspect of narrative that joins, that sequences, that adds thing to thing in a grand total—Bernard’s “thread,” his “linked phrases” measuring in lieu of a compass. Elsewhere he describes his philosophy as “always accumulating, welling up moment by moment” (218). Bernard’s “sum[ming] up” in the final chapter, then, is not unlike Louis’s great addition (238). The phrase-maker eventually identifies the inadequacy of the mathematical counting of life, wondering, “but what is the use of painfully

elaborating these consecutive sentences when what one needs is nothing consecutive but a bark, a groan?" (251). The linearity narrative imposes becomes cold and numerical. Like any organizing principle, narrative "subjugates," as Bernard himself says. It reduces to order.

Strange, then, that it suffers from the opposite problem as well: narrative also softens and blurs the truth it attempts to communicate. Bernard is expert at running moments together into a whole, but blurring by nature obscures the items it runs together. He says of the "biographic style" in which he occasionally describes his life, "it does to tack together torn bits of stuff, stuff with raw edges" (259). The biographic style only amplifies a preexisting feature of all narrative: in tacking together these bits it rounds out their edges; in unifying them it makes a whole of things torn. It also alters "raw" things by making them symbolic. The tension between symbol and reality is central to Bernard's struggle with narrative. Amid one of these struggles he recalls one of his first revelations, a moment from the first chapter that the reader also recalls as the beginning of young Bernard's phrase-making. After following a distraught Susan, he distracts her by inventing stories about the woods around them, which he recasts as the mystical Elvedon. In his retelling of this event in the last chapter, however, he remembers how the impulse to tell stories removed him from his own experience:

That I observed even in the midst of my anguish when, twisting her pocket-handkerchief, Susan cried, "I hate, I love." "A worthless servant," I observed, "laughs upstairs in the attic," and that little piece of dramatisation shows how incompletely we are merged in our own experiences. On the outskirts of every agony sits some observant fellow who points; who whispers as he whispered to me that summer morning in the house where the corn comes up to the window, "The willow grows on the turf by the river. The gardeners sweep with great brooms and the lady sits writing." Thus he directed me to that which is beyond and outside our own predicament; to that which is symbolic, and thus perhaps permanent, if there is any permanence in our sleeping, eating, breathing, so animal, so spiritual and tumultuous lives. (248-49)

Here he identifies the paradox of symbols: they offer permanence (“perhaps”), yet change the very thing they immortalize. Life is “tumultuous”—unstable, passing—but symbols, by transcending “our own predicament,” escape the upheavals of time. (Thus Mrs. Ramsay senses, in her triumphant dinner of Boeuf en Daube, something “immune from change,” the pieces of meat seeming to stand in for the moments that “part[ake] of eternity” [*Lighthouse* 105].) But the repeated verb here is “observe.” Symbols may grant a kind of permanence through narrative, but they also alter experience itself. This alteration does not much matter in the childhood moment above, but it becomes painfully important when the stakes are higher, as upon Percival’s death. “So the sincerity of the moment passed,” Bernard recalls, “so it became symbolical; and that I could not stand. Let us commit any blasphemy of laughter and criticism rather than exude this lily-sweet glue; and cover him with phrases” (265). Phrases and symbols—natural allies, it seems, which together constitute narrative—obscure the truth here, the thing itself Woolf cares so much about. And this loss is the price of the “glue” which both obscures and holds life together, as Bernard well knows, makes one moment adhere to the next.

These two problems with narrative seem to be opposed: its mathematical side imposes false divisions while its literary side eliminates real ones. But both emerge from the common impulse to “make reason of it all,” the human impulse to make the thing itself meaningful and thus comprehensible. In one of many instances of the latter phenomenon, the loss of distinctions, Bernard says, “But observe how dots and dashes are beginning, as I walk, to run themselves into continuous lines, how things are losing the bald, the separate identity that they had as I walked up those steps” (188). This sentence appears to illustrate the difference between the smoothing function of narrative (erasing distinction) and the successive ordering described above (imposing distinction). But shortly thereafter he says, “I am moving too, am becoming involved in the

general sequences when one thing follows another and it seems inevitable that the tree should come, then the telegraph-pole, then the break in the hedge.” Here the mathematical (which Naremore would classify as masculine) and the poetic (which he would classify as feminine) become two sides of the same coin. This is the entrenched order that Louis describes. They both join one thing to the next in an essentially linear fashion. And they both fail to capture the thing itself, as Bernard sees when he declares his freedom from “lies and phrases” (294). Putting the thing into words does not make it real, it mutates it. Telling changes the tale.

Bernard’s dissatisfaction with narrative comes to encompass smaller and smaller units, until finally his objection concerns words themselves and even the sounds that create them. *The Waves* suggests a linguistic continuum that in addition to narrative includes (in approximately descending order) sentences, lines of poetry, phrases, words, and syllables or sounds. These units accord different levels of order, as when Bernard recognizes the usefulness of the biographic “phrases laid like Roman roads across the tumult of our lives...though one may be humming any nonsense under one’s breath—‘Hark, hark, the dogs do bark,’ ‘Come away, come away, death,’ ‘Let me not to the marriage of true minds,’ and so on” (259).⁵ The biographic sentences have a rigidity and reason the “nonsense” lacks. But Bernard finds fault with each of the various linguistic units he employs: he begins by trying to imagine a world without stories, for “none of them are true,” and these stories are in turn composed of mathematically “consecutive sentences” composed of the “lies and phrases” he is forever recording (238). Even everyday words become too tyrannical in their coherency. “I begin to long for some little inarticulate language such as lovers use,” Bernard says near the beginning of his peroration, “broken words, inarticulate words” (238). Later on he discards even broken words, when, dismissing “consecutive

⁵ Curiously, this “nonsense” ranges from nursery rhyme to Shakespearean sonnet. All, however, are fragments, removed from the illumination of context. So even the sonnet, Mrs. Ramsay’s exemplar of wholeness and reason in *To the Lighthouse*, becomes nonsense when fractured (121).

sentences,” he says that “what one needs is nothing consecutive but a bark, a groan” (251). And by the end of his speech, which is really an extended complaint against language, syllables, too, do not suffice. As he considers the inadequacy of names (for death and love, for instance), he reiterates, “I need a little language such as lovers use, words of one syllable such as children speak when they...pick up some scrap of bright wool, a feather, or a shred of chintz” (295). His focus here is on fragmentation, the “scrap[s]” and “shred[s]” that language comprises. He goes on to repeat his wish for “a howl; a cry....I need no words. Nothing neat....None of those resonances and lovely echoes that break and chime from nerve to nerve in our breasts making wild music, false phrases. I have done with phrases.” And so finally he moves from fragmentation to obliteration, declaring, “How much better is silence...things in themselves, myself being myself.” Here at last is the thing itself; it emerges only after the total breakdown of language and the establishment of silence. Miraculously, paradoxically, he thinks that he “could bring [his] sentence to a close in a hush of complete silence” (255).

Bernard cannot obey his own conclusions, however. He, perhaps more than anyone, depends on language. Although he begins his “sum[ming] up” by dismissing stories as false, he frames the speech as a children’s story. “But meanwhile, while we eat,” he says to his silent companion, “let us turn over these scenes as children turn over the pages of a picture-book and the nurse says, pointing: ‘That’s a cow. That’s a boat.’ Let us turn over the pages, and I will add, for your amusement, a comment in the margin” (239).⁶ Then he starts his story, “In the beginning,” in the manner of that grandest of narratives. Percival’s death marks the first of only two times Bernard longs for silence, in order to understand “what death has done to [his] world”

⁶ By “meanwhile” he seems to mean “until we have found a replacement for stories.” He repeats this concession to narrative elsewhere, when he begins to lose hold of the purpose of stories. He says, for instance, “But to return....Let us pretend that we can make out a plain and logical story, so that when one matter is despatched—love for instance—we go on, in an orderly manner, to the next” (251).

(153). It also marks the appearance of what becomes known (at least to Bernard and Neville) as the “machine.” Observing the proceedings of everyday life as he walks around London, Bernard notes, “The machine then works; I note the rhythm, the throb, but as a thing in which I have no part, since [Percival] sees it no longer” (153). The machine denotes the endless grind of life going on, then, but the *rhythm* of its cogs and wheels is a crucial element. Bernard, craving silence, finds himself outside the noisy machine. And he soon discovers that “one cannot live outside the machine for more perhaps than half an hour” (154). He feels himself sucked back into the great procession, for “the sequence returns; one thing leads to another—the usual order” (155). He feels himself sucked back into narrative.

As he resists this order, however, he feels the “loneliness” and “desolation” that come from “sights that...cannot be imparted” (156). He suddenly inhabits Rhoda’s perspective; just as she experiences the succession of moments as “all violent, all separate,” he says that we have “no conclusions, only violent sensations, each separate. Nothing that has been said meets our case” (157). Yet these temporal divisions do not come naturally to Bernard, and he becomes “exhausted with the strain and the long, long time—twenty-five minutes, half an hour—that [he has] held [himself] alone outside the machine” (158). He wants life, he wants talk, he wants “the usual sounds of tradesmen calling”; he wants noise, words, narrative (158). Even if he wished to be Rhoda, who sees without the illusion of narrative unity, he could not. Recall that his identity is “persistent” where hers is flimsy. The loss of words corresponds with the loss of identity. The second time he longs for silence, in his final speech, represents crisis: he loses both narrative and selfhood. “For one day,” he recalls, “...the rhythm stopped: the rhymes and the hummings, the nonsense and the poetry” (283). The machine grinds to a halt. The futility of narrative suddenly becomes real to him, and he feels the impossibility of “keep[ing] coherency,” which is “too vast

an undertaking” (283). He remembers how in this silence he became “a man without a self” (285). But of course his very recollection of the crisis foretells its end; he has already incorporated the loss of narrative into a story. The gears start turning again, identity and words return, “there is a gradual coming together, running into one, acceleration and unification” (294). Although Bernard proclaims that his “book, stuffed with phrases, has dropped to the floor,” silence can never gain more than provisional dominance (294).

This conclusion comes dangerously close to platitude. Much criticism of *The Waves* reaches the same conclusion—broadly, that narrative is inadequate but necessary. This problem is the paradox so many critics have identified (rightly), “the paradox,” Susan Dick says, “which informs Bernard’s entire narrative,” not to mention Woolf’s: “Life is not globe, shapely and whole; to believe that it is, is to believe in an illusion. Yet without the illusion of coherency and order, we cannot act or speak” (“I Remembered” 48). More specifically, as I have tried to demonstrate, the fundamental problem with narrative is that its very nature (being made of words) prevents it from reaching its goal (communicating a truth beyond words). Again, this presentation of the problem does not alter the conception of the thing itself as a truth beyond words—that is, both outside of language and out of its reach. Yet is there nothing beyond this paradox? Here we have the unbridgeable chasm between signifier and signified, an age-old problem if not an age-old description of it. The problem is not trivial, but merely offering it up for inspection is; why delineate so painstakingly language’s failure to capture the thing itself? Woolf does more than delineate it, however. She looks beyond the paradox for a solution.

The Waves suggests (but does not demonstrate) a couple of possibilities. Rhoda’s approach does not constitute a solution, for although she lives without the support of the machine, she does not really *survive* without it. Jinny may offer a solution to the falsity of

narrative in the world of the body. “She made the willows dance,” Bernard says, “but not with illusion; for”—like Stevens’s snow man—“she saw nothing that was not there” (252). Jinny does not imbue things with symbolism—objects are merely objects; bodies, bodies. She seems closer to grasping the thing itself (or, as Kelley puts it, she belongs to the world of fact). Jinny’s place as Bernard’s counterpart further suggests her approach as an alternative to his. Perhaps even more compelling, however, is the solution that Bernard himself proposes. While he occasionally longs for silence, he more frequently longs for music. He thinks of music when trying and again failing to describe love and death, as when he says that “no lullaby has ever occurred to [him] capable of singing [Percival] to rest” (243). This regret implies that such a lullaby might exist if only he could find it. “Here again there should be music,” he says later, “. . . a painful, guttural, visceral, also soaring, lark-like, peeling song to replace these flagging, foolish transcripts—how much too deliberate! how much too reasonable!—which attempt to describe the flying moment of first love” (250).

What music seems to offer, besides its “visceral” and “soaring” emotion, is a more honest whole than narrative, a gestalt that stories can only simulate. In one of his complaints against sentences, Bernard says, “How impossible to order [faces] rightly; to detach one separately, or to give the effect of the whole—again like music” (256). He describes music as a whole that allows for fragmentation and as a force that can “order . . . rightly,” as the very things narrative has failed to be. Elicia Clements argues convincingly that Woolf wrote *The Waves* in imitation of music, structuring it like “Beethoven’s late String Quartet in B-flat Major, Opus 130, including the piece’s original finale, the *Grosse Fuge*, Opus 133,” which Woolf listened to throughout writing the book (161). Although this imitation holds true formally, it is, as Bernard says, transcription: Woolf wrote *The Waves* in words, and words are part of the problem. The real answer comes not

in *The Waves* but in *The Years*. Kelley writes that the theories Woolf developed in *The Waves* “could be articulated, but not demonstrated” (200).⁷ The new order that the former book suggests, *The Years* manifests. Language becomes something quite different in her penultimate novel, something more physical, more musical, and altogether stranger.

A Pattern, Like Music: *The Years*

The Waves sees the systematic breakdown of language—Bernard, master narrator, splits narrative into smaller and smaller pieces and rejects each one until only silence and music remain. The obvious irony here, true of all books concerned with the failures of language, is that the novel uses language to express these failures. The less obvious, and in my view more important, irony is that language in *The Waves* defies the book’s conclusions: it is impossibly whole and regular. While Bernard seeks to show the fragmented nature of language, the soliloquies arrive in assembly-line perfection and consistency.⁸ While he laments the impotence of words, words never endure the test of real life, and if anything seem remarkably powerful; the soliloquists carry their thoughts to completion without either internal or external interruption. The closest they come to dialogue bears little resemblance to real conversation (see, for example, Bernard and Neville’s alternating speeches at the beginning of the third chapter [76-92]). The otherworldly space Woolf carves out for the “spokesmen” allows them ample leeway to develop their thoughts. And although Bernard decries symbols, *The Waves* overflows with them. The interludes are purely symbolic; Kelley identifies the sun, the waves, the birds in the garden, and

⁷ Kelley refers specifically to the theory “that both fact and vision are essential to a comprehensive understanding of life,” a theory Woolf could only suggest in *The Waves* because of the novel’s devotion to vision. The statement holds true for this discussion, however, which is related to Kelley’s.

⁸ The order of the soliloquies is not perfectly predictable, but it does follow a kind of logic: once the men speak, the women will speak, and vice-versa; everyone gets a turn in nearly every chapter; after only Neville, Bernard, and Rhoda speak on the news of Percival’s death, Louis, Jinny, and Susan get the first words in the subsequent chapter; and so forth.

the house as the interludes' important figures, but the interchapters provides still others (Neville's tree, Rhoda's fountain), and by its close the book is ponderous with symbolic meaning (Kelley 147-48).

The realist streak of *The Years*, on the other hand, finds its strongest manifestation in the pressures it applies to language. For one thing, narrative, that most whole of linguistic creations, lacks the centrality in this book that it has in *The Waves*. While both books are themselves narratives, the form of *The Years* also undermines narrative in a way its predecessor does not. *The Waves* follows a clear arc, the course of the sun over a day and the course of group of friends over a lifetime. Moreover, the friends spend much of the book telling stories—some more recognizable as stories than others, but all relating their lives in some way. The action of *The Years* is far more staggered. The novel loosely follows Eleanor, the closest thing to a protagonist, but several generations and many characters shuffle in and out, contending for primacy. The narrative hardly qualifies as an arc, diluted and decentralized as it is.⁹ Despite the superficial similarities of the time sequences in the novels (a number of installments marking the progression of about half a century), *The Years* is far more erratic and irregular than *The Waves*. For the characters, too, narrative is diluted and decentralized, fragmented and obscured. If Bernard wants to bring his sentence to a close, the Pargiters have “all settled in to add another sentence to the story that was just ending, or in the middle, or about to begin” (261). Yet story, it seems, cannot gain a foothold in the world of *The Years*. When Sara asks her mother to tell her about an old suitor, Lady Pargiter, interrupted by her husband, promises to tell “the true story one of these days” (143). But by the next year she is dead. The tale seems poised to rise again

⁹ Kelley's excellent chapter on *The Years* in *The Novels of Virginia Woolf: Fact and Vision* provides a thorough discussion of the irregular order of the novel (202).

when Eleanor and Martin recall Lady Pargiter's life the following year. "There was a story—," Eleanor begins. "But here the electric bell rang sharply. She stopped" (153).

These interruptions do not invade only storytelling; they characterize the novel, pervading nearly all speech and thought. Speech itself cannot gain a foothold in this world. Nicholas prepares to give a speech on two occasions, in 1917 and the "present day," each thwarted (292-93, 415-20). Conversations suffer interruption from air raids, ringing telephones, practicing musicians, and (most frequently) people outside the conversation. Even without external intrusion, the characters trail off, unable to hold onto their thoughts or unwilling to say what they mean.¹⁰ While they often conceal their thoughts out of fear, the concealment is not always deliberate. Sara, wondering about the nature of thought and the self, "stopped. She did not know what she meant. She was talking nonsense" (140). On the verge of revelation, the thought "slip[s]"; just completing a sentence is a triumph (352, 369). And even when someone does say what she means, does manage to finish the sentence, she is often misinterpreted. The novel is peppered with comically trivial obstacles to communication whose presence only highlights the immensity of the broader miscommunication. In the midst of a conversation full of misfires and mix-ups, for instance, Maggie speaks "indistinctly because her mouth [is] full of pins" (173). Success can look equally trivial: Peggy asks her uncle, "'How's the man who cut his toes off with the hatchet?' ...speaking the words exactly as she thought them" (351). At last comes the rare identity between speech and thought. Yet not only is the thought inconsequential, her uncle entirely misunderstands her. "'Hacket? Hacket?' he repeated. He looked puzzled. Then understanding dawned" (352). But alas, it does not. "'Oh, the Hackets!' he said. 'Dear old Peter Hacket—yes.'"

¹⁰ Compare the incidence of ellipses in *The Years* and *The Waves: The Years*, with only two-thirds more words, has 233 to the earlier book's 16 (VLSA Concordance).

This is the world in which the Pargiters must try to live and speak. Like *The Waves*, *The Years* presents the many problems with language—but as axiom, not as conclusion. Bernard has to divide and conquer, to break narrative down into increasingly small elements and reject each one. While I have described the latter novel using a similar kind of progression (stories fail, sentences fail, even words, like “hatchet,” fail), this progression does not inhere in the structure of *The Years* as it does in that of the former novel. Linguistic failure is the condition rather than the culmination of *The Years*. In the final pages of his closing speech, Bernard declares that his “book, stuffed with phrases, has dropped to the floor.” For the Pargiters, the book is forever dropping to the floor—quite literally (“the book fell on the floor,” for example [137; also 213, 313, 347]). The other problems Bernard enumerates occur and recur here, too. The characters actually count; Eleanor actually keeps mathematical accounts of life (19). “One, two, three, four” becomes an incantation, tallying bombs or sugar cubes, spoonfuls of tea or, most frequently, church bells (4, 40, 41, 151, 243, 247, 285, 291, 362). The Pargiters also lend objects symbolic power, although the book itself may deny them that power. One frequently recurring object, a walrus with a brush on its back, appears almost doggedly insignificant, particularly next to the grand natural symbols of *The Waves*. But Eleanor, thinking that “that solid object might survive them all,” refuses to throw it away “because it [is] part of other things—her mother for example....” (91). In *The Years*, however, number and symbol exist apart from narrative; the book having fallen to the floor, these features of narrative stand free from their context. Is this then the world Bernard imagines, liberated from stories, with only “little inarticulate language”? If so, this other order does not look, as Louis imagines, better. The thing itself is meaningless indeed—stripped of its sentimental association with Eleanor’s mother, the thing is just an “ink-

corroded walrus” (426). But what hope can we extract from the solutions Bernard proposes, silence and music?

As in *The Waves*, silence offers only an extremely limited solution. After North returns to England from many years on a farm in Africa, he thinks to himself, “silence and solitude...that’s the only element in which the mind is free now” (424). He also muses as he assesses various aspects of his cousin Sara—her voice, her face, her attitude—“but then there’s something true—in the silence perhaps. But it was not silent” (342). Herein lies the problem. Sounds bombard them: “the Jew thudding in the bathroom,” earlier a trombonist and a singer (342). The world is not silent, for though books can “exist silently, with dignity, by themselves, for themselves,” people cannot (276). This description of Kitty’s books continues the association Bernard makes between silence and the thing itself. The problem with this option in *The Waves* was that Bernard could not sustain silence; *The Years* shows conclusively that the world cannot sustain it either.

For the world is full of noise. Music fares better than silence, as it pervades the book: the machine roars loud and long in *The Years*. The clamor of the machine, the preponderance of music and music-like scraps, is one of the novel’s most distinctive features. Replacing the chorus of *The Waves* is “a confused babble of sound” in which “sometimes a single word or a laugh [rises] above the rest” (133). The babble forms a vast pattern of street cries, poems, birdsong, music, and nursery rhyme undergirding the book’s otherwise jagged shape. Many of these scraps, rising above the rest, appear several times. Kelley’s comprehensive account of the sonic repetitions deserves to be quoted at length:

So in this opening paragraph as pigeons “crooned over and over again the lullaby that was always interrupted” and “In the quieter streets musicians doled out their frail and for the most part melancholy pipe of sound, which was echoed, or parodied, here in the trees of Hyde Park, here in St. James’s by the twitter of sparrows...” (3), the music begins. The pigeons’ lullaby, “Take two coos, Taffy. Take two coos. Tak...” (75), appears again and again throughout the novel. Kitty

hears it (75, 433), Eleanor hears it (75, 115, 176, 433), Edward and Martin hear it (433), Sara hears it (187), until it takes on a special meaning of vision interrupted and rebuilt. Street music, too, resounds as *The Years* unfolds: a barrel organ plays (91, 225), peddlers sing of “Old chairs and baskets to mend” (307) or “Any old iron to sell, any old iron” (91, 162), until “the rhythm persisted; but the words were almost rubbed out” (162). Then a trombone strikes up a tune (316), a woman practices her scales (316), and waltzes form a circle of sound “from Hammersmith the Shoreditch” “like a serpent that swallowed its own tail...” (129), making music into the symbol of eternity. (207)

To this list of public noises I add the repetition of private, and thus perhaps less easily explainable, fragments. “Hammer, hammer, hammer” appears on three different occasions (67-69, 183-85, 190), “my wasted youth” (135, 168), “the King of Spain’s daughter came to visit me” (148, 225-26), and “all men loved me when I was young” on two (288, 421). Sometimes one person murmurs the same line to herself years apart; sometimes different people pick up the phrase. The repetitions do not only include the musical, however. Kelley also surveys the repeated actions (such as counting) and objects (such as the walrus) of the novel (208). She characterizes this repetition as evidence of vision, the quality of transcendence, unity, and universality (4). “In the midst of this constant rhythm of repetition—repeated symbols, actions, scenes, and sounds—the characters often lose their sense of definition and melt for a moment into a universal whole, thereby demonstrating the visionary power of pattern” (208). The pattern certainly wields some kind of power, but the nature and extent of this power constitute the stakes of *The Years*, particularly as a response to *The Waves*. *The Waves* did not reveal a way to reconcile the thing itself with the “visionary power” to forge a “universal whole”; the wholeness language offered was false. Does the dissonant music playing behind *The Years* offer an alternative to language? Does the machine, its narrative aspects stripped away, provide the “other order, and better, which makes a reason everlastingly”?

It may. Not only does music flourish, but language itself survives foremost as a kind of music. Just as the machine seems to persist even as narrative dissipates, speech persists even as meaning dissipates. It becomes something much more musical and physical than the speech of *The Waves*. This transformation does not spring solely from the realist property of *The Years* that its speech is actually uttered; the distinction between speech and other sound also softens. The iron grip language had on the earlier book relaxes here. As Lady Pargiter talks to her daughters in 1907, waltz music floats in through the window and lends its inflection to her speech: “Her words were stressed so that they seemed to rise and fall. She emphasised the rhythm still further by tapping with her fingers on Sally’s bare arm” (142). After a couple sentences she “stop[s] in the middle of her sentence” and the music takes over completely. In another example so typical it merges with dozens of others, Edward

listened; there was no sound in particular; but, as he stood looking out, the building hummed with life. There was a sudden roar of laughter; then the tinkle of a piano; then a nondescript clatter and chatter—of china partly; then again the sound of rain falling, and the gutters chuckling and burbling as they sucked up the water. (50-51)

The background often hums, roars, tinkles, clatters, or chuckles with “no sound in particular” but many sounds at once; this is the “confused babble” of the machine. This particular babble does not include speech (at least explicitly), but Edward hears several of these sounds in oddly human terms: the building “hum[s],” the china “chatter[s],” the gutters “chuckl[e].” None of these words applies exclusively to humans, of course, but the “life” of the building takes on an anthropomorphic tinge. Speech looks like music, other sounds like speech.

When humans do speak, the sound and rhythm of their words often equals or overpowers the words’ meaning. (Where in *The Waves* words had only meaning and no real sound, in *The Years* words are fractured into these components.) When North assesses a story Sara tells him,

for instance, he contrasts her “actual words,” from which he takes one meaning, with “the excitement with which she had spoken,” which creates “another semblance” he must try to integrate with the first (342). The manner frequently seems to trump the content, as in young Sara’s imitation of her father: “Emptied of all meaning, she had got the rhythm of his words exactly” (127). Moments like these emphasize that voice is physical and thus allied with other physical qualities of communication (gesture, expression) which often disagree with words. It seems obvious that we know people by more than just their words, and sometimes—often, at least in *The Years*—by elements that contradict their words. In a typical example, North thinks that “it was [his sister Peggy’s] face that was true; not her words,” that “it was what she meant that was true...her feeling, not her words” (422). Where before the words were “emptied of all meaning,” here meaning actually resides in the physical—her face conveys “what she meant.”¹¹

The physical holds a curious power; the machine succeeds where language fails. People cannot complete their thoughts and sentences, much less their stories and speeches. But narrative resurfaces in objects, thoughts are woven into sound, books express people’s emotions. Music often seems like a puppeteer invisibly coercing the movements of a conversation, as with Lady Pargiter and the waltz. Sara wonders if thought begins “in the feet” (133). When North recites a poem, “the words going out into the room [seem] like actual presences, hard and independent,” which interact with Sara (339). “A newspaper placard, with large black letters, seem[s] to finish [Eleanor’s] sentence for her” (337). Kitty’s mother’s “embroidery serve[s] to weave the after-dinner talk into a pleasant harmony” (79). This last instance most clearly illustrates the complex workings of speech, objects, narrative, and music. It shows the kind of surrogate narrative the physical world provides: Mrs. Malone “weave[s]” the words, as if weaving a tale, invoking the

¹¹ North could, of course, be wrong; his assessment does not automatically coincide with Woolf’s. But the book supports his evaluation—Peggy has not at all said what she meant. Glimpsing wholeness and hope, the fragment she breaks off comes out as despair (390). Somehow North sees the other world she has tried to communicate (422).

centuries-old connection between weaving and writing (or text and textile). She does so literally, physically, with her embroidery; and this generation also transforms “talk” into “harmony,” words into music. As Neville says, “the machine works” (*Waves* 227). Though material itself, it also has the power to elevate the material: babbling speech becomes harmonious pattern. While *The Years* continues to put language in its place, the possibility emerges that mere “after-dinner talk” can become part of something transcendent without the dishonesty of narrative. Objects and sounds form something like a collective unconscious that takes over where the human mind founders, and that the human mind can somehow access. Thus do the characters repeat each other’s words and actions without actually having shared them with each other. They draw on the pattern. And the pattern, or the machine, or the collective unconscious, does allow them a communication beyond words. So when Eleanor hears the wind-obscured voice of her brother Martin, though she cannot hear his words, “from the sound of his voice it [comes] over her that he must have a great many love affairs” (155). And indeed we do hear about his affairs (243-44). So when North asks Sara to tear up a letter, Eleanor, thinking of Sara, seems to honor his request by proxy pages later in a different room (330). For, as Nicholas says in his first meeting with Eleanor (one of the book’s few encouraging examples of communication), “We all think the same things; only we do not say them” (282).

Still, there is little that looks like transcendence in *The Years*. What sort of pattern is this that defies narrative, even defies language? Eleanor apprehends it at the final reunion:

And suddenly it seemed to Eleanor that it had all happened before....She knew exactly what he was going to say. He had said it before, in the restaurant. He is going to say, She is like a ball on the top of a fishmonger’s fountain. As she thought it, he said it. Does everything then come over again a little differently? she thought. If so, is there a pattern; a theme, recurring, like music; half-remembered, half-foreseen?...a gigantic pattern, momentarily perceptible? The thought gave her extreme pleasure: that there was a pattern. But who makes it? Who thinks it? Her mind slipped. She could not finish her thought.

“Nicholas...” she said. She wanted him to finish it; to take her thought and carry it out into the open unbroken; to make it whole, beautiful, entire. (369)

This moment captures the contours of the limited transcendence the pattern offers. The sense of continuity and underlying order gives her “extreme pleasure”; it connects the past and the future (“half-remembered, half-foreseen”); sometimes we can glimpse this order as we could “glimpse” the transcendent treasures of “divine goodness” in *To the Lighthouse* (127-28). Yet the moment ends and understanding slips away. Eleanor wants Nicholas to help her make the glimpse transcendent—“whole, beautiful, entire”—but he cannot. He cannot pluck the thing itself from the pattern and “carry it out into the open unbroken”: he cannot turn it into the thing made whole. For the thing itself is not whole, beautiful, and entire, at least to human eyes, but fractured, ugly, and partial. When Bernard thinks of “things in themselves,” he thinks of “bare things, this coffee-cup, this knife, this fork” (295).¹² Only the addition of human meaning makes things whole and thus supplies transcendence, but of course human meaning alters the thing itself, compromising this transcendence.

Unless, that is, the pattern provides its own kind of transcendence. Woolf plays with various models of meaning and interpretation in *The Years*, finally settling on one that allows a loophole in this intractable problem. Not coincidentally, these models concern the location of meaning in a text. Saint Augustine expounded a model of interpretation that has proved powerful and enduring. He repeatedly compared the text of the Bible to a grain of barley, whose “secrets are to be removed as kernels from the husk as nourishment for charity” (90). The kernel, the figurative meaning, is “shut up in a covering of carnal sacraments,” the “husk” which “adher[es] tenaciously” (quoted in Koelb 22). Clayton Koelb traces the development of this model to apply to secular reading as well as sacred; Giovanni Boccaccio argued that “every fiction (*fabula* in

¹² Tableware has persistent symbolic power for Woolf. Knives and forks, like Mondays and Tuesdays, frequently stand for “bare things” or the everyday.

Boccaccio's terminology) has the double structure of husk-and-kernel ascribed to the word of God" (Koelb 22). Taken to its logical conclusion—and it was—this structure generates a host of sexist conclusions. Retrieving the kernel, being a good reader, requires penetration (Koelb 22). Thus the carnal text is female, and the successful interpreter can only be male; to access the kernel of meaning he must strip the seductive word "of its stylistic and fictional blandishments" (Dinshaw 22-24). Woolf uses her deceptively self-deprecating narrative voice to satirize this model in *A Room of One's Own*.¹³ Professing intimidation in the face of the abundance of books on the female sex at the British Museum, she says, "I should need claws of steel and a beak of brass even to penetrate the husk. How shall I ever find the grains of truth embedded in all this mass of paper? I asked myself" (34). She goes on, of course, to show how little truth the mass of paper contains.

The Augustinian model lost authority, Koelb explains, with European Romanticism. Focusing particularly on German Romanticists like Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich Schiller, he shows how for them "the analogy between poems (and other works of art) and the human organism supplants the trope of husk-and kernel because...it fits the facts better" (23). For in reading we do not remove the husk—the letter remains "intact" (23). Schiller says that language does not cover meaning; "he prizes instead a discourse in which 'the signifier disappears completely in the thing signified'" (24). Ideally, the spirit of the text envelopes the body rather than the reverse. Yet here the model runs into a problem. The body "is necessary to convey the spirit from one mind to another," and so the spirit can never wholly erase it (24).

Woolf toys with these models but ultimately rejects them for yet another. In *The Years* the template applies not only to reading, but to all language and even to humans; where

¹³ I am grateful to Jennifer Bryan for bringing my attention to the constellation of the Augustinian model of interpretation, feminist analysis of this model (Carolyn Dinshaw's in particular), and Woolf's own response to it in her class on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Romanticism likens texts to people, this novel, placing language alongside the rest of the world, likens people to texts. Eleanor in particular thinks about meaning in a distinctly Augustinian way. She considers the Bible in exactly the manner he describes. “God is love, The kingdom of Heaven is within us, sayings like that, she thought, turning over the pages, what did they mean? The actual words were very beautiful. But who said them—when?” (154). She distinguishes, just as he does, between the attractive body and the armored spirit. When she tries to read Dante, “the words [do] not give out their full meaning, but [seem] to hold something furled up in the hard shell of the archaic Italian” (213). Her inability to pierce the shell does not come from her sex, however; North has a nearly identical encounter with Latin words that refuse to “give out their meaning” (394). People, too, refuse to give out their meaning: “What, what, what do they mean by it?” North wonders, and often so do we (309). If Woolf endorses the husk-and-kernel model, the world she presents looks unremittingly grim. For no one, even insightful Nicholas or visionary Sara, seems to possess the tools to pluck the kernel from its husk. No one can seize the thing itself. But rather she uses it, as she did in *A Room of One’s Own*, ironically. Both times words withhold their meaning, the words are foreign or translated. These moments belong to the class of those simple linguistic problems that only accentuate the more complex ones; it seems natural that *these* words should be opaque, but what about all the other words? In dismissing the Augustinian model Woolf does not substitute the Romantic, however. Both maintain a clear dichotomy between the body and the meaning of the text and both prize the meaning over the body. Woolf again complicates this dichotomy.

Body and soul, exterior and interior, are sometimes hard to separate in *The Years*. The separation does not disappear altogether: as I discussed above, language does seem fractured into its physical and metaphysical components. But more precisely, the physical informs the

metaphysical; like the “little negligible words” that Edward notices on a second reading of his Greek, it “reveal[s] shades of meaning, which alte[r] the meaning” found in the soul alone (50). Clothes have the power to transform their wearers. When North notices that Sara “had changed,” the phrase applies to more than just her attire: “she was in evening dress; there was something odd about her—perhaps it was the effect of the evening dress estranging her?” (349). Distinguishing whether something takes place in art or out of it, in real life, also becomes difficult. North wonders if a sound is “in the poem [he is reciting] or outside of it”; deciding it is inside, he continues his recitation only to realize he has erred (339). Where outside the poem sound is a thing itself, inside it is a thing made whole with human meaning. Suddenly the two become less easy to differentiate, and meaning, therefore, less easy to locate. And of course, the suggestion that some sort of meaning resides in the physical, as when North equates Peggy’s face with “what she meant” and deems it truer than her words, defies both models of meaning.

Woolf, in her fashion, employs a more amorphous model. James Naremore aptly uses this quotation from *Heart of Darkness* for the epigraph to one of his chapters:

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (quoted in Naremore 5)

Woolf herself uses strikingly similar language in her essay “Modern Fiction”: “Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (212). These descriptions, Conrad’s in particular, explicitly upend the Augustinian template. But they go beyond a mere reversal, beyond showing that truth resides in the shell rather than the kernel; they obliterate the shell and replace it with the infinitely more mystical haze or halo. What is the significance of this

difference? Above all, a shell is solid and a haze porous. A haze comprises millions of suspended particles only loosely arranged into a whole—in other words, it is a fragmented whole. The reference to the halo in “Modern Fiction” comes just after Woolf describes the impressions the mind receives as “an incessant shower of innumerable atoms” (212). Surely these atoms, then, compose the luminous halo into which the mind shapes experience.

The fragmented whole, the halo of atoms, goes a long way toward explaining the pattern of *The Years*. Even the physiognomy of the book reflects this shape: it differs from all her other novels except *Jacob’s Room* in its fragmentation, formed from myriad pieces separated by white space. The whole book is a halo of atoms, a rough collection of years and Pargiters, little events and little words. Eleanor considers atoms explicitly on two occasions. Once she examines a cup (a “thing in itself,” according to Bernard):

But what vast gaps there were, what blank spaces...in her knowledge!...Take this cup for instance; she held it out in front of her. What was it made of? Atoms? And what were atoms, and how did they stick together? The smooth hard surface of the china with its red flowers seemed to her for a second a marvellous mystery. (155)

The mystery that atoms can form a cup is also the mystery that sounds can form a word, that words can form a narrative, or that moments can form a life. It is the mystery, too, that the thing itself (discrete, fractured) can be part of a whole. The “smooth hard surface” of the cup resembles the hard shell of Augustine’s text. But this surface, Woolf recognizes, is nothing but atoms; like Eleanor’s knowledge, the apparently monolithic solid contains “blank spaces.” The atomized halo lit from within thus models what Woolf has already shown about narrative: that it runs torn bits of stuff together into one whole. The second time Eleanor thinks of atoms comes in the last scene, in one of her approaches to revelation:

Oughtn’t a life to be something you could handle and produce?—a life of seventy odd years. But I’ve only the present moment, she thought....Millions of things

came back to her. Atoms danced apart and massed themselves. But how did they compose what people called a life? She clenched her hands and felt the hard little coins she was holding. Perhaps there's "I" at the middle of it, she thought; a knot; a centre; and again she saw herself sitting at her table drawing on the blotting-paper, digging little holes from which spokes radiated. (366-67)

Much resides in this passage. Eleanor, like so many of the characters, can apprehend only the atom of the present, not the halo of her whole life. Seeing a gestalt rather than a series of components is a pervasive problem in *The Years*, part and parcel with the loss of narrative. "These little snapshot pictures of people left much to be desired," North thinks, "these little surface pictures that one made, like a fly crawling over a face, and feeling, here's the nose, here's the brow" (317). The whole the pictures or the atoms "compose" is especially difficult to see when that whole is dynamic, as *The Years* shows it to be. The atoms do not stay in place but "danc[e] apart and mas[s] themselves." The book repeatedly describes a "fluctuating" and "watery pattern" (188, 342, 350). Eleanor wonders if these fluctuations cluster around a hard center—something like the Augustinian kernel. But whatever lies at the heart of the halo, it is no knot or kernel. The "hard little coins" Eleanor associates with the nucleus of self later lose their cohesion and roll out onto the floor (392). Moments after, she thinks, "Yes, it was over; it was destroyed...Directly something got together, it broke....And then you have to pick up the pieces, and make something new, something different" (392). It is as if the china cup has been shattered and a porcelain figurine constructed from its pieces.

In this scheme, *The Waves* is the china cup and *The Years* its reconfigured heir. Again, while in *The Waves* Bernard breaks down language into atoms of sound, the wholeness of the novel's language belies this fragmentation. In *The Years* those fragmented sounds are what hold everything together, the atoms of the hard shell of *The Waves* reconstructed into a loose and patchy haze, this time with the holes and "raw edges" still showing. The tragedy of the book,

such as it is, is that the characters sense that their world looks like “a puzzle [that was] solved, and then broken,” yet they find that “the puzzle [is] too difficult...to solve” anew (160, 334). Does the puzzle allow any hope? Or, to return to the question of transcendence, is there any possibility of making something “whole, beautiful, entire” out of the jumble of disconnected pieces?

The answer, it seems, is yes and no. Grasping the shape of the vast pattern may be impossible. As with Eleanor, the closest the characters seem to get is recognizing the existence of the pattern, and perhaps discerning, faintly and for a moment, its outline. But the atoms themselves have power: occasionally these fragments can represent the whole. Koelb describes a Romantic notion that Woolf appears at least partly to share. Schlegel, he says, is

entranced with the idea that a single sign, whether a hieroglyph or a work of fiction, could encompass a vast field of meaning...The images produced by the imagination would be comparable to such ideographs because they express much in a little compass. But they also tease us with a plenitude of significance that lies just outside our limited abilities to read them. (26)

Every moment of near-understanding in *The Years* teases the characters (and the reader) with the illegible significance behind it. Compare this idea with North’s musing as he observes Renny’s forceful “voice” and “gesture,” incongruous with the quotidian matter at hand: “Or was there always, he thought...something that came to the surface, inappropriately, unexpectedly, from the depths of people, and made ordinary actions, ordinary words, expressive of the whole being?” (349). This passage suggests three related but different things: the “ordinary” can express the profound, the exterior can express the “depths,” and the part can express the “whole.” In a book overflowing with the ordinary, exterior, and fragmented, these possibilities may represent the only available route to transcendence. The atom allows oblique access to the “whole, beautiful, entire” halo in which it lies; the thing itself allows oblique access to the thing made whole. After

Eleanor perceives the pattern yet cannot complete her thought, she at least sees “another inch of the pattern”—the fly crawling over the face cannot ever grasp more than the nose or the brow, but it can understand, finally, that the strange terrain is a face (370).

The Schlegelian possibility is essential to a reading of the end of *The Years*. Like *The Waves*, *The Years* ends with the dawn. But the dawn of the later novel looks far more ambiguous than that of its predecessor. In *The Waves* Bernard resolves not to make the dawn symbolic, refusing to “call it dawn” because dawn is “some sort of renewal” (296). But he soon yields to the symbolic reading, proclaiming, “Yes, this is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again,” before resolving to ride against the enemy Death (297). The final pages of *The Years* contain nothing so grand. The caretaker’s children recite, at Martin’s request, an indecipherable, shrieking song to the party of adults, whose efforts at connection and communion have been deflected at every turn. They chant several “harsh” and “hideous” verses that rise and sink “as if they followed a tune” (429-30). “Then they stopped. It seemed to be in the middle of a verse... Nobody knew what to say. There was something horrible in the noise they made. It was so shrill, so discordant, and so meaningless” (430). The children’s cry is emblematic of the equivocal place of language in the book: half speech, half song, interrupted, apparently meaningless. As a conclusion this episode looks grim. Yet Eleanor, in her way, finds some hope in the ugliness.

“But it was...” Eleanor began. She stopped. What was it? As they stood there they had looked so dignified; yet they had made this hideous noise. The contrast between their faces and their voices was astonishing; it was impossible to find one word for the whole. “Beautiful?” she said, with a note of interrogation, turning to Maggie.

“Extraordinarily,” said Maggie.

But Eleanor was not sure that they were thinking of the same thing.
(430-31)

Somehow, as we recite our hideous and meaningless songs, we maintain some kind of dignity. The most revealing element of this passage, however, pertains not to the children's song but to the adults' interpretation of it. Upon first inspection Eleanor's word seems not just inadequate, as so many words are in *The Years*, but wildly incorrect. But to be paradoxical is not to be incorrect, and her word ultimately falls into the former category. "Beautiful" becomes the hieroglyph Schlegel sought, "encompass[ing] a vast field of meaning." Its field is vast indeed: it includes the "contrast between [the children's] faces and their voices"; it includes two people's different and inexpressible feelings; it includes its own opposite, "hideous." All these items represent contradiction or paradox.

But this ambiguity may be the most important feature of our lives. After the children depart a moment from the beginning of the book recurs. Eleanor looks out the window at a taxi that stops two doors down; a young man gets out and pays the driver (434, 18). The only difference in this iteration is that a girl follows him to the door. So everything does "come over again a little differently," and Eleanor seems satisfied that something has been completed. "There," she says, "There!" (434). But what has been completed? Is this manifestation of the pattern anything but inconsequential? The book ends two sentences later: "The sun had risen, and the sky above the houses wore an air of extraordinary beauty, simplicity, and peace" (435). This assertion of transcendence, in the same language Eleanor and Maggie used to describe the chant, seems ironic. But like the word "beautiful," the novel's conclusion remains ambiguous. There is something beautiful about this world which we can reform into something new, which means so many and contrary things at once, whose atoms we can take and reconstruct into fresh objects. Does the children's speech resemble music, implying transcendence? Or does their song resemble speech, implying hopelessness? There is no way to find a definitive answer. We can

never eliminate the possibility of irony from the novel's transcendence, but neither can we eliminate the possibility of transcendence from its irony.

Conclusion: The Profane Halo

So *The Years* finishes the work *The Waves* begins: it finds the "other order, and better" in which the thing itself and transcendence, the "real" and the "whole," can exist together. This novel is not transcription, as Bernard says, because its words belong to the musical, physical world. Language does not engulf it as it does *The Waves*. But does the ambiguous vision of *The Years* really answer Louis's call? What makes this other order better? The problem with *The Waves* is that it occurs in another world. *The Years* imagines a new order in this one. When Eleanor wakes up from her beautiful dream, Renny chastises her for "always talking of the other world" and "not this one" (387). "But I meant this world!" she replies. "I meant, happy in this world—happy with living people" (387). The crucial element of this world, then, is "living people." Like Wallace Stevens, Woolf wants to explore what comes after "the gods [are] dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds" ("Two or Three Ideas," 260). The sort of whole the characters in all Woolf's books envision is vaguely Edenic, an imagined whole from which the world has fallen. Perhaps there is no original whole, however; perhaps our world is inherently fractured, and any whole can only be constructed with human effort. As *The Waves* shows, though, we cannot add up the entire pattern and we cannot smooth things together into one entity—we can only see the whole in parts, in atoms.

Recall Woolf's declaration, "certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself." This pronouncement sounds exultant, but it is actually quite a hard truth to live with. Woolf obviously believes in the power of words and

narrative; presumably she would not be a novelist otherwise. But she shows what a weird and sharply limited power it is. “The possibility of art—and indeed the necessity for it,” Koelb says, explaining Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s position, “arises not out of the expressive richness of language...but out of its poverty and failure” (19). The possibility of transcendence comes not from the beautiful language of *The Waves* but the hobbled language of *The Years*. While Fichte thinks art therefore derives its power from the artist, Woolf democratizes this principle. Language derives its power from its users and the haze they help compose, their occasional ability to tap into the pattern and to imbue their words with a richness the words per se lack, as in “beautiful.” This is no divine power, though. North articulates a feeling many characters have throughout the book—the feeling Eleanor has when she wants Nicholas to complete her thought—that “Thinking alone tied knots in the middle of the forehead” and untying them requires assistance (414). When he attempts to communicate with his sister, “he [feels] again the constriction of a knot in his forehead” and “wishe[s] there were someone, infinitely wise and good, to think for him, to answer for him” (423). God, of course, is the only infinitely wise and good being, but he has dissolved like clouds. Instead of God we get Peggy, or Eleanor, or Nicholas, if we are lucky. Yet “putting it into words,” even though we have only “broken sentences, single words,” sometimes allows us a glimpse of the work of art we form, the halo in which we are atoms (411). And so we all settle in to add another sentence to the story that is just ending, or in the middle, or about to begin.

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