

## Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*: A Novel of "Silence"

Francesco Mulas

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Virginia Woolf reveals the shift in emphasis which accounts for the difference between *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931). She claims that to write well one must recognize "that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women". Whereas in *To the Lighthouse* we see human beings primarily "in their relation to each other", in *The Waves* the emphasis falls upon human beings "in relation to reality"<sup>1</sup>. What Virginia Woolf means by "reality" is symbolized by the sea: it is both the all-One and the Void.

*The Waves*, then, is a novel of "silence" in a much deeper sense of the word than her other two stream-of-consciousness novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. The "outer life" infringes even less than before upon Virginia Woolf's primary subject matter: that which is "eternal", "the spirit we live by, life itself". For instance, there is no dialogue and no injection of the author's comments or descriptions. The lives of the six main characters are suggested entirely through their interior monologues.

Moreover, the poetic and symbolic nature of their soliloquies enables the author to transfer our attention from the inner life to what Virginia Woolf calls the "common life"<sup>2</sup>, that is, the essence of all inner lives. As Jean Guiguet notes in *Virginia Woolf and Her Works*, "...*The Waves* is less an expression of the inner life than an attempt to formulate Being"<sup>3</sup>.

Indeed, *The Waves* is a verbalization of a mystical vision which Virginia Woolf had as she was finishing *To the Lighthouse*. Writing in her diary, she refers to *The Waves* as "that fin in the waste of water which appeared to me over the marshes out of my window at Rodmell" (169). The fin represents a feeling or intuition about reality which cannot be described but rather must be, in her words, "suggested and brought slowly by repeated images before us until it stays, in all its complexity, complete"<sup>4</sup>. It is this mystical awareness of Reality or Being that Virginia Woolf tries to evoke through the lives of the six "characters" in *The Waves*.

Bernard, the most interesting of the six characters, is an aspiring writer who all his life has diligently accumulated phrases in a notebook in the hope that someday he will be able to provide "a meaning for all (his) observations: a line that runs from one to another, a summing up that completes" (83). Like Virginia Woolf's friend, Desmond MacCarthy, Bernard, stimulated by society, begins many stories, but, unable to carry on in solitude, fails to finish them<sup>5</sup>. Unable to find "the true story, the one story to which all his phrases refer", he begins to get tired of stories and neat designs of life on half-sheets of paper: "I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement. I begin to seek some design more in accordance with those moments of humiliation and triumph that come now and then undeniably"<sup>6</sup>. As he grows older, he becomes more and more often a disinterested observer of life. He does not aspire to capture, as the author did in *To the Lighthouse*, what life is like to a few individuals, but the very nature of human existence as epitomized by his own life. However, he finds it difficult to give "the effect of the whole" (182). The whole must include himself as distinct from the others; himself as an embodiment of the people and places that made up his life, himself as defined both by his many selves and the selves he might have been but was not.

This is the vision, but can he transform it into a work of art? His psychological response to the challenge passes through three stages which must be understood in terms of the sea-wave image central to both the form and meaning of the book. The rhythm of his states of mind parallels the rhythm of the waves: despair (the crash), renewal of strength (the calm), desire for confrontation (the re-formation). The despair is often caused by a sense of the Void; the renewal of strength, by a sense of Oneness, the desire for confrontation, by the sense of a Rebirth. His experience, therefore, is archetypal: sometimes he falls into despair (Life is a "dust dance"; all is "mutable, vain") (202); life is disgusting, disorderly (208); phrase are useless, false, "I have done with phrases" (209); sometimes he experiences a renewal of strength (My being is "immeasurably receptive, holding everything, trembling with fullness, yet clear, contained...It lies deep, tideless, immune") (206); and sometimes he courageously prepares himself for the inevitable confrontation ("there is a gradual coming together, running into one, acceleration and unification...I regain the sense of the complexity and the reality and the struggle")(208); "in me too the wave

rises. It swells; it arches its back. I am aware once more of a new desire, something rising beneath me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back" (211). Until the end of the novel, the confrontation is with the machine of life which demands that human beings act and commit themselves in order to survive. Just when Bernard's grasp of life might have enabled him to write the unwritten novel, he is confronted not by Life but by Death. What he leaves undone, however, Virginia Woolf accomplishes; *The Waves* is the book, Bernard might have written. Indeed, Bernard functions very much as Lily Briscoe does in *To the Lighthouse*: he clarifies the aesthetics of the novel in which he appears.

Bernard reminds us of the despairing author (who is spoken of but never seen) in Luigi Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921). This author refuses to struggle further to press his six characters into the frame of the conventional drama. His six created characters are too alive; they refuse to have various aspects of their personality suppressed in order to fit properly into the whole. As it is true of Bernard, his vision of reality has outgrown the known forms and techniques<sup>7</sup>; he, like Bernard, fails to create new methods for representing reality as he sees it. Virginia Woolf and Luigi Pirandello give a fictional embodiment to their own struggle; and while spelling out for their audience the precise nature of their problem, they simultaneously resolve it.

Furthermore, like Pirandello, Virginia Woolf is obsessed with the question of identity. She would sympathize with the Father in Pirandello's play, who refuses to be summed up as the man he was at a particular moment involved in a particular relationship (with his step-daughter in Madame Lapace's "shop"): what one is at one moment often contradicts what one is at another. Virginia Woolf's sensitivity to the complex, ambiguous, contradictory nature of man is similar to the concept of the total reality of an object or set of objects. With this she wants to increase the number of possible perspectives and thus, in that sense, make her characters more lifelike. Bernard, for instance, is a composite of what he seems not only to himself but also to his five friends not just at one particular moment but at many moments throughout his life. We have seen the origin of this approach to character in both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*.

Another aspect of Virginia Woolf's approach (seen also in the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay) is summed up in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. The Manager is speaking to his

Leading Man about his role in a play by Pirandello: "You stand for reason, your wife is instinct. It's a mixing up of the parts, according to which you who act your own part become a puppet of yourself"<sup>8</sup>. In order to depict a human personality in all its ambiguity and complexity, Virginia Woolf uses several characters. Each becomes somewhat more like a puppet than a human being, because each, while remaining credible as an individual, symbolizes one aspect of that personality. Seen in this way, the six characters in *The Waves* are, without contradiction, both many and one at the same time.

Therefore *The Waves* is at once a group biography and both Bernard's and Virginia Woolf's autobiography. It is a group biography in that it simultaneously traces in excerpt form the lives of Bernard, Neville, and Louis, Rhoda, Jinny, and Susan. It is Bernard's autobiography in the sense that, as a writer, the "moments" which he is trying to record and sum up are those which are recorded in the first eight sections of the book and summed up by Bernard in the ninth. His experiences from childhood through middle age are necessarily interlaced with those of his close friends; therefore, his autobiography necessarily envelops the group biography. In another sense, however, Bernard the creative writer may be viewed abstractly as a representation of one element, the most important one, in Virginia Woolf's own personality. In 1929 when *The Waves* was still little more than an "angular shape" in her mind, she comments in her diary: "Autobiography it might be called" (AWD: 142-43). Jean Guiguet specifically identifies Virginia Woolf with her six protagonists:

She is in love with words, like Bernard: in love with books, like Neville: a lover of action, like Louis: like Susan feminine, earthy, nature-loving: like Jinny sensual and sociable; like Rhoda hypersensitive and solitary--must one anticipate and say that like Rhoda she was to kill herself? She is all this, and now one aspect, now another predominates<sup>9</sup>.

However, in a still deeper sense, the six protagonists represent not just aspects of Virginia Woolf's personality, but aspects of the human personality. C. B. Cox, in his book, *The Free Spirit*, describes the six aspects as follows: "the imaginative impulse (Bernard), the desire to impose order upon material things (Louis), delight in personal relationships (Neville), pleasure of the body (Jinny), joy in motherhood (Susan), and the life of solitude (Rhoda)"<sup>10</sup>. This interpretation of *The Waves* clarifies Virginia Woolf's remark on

October 5, 1931 about a review of the book: "Odd, that they (The Times) should praise my characters when I meant to have none" (AWD: 175). Indeed, her aim in this, the least representational of her novels, was to capture what she refers to in *A Room of One's Own* as "the common life which is the real life and not...the little separate lives which we live as individuals" (171).

Virginia Woolf's original vision of *The Waves*, a "fin in the waste of waters", develops into a series of "fins" or waves; thus, the "spatial form" of the novel may be seen as a series of "angular" shapes (AWD: 169,142). So, too, Bernard describes his original vision of his magnum opus in these terms:

Leaning over this parapet I see far out a waste of water. A fin turns. This bare visual impression is unattached to any line of reason, it springs up as one might see the fin of a porpoise on the horizon. Visual impressions often communicate thus briefly statements that we shall in time to come uncover and coax into words (134).

Bernard has difficulties, however, in seizing that fin, for sometimes it is not there: "Nothing, nothing, nothing broke with its fin that leaden waste of waters" (174), and again "No fin breaks the waste of this immeasurable sea" (201), and sometimes it appears ("a fin rose in the wastes of silence") only to disappear ("the fin, the thought, sinks back into the depths")(194). But finally, although somewhat late, he too evokes from his unconscious his vision of the "common life" as symbolized by the angular shape of the waves: "Yes, this is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again" (210-11).

The rhythm of the waves permeates both Bernard's vision of the continuity of life and the thought processes of the six characters in their soliloquies. This undulating movement is particularly obvious in section nine, for here, in contrast to the first eight sections in which the soliloquies of one personality are interwoven with those of several others, we follow only Bernard's stream of consciousness. However, throughout the novel especially Bernard and to some extent the others (Louis, Neville, Jinny, Susan, and Rhoda) alternate between moments characterized by disintegration, chaos, and dissatisfaction (the crash from illusion to reality as one hits the surface of the sea). Here is an example from Bernard's experience:

I, who had been thinking myself so vast, a temple, a church, a whole universe, unconfined and capable of being everywhere...am now nothing but what you see--an elderly man, rather heavy, grey above the

ears, who (I see myself in the glass) leans one elbow on the table, and holds in his left hand a glass of old brandy. That is the blow you have dealt me. I have walked bang into the pillar-box. I reel from side to side. I put my hands to my head. My hat is off--I have dropped my stick. I have made an awful ass of myself and am justly laughed at by any passer-by.

"Lord, how unutterably disgusting life is! What dirty tricks it plays on us, one moment free; the next, this. Here we are among the breadcrumbs and the stained napkins again. That knife is already congealing with grease. Disorder, sordidity and corruption surround us. We have been taking into our mouths the bodies of dead birds. It is with these greasy crumbs, slobbered over napkins, and little corpses that we have to build. Always it begins again; always there is the enemy; eyes meeting ours; fingers twitching ours; the effort waiting. Call the waiter. Pay the bill. We must pull ourselves up out of our chairs. We must find our coats. We must go. Must, must, must--detestable word. Once more, I who had thought myself immune, who had said, 'Now I am rid of all that,' find that the wave has tumbled me over, head over heels, scattering my possessions, leaving me to collect, to assemble, to heap together summon my forces, rise and confront the enemy (207-08).

The rhythm of the waves permeates the novel in still another sense. An intricate network of similarities and differences among the characters exists; however, the over-all movement is between integration (into a group personality through a mystical experience of Oneness) and disintegration (into separate identities). Normally, each character is extremely aware of how different or separate he or she is from the others. Rhoda notes, for instance,

I have no face. Other people have faces; Susan and Jinny have faces; they are here. Their world is the real world. The things they lift are heavy. They say Yes, they say No; whereas I shift and change and am seen through in a second (30-31).

Or Louis thinks upon seeing the five characters:

We differ, it may be too profoundly...for explanation. But let us attempt it. I smoothed my hair when I came in, hoping to look like the rest of you. But I cannot, for I am not single and entire as you are. I have lived a thousand lives already (91).

This sense of being unique and alien to others is usually disturbing; for instance, Louis notes, "They laugh at my neatness, at my Australian accent" (14) and in Neville's presence Bernard feels like

"an untidy, an impulsive human being whose bandanna handkerchief is for ever stained with the grease of crumpets" (60). Sometimes, however, solitude permits them to escape the burden of their uniqueness. When Neville leaves Bernard alone in a room, Bernard comments:

He is gone; I stand here, holding his poem. Between us is this line. But now, how comfortable, how reassuring to feel that alien presence removed, that scrutiny darkened and hooded over! How grateful to draw the blinds, and admit no other presence;...For I am more selves than Neville thinks. We are not simple as our friends would have us to meet their needs (64-65).

It is a sense of oneness, however, not solitude, which actually eliminates the characters' consciousness of their separate identities. There are three major scenes in the novel all of which take place in restaurants. Symbolically speaking, in each scene the separate waves merge again with the sea. In the first two a reunion, both physical and spiritually occurs; in the third, the reunions occur only within Bernard's memory.

Leaving together as children, in the beginning of the book the six have not yet suffered the pain of separation<sup>11</sup>; their personalities are individualized, but they share a common existence. As adolescents, the group is divided according to sex, for they go away to school. Each of the group splits again when as young adults Neville and Bernard go to the university while Louis works in an office and Rhoda and Jinny participate in London social life while Susan returns to the country. The six are first reunited at a farewell dinner for Percival, a friend who is spoken of but never speaks in the novel. His lack of self-consciousness makes him irresistibly attractive. They refer to him as a leader, a hero, and a god<sup>12</sup>. His attitude creates an atmosphere which draws each of them from a conscious to an unconscious state of mind. They then can experience unity and harmony<sup>13</sup>. When he enters the restaurant, Neville thinks, "My heart rises...The reign of chaos is over. He has imposed order. Knives cut again". Bernard observes that under his influence,

we who have been separated by our youth (the oldest is not yet twenty-five), who have sung like eager birds each his own song and tapped with the remorseless and savage egotism of the young our own snails-shells till it cracked...now come nearer; and shuffling closer on our perch in this restaurant where everybody's interests are at variance,

and the incessant passage of traffic chafes us with distractions, and the door opening...sitting together here we love each other and believe in our own endurance (88).

Louis and Neville are similarly sensitive to the reintegration of the group:

"Now let us issue from the darkness of solitude," said Louis.

"Now let us say, brutally and directly, what is in our minds," said Neville. "Our isolation, our preparation, is over. The furtive days of secrecy and hiding, the revelations on staircases, moments of terror and ecstasy" (88-89).

They have come together "to make one thing, not enduring--for what endures?--but seen by many eyes simultaneously. There is a red carnation in that vase. A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven-sided flower, many-petalled, red, puce, purple-shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves--a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution" (91).

Like Mrs. Ramsay, Percival has made of the moment a work of art which they will always remember: Reluctant to abandon the sense of wholeness, Jinny thinks, "Let us hold it for one moment,...this globe whose walls are made of Percival, of youth and beauty, and something so deep sunk within us that we shall perhaps never make this moment out of one man again" (p.104). Under the spell of "the swelling and splendid moment created by us from Percival", Bernard feels,

We have proved, sitting eating, sitting talking, that we can add to the treasury of moments. We are not slaves bound to suffer incessantly unrecorded petty blows on our bent backs. We are not sheep either, following a master. We are creators. We too have made something that will join the innumerable congregations of past time. We too, as we put on our hat and push open the door, stride not into chaos, but put into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illumined and everlasting road (104-05).

Enriched by their moment of harmony, they experience a rebirth, renewed sense of energy.

But the crash of the wave is inevitable. Percival "galloped in India", but only until "his horse tripped" and "he was thrown" (211, 107). Reacting to Percival's untimely and senseless death, Neville says, "The sails of the world have swung round and caught me on the head. ... From this moment I am solitary" (107-08). "I need silence, and to

be alone", says Bernard; "I am alone in an hostile world", says Rhoda (109, 113). They no longer experience oneness but loneliness; their vision of life is no longer feminine but masculine. The wholeness which they felt in the presence of their god (Percival) is shattered by his death. Momentarily, at least, his death had made the threat of the Void a reality.

Thereafter, the more each develops his individual personality and finds satisfaction in his or her own way (for instance, through sex or motherhood or business), the more divided the group is. But as the six protagonists reach middle-age, they begin to question the choices they have made. At this point, therefore, a spiritual reunion again becomes possible. They come together to dine at Hampton Court. Bernard chooses Hampton Court as the site, because he recalls that once Percival had asked him to go there and he had refused (113). As Josephine Schaefer points out, "Now, years later, through the power of memory he and the others bring Percival there. Like the trip in *To the Lighthouse*, this banquet becomes a kind of fulfillment"<sup>14</sup>.

As if compelled by the spirit of Percival, the six again attain a state of unconsciousness and oneness<sup>15</sup>. As Aileen Pippett writes in her biography of Virginia Woolf, Percival represents the "ideal figure, the Whole Man, the Ordinary Man made perfect, the whole-containing, incomprehensible Norm, the great Unifier, the Beloved, made safe by death from time's corruption"<sup>16</sup>. All that he could have been remains intact, sealed by his premature death; he remains whole, silent, god-like. He is like the legendary Sir Percivale "Whom Arthur and his knighthood call'd The Pure"<sup>17</sup>. As the dinner at Hampton Court progresses, the six "characters" gradually experience again the Unity which he represents. Bernard notes:

We have dined well. The fish, the veal cutlets, the wine have blunted the sharp tooth of egotism. Anxiety is at rest. The vainest of us, Louis perhaps, does not care what people think. Neville's tortures are at rest. Let others prosper--that is what he thinks. Susan hears the breathing of all her children safe asleep. Sleep, sleep, she murmurs. Rhoda has rocked her ships to shore. Whether they have foundered, whether they have anchored, she cares no longer. (159)

Implicit in this is the appeal of death as a symbol of eternal rest and absolute silence. Little by little, however, they are called back into Life:

"...we are extinct, lost in the abysses of time, in the darkness".

"Silence falls; silence falls", said Bernard. "But now listen; tick, tick; hoot, hoot; the world has hailed us back to it. I hear for one moment the howling winds of darkness as we passed beyond life. Then tick, tick (the clock); then hoot, hoot (the cars). We are landed; we are on shore; we are sitting, six of us, at a table. It is the memory of my nose that recalls me. I rise; 'Fight', I cry, 'fight!' remembering the shape of my own nose, and strike with this spoon upon this table pugnaciously".

"Oppose ourselves to this illimitable chaos", said Neville, "this formless imbecility. Making love to a nursemaid behind a tree, that soldier is more admirable than all the stars..." (160).

Again, however, they cling to the moment knowing, as Rhoda reminds us, "how short a time silence lasts" (160). Again "the red carnation that stood in the vase on the table of the restaurant when (they) dined together with Percival, is become a six-sided flower; made of six lives".

"A mysterious illumination", said Louis...

"Built up with much pain, many strokes", said Jinny.

...said Bernard... a many-sided substance cut out of this dark; a many-faceted flower. Let us stop for a moment; let us behold what we have made. ... One life. There. It is over. Gone out" (162).

Once more they begin to hear the "Knock, knock, knock. Must, must, must. Must go, must sleep, must wake, must get up--sober, merciful word which we pretend to revile, which we press tight to our hearts, without which we should be undone" (166). They must arouse themselves from passivity to activity; they must reassume the burden of responsibilities and appointments. This time, however, being older, Bernard notices a change in his outlook which leads him to wonder: "Was this, then, this streaming away mixed with Susan, Jinny, Neville, Rhoda, Louis, a sort of death? A new assembly of elements? Some hint of what was to come?" (198). Nor is he sure now whether he is "man or woman, Bernard or Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny, or Rhoda--so strange is the contact of one with another" (199). Indeed, he no longer knows whether he is "all of them" or "one and distinct" (205). Involved in this attitude is a preparation for death, for the moment when he will become one not just with "all of them" but with the All. Once more, however, the wave "swells" within him, and notwithstanding this preparation he declares defiantly that "Death is the enemy. ... Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, o Death!" (211).

The wave image controls the structure of the book in yet another way: it exists not just as a rhythm inherent in human thought and human existence but also as an inescapable moving force which marks time just as relentlessly in *The Waves* as Big Ben does in *Mrs. Dalloway*. The interludes which precede each of the nine soliloquy sections of *The Waves* abruptly bring us out of the world of unspoken thoughts up to the physical, external world visibly subject to the changes wrought by time. The interludes depict "the majestic march of day across the sky" (193). Nothing the characters think or imagine can stop this march of time over their lives. They can fight against it, but they cannot win. The interludes serve to remind us that a lifetime is brief (like a solar day) and, consequently rather insignificant when seen in perspective. Thus, each time we come to an interlude, we are forced to readjust our angle of vision. We feel somewhat as Bernard did one day sitting with Neville in his room:

"Yes, but suddenly one hears a clock tick". We who had been immersed in this world became aware of another. It is painful. It was Neville who changed our time. He, who had been thinking with the unlimited time of the mind, which stretches in a flash from Shakespeare to ourselves, poked the fire and began to live by that other clock which marks the approach of a particular person. The wide and dignified sweep of his mind contracted. He became on the alert (194).

We too became aware of the particular details of a representational reality. We note the changes which have taken place during our absence. The light falls differently upon the sea and upon the land; the birds sing in a different way; and once more we hear the waves upon the shore. They fall again and again "like the thud of a great beast stamping" (107). Finally, the sun sinks and darkness covers everything like "waves of water" (168). Despite Bernard's valiant battle against death, as the novel ends, again "the waves broke on the shore" (211). As A. D. Moody says in Virginia Woolf, the wave image expresses,

the relations of the transient individual to the continuing force of life. It has the advantage of suggesting the successive and continuous nature of life, as well as the way in which the individual being forms within, is carried upon, and finally merges back into its elemental source<sup>18</sup>.

While differing in form (direct descriptions rather than interior monologues), each interlude is closely linked in its images (for

instance, the handling of the birds) and in its general concept (changes wrought by the advancement of time), to the content of the soliloquies it precedes. Also, we discover in the soliloquies echoes of phrases read in the interludes (207-10). Such devices help to make the novel an organic whole. Unity is also established through the relationship of both the interludes and soliloquies to the wave image. As Winifred Holtby points out, the sea functions differently in *The Waves* than it does in Virginia Woolf's earlier novels:

That sea over which Rachel Vinrace sailed to Santa Marina, over which Tim Durrant and Jacob sailed to Cornwall, over which Cam and James and Mr. Ramsay sailed to the lighthouse, has now overflowed from its geographical significance. It has passed into time; it has passed into the swing and surge of Mrs. Woolf's deliberate prose; it has passed into the hearts and minds of men and women, until the characters themselves are tossed upon its restless waters, carried by the tide which is time to meet the final challenge of death. From cover to cover the novel is saturated in the sea<sup>19</sup>.

Furthermore, the novel is tightly unified in that there is no relief from the sameness of the texture, the substance, and the tone of both the interludes and the soliloquies. In both there is an abnormal density and intensity of emotion, symbolic meaning, and stylistic expression. Because the author's aim is to write "an abstract mystical eyeless book: a play poem", not a representational novel, the entire book is written in the same compressed, poetic style as if all six characters, even as children, had Virginia Woolf's command of the English language (AWD: 137). With a simple sentence her characters have the power to penetrate to the core of a personality; for example, Bernard says of Louis, "His heroes wore bowler-hats and talked about selling pianos for tenners" (179). Jinny wraps up the experience of having lost the sexual appeal of one's youth, "shall look into faces, and I shall see them seek some other face" (138). Although gifted with the same power of expression, the characters are differentiated by what they observe either about nature or about themselves and each other. They each grow and change somewhat, but when old, as Dorothy Brewster points out, "they still have within them the children they once were"<sup>20</sup>. For instance, as a child Jinny kisses Louis on the nape of the neck; Susan is jealous; Bernard comforts her and is inspired to write a poem; Neville sees Bernard's decision to leave to follow Susan as a breach in their relationship; and Louis and Rhoda feel themselves to be lonely outsiders. *The Waves*, therefore, is made into an organic whole not

only by the wave image but also by the sameness of texture (its intensity, its density), substance (well-defined youth to age pattern), and tone (due to the uniformity of the prose style) as well as by the consistency and integrity which characterizes the portraits of the six speakers. Also, in the last of the three restaurant scenes, Bernard looks back upon his life and in so doing sums up the content of the novel, thereby helping us to see the whole.

Another unifying device used by the author is the repetition and variation of certain themes, images, and phrases. The themes include the question of individual identity, the pressure upon an individual created by the presence of other people, the quest for the consolations of order and meaning, and the constant threat of cruelty and annihilation. Images like the globe, the swing-door, the virginal white wax, the opening door, and the willow tree lend continuity to the development of these and other themes. Variations of certain phrases like "the door opens and the tiger leaps", "I heard songs by the Nile and chained beast stamping", "the swallow deeped her wings in dark pools", "the drip falls", "to gather flowers and present them--oh, to whom?" and "the immitigable tree" expand in meaning as they are recalled and reapplied in varying circumstances. This rhythmic echoing of significant themes, images, and phrases helps to establish the form of the novel.

The form of the whole is seen to be infinitely complex when one adds to what has already been mentioned the network of relationships among the six characters. Similarities and differences are set up between them even in their initial observations:

"I see a ring", said Bernard, "hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light".

"I see a slab of pale yellow", said Susan, "spreading away until it meets a purple stripe".

"I hear a sound", said Rhoda, "Cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down".

"I see a globe", said Neville, "hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill".

"I see a crimson tassel", said Jinny, "twisted with gold threads".

"I hear something stamping", said Louis, "a great beast's foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps" (6).

As Josephine Schaefer points out,

Bernard and Neville see a round shape; one is interested in the movement and luminosity of this shape, the other in its proportions and relation to something else. Susan and Jinny see colours: Susan's are gentle and soft, Jinny's are intense. Rhoda and Louis experience life differently, from a more removed angle. Before opening their eyes in the morning, they listen to the awakening world. Rhoda hears a tiny bird-sound; Louis hears a great beast stamp. Throughout the novel the children's conceptions of life grow along the lines laid down in these early responses to life<sup>21</sup>.

The way in which the characters are paired here is further reinforced by the facts that Bernard and Neville are the most intellectuals, although one is untidy in his habits and the other neat; Susan and Jinny are the most animal in their desires, although one seeks the quiet security of family and land while the other seeks the excitement of the city and innumerable lovers; Rhoda and Louis are linked by their loneliness and timidity although one wanders in her dreams to a spatial infinity beyond time whereas the other wanders in time and feels he has lived thousands of years; one seeks privacy and annihilation while the other seeks community and a secure place in the existing world. But the subject easily shifts and the characters pair off differently. Louis and Neville both love neatness and order, but one imposes them through business upon the contemporary world while the other seeks to discover them through his scholarship about the past. Ironically, it is Louis who loves the past in terms of tradition and Neville, the scholar, who hates it. Louis and Neville are also alike in having clear, strong intellects, in their desire to write poetry, in their desire to be loved, and in their uncertainty about how to make themselves appealing. Neville and Susan are similar in their strong desire for one person, and they contrast with Bernard and Jinny who need the stimulation of many people to be happy. In contrast to all four, Rhoda prefers solitude. Yet Bernard and Susan are alike in their desire for children, and as artist and mother, both are creators. Neville and Jinny share an interest in the existentialist enjoyment of the moment at hand, and they are alike in being primarily interested in sex; Neville, however, is attracted to his own sex, Jinny to the opposite sex. For her part, Rhoda quotes Shelley, whom Virginia Woolf describes in *A Room of One's Own* as "sexless". Rhoda and Neville are linked, because each is "in love" with Percival. Rhoda and Susan are both happy at school but Rhoda because she is rootless, Susan because she is rooted elsewhere. As homemaker and businessman, Susan and Louis choose the ways of life most conventionally

acceptable according to one's sex, whereas in their ways of life, Jinny and Neville "embody the two enemies of traditional society: individualism and promiscuity"<sup>22</sup>. Bernard has an interesting relationship with Susan for she, of the three girls, is the only one who becomes "wholly woman, purely feminine" (175). Thus, "she was born to be the adored of poets, since poets require safety; someone who sits sewing, who says, 'I hate, I love', who is neither comfortable nor prosperous, but has some quality in accordance with the high but unemphatic beauty of pure style which those who create poetry so particularly admire" (176). But his relationship with Rhoda is perhaps the most interesting, for Bernard and Rhoda represent the life-death duality inherent in Virginia Woolf's vision of life.

Rhoda is unable to accept the conditions and limitations imposed upon human beings by the physical nature of their existence. She is irritated by the consequent self-centeredness which emphasizes differences and, out of jealousy or indifference, withholds sympathy due to others. She has so little self-confidence that she fails to create an identity of her own. "I have no face", she says (158, 93); moreover, she refuses to have a face because "the human face is hideous" (113). Neville says, "She has no body as the others have" (16). She refuses the separation from others imposed by physical being ("I hate all details of the individual life" (76), and she wants no part of the compromise and imperfection which characterize physical love. She leaves Louis, because she fears embraces (146). She prefers to love Percival who is absent, and she is able to give her complete love to him only after he is dead (117).

Rhoda in her dreams has visions of a white shape. In life she discovers such purity only once as she listens to music. Listening, she sees the "thing"--a square placed "accurately" upon an oblong, leaving "very little" outside. Discovering aesthetic purity so created by man ("This is our triumph; this is our consolation" (116), she is reconciled momentarily with life and, immersing herself in it, discovers she is no longer "injured" or "outraged" by contact with it. But the purity of annihilation, or nothingness is still more tempting, for the creation or perception of aesthetic purity is the exception rather than the rule in life. Therefore, she again turns against it.

"Oh, life, how I have dreaded you", said Rhoda, "oh, human beings, how I have hated you! How have you nudged, how you have interrupted, how hideous you have looked in Oxford Street, how squalid sitting opposite each other staring in the Tube!...I have been

stained by you and corrupted. You smelt so unpleasant too... What dissolution of the soul you demanded in order to get through one day, what lies, bowings, scrapings, fluency and servility! How you chained me to one spot, one hour, one chair, and sat yourselves down opposite! How you snatched from me the white spaces that lie between hour and hour and rolled them into dirty pellets and tossed them into the wastepaper basket with your greasy paws. Yet those were my life (145).

Previously, she had yielded to life and remained on the fringe of Nothingness, but now she refuses even this compromise. Like Septimus Smith, she chooses death.

Rhoda wishes "to spread in wider circles of understanding that may at last...embrace the entire world". Having to "go through the antics of the individual" prevents her from grasping the "circumference" of life, the vast bubble which can "be cast off and escape from the here and now" (158-59). Bernard would also like "to indulge impossible desires to embrace the whole world with the arms of understanding--the impossible to those who act". Whereas she wants to sacrifice herself, to be consumed in the sea of Nothingness, he wishes to absorb, to consume all of life into his being. She closes herself off from life; he opens himself to all impressions and sensations. He too experiences moments of peace and happiness in the "sunless territory of non-identity"; "Am I not, as I walk, trembling with strange oscillations and vibrations of sympathy, which, unmoored as I am from a private being, bid me embrace these engrossed flocks; these starers and trippers; these errand-boys and furtive girls who, ignoring their doom, look in at shop-windows?" (82-3). Yet, despite such moments, he is not satisfied with only the circumference of life; he also seeks the core of life, "a meaning for all my observations" and he knows that the core can be reached, if at all, only by an active study of the particulars. Therefore, replenished by his solitude and passive absorption of life, he chooses to rise again on the wave to mix again with his surroundings:

Oh, to...be active! Anybody will do...The crossing sweeper will do; The postman; the waiter in this French restaurant;...Images breed instantly. I could describe every chair, table, luncher here copiously, freely. My mind hums hither and thither with its veil of words for everything. To speak, about wine even to the waiter, is to bring about an explosion. Up goes the rocket. Its golden grain falls, fertilising, upon the rich soil of my imagination. The entirely unexpected nature of this explosion--that is the joy of intercourse. I, mixed with an

unknown Italian waiter--what am I? There is no stability in this world. Who is to say what meaning there is in anything? Who is to foretell the flight of a word? It is a balloon that sails over tree-tops. To speak of knowledge is futile. All is experiment and adventure. We are forever mixing ourselves with unknown quantities. What is to come? I know not (84).

Mixing with life teaches him again that there seems to be no one meaning for all his observations. But the pursuit itself is exciting and rewarding.

Paralleling Rhoda's experience with music after Percival's death is Bernard's experience with paintings in the National Gallery. Percival was a hero, because, being "naturally truthful", he saw everything in its proper relationship to the whole; nothing was exaggerated beyond its importance, hence his stability and calm, his mastery of "the art of living" (111). Bernard recognizes that he fails to perceive the over-all pattern, because he takes an exaggerated interest in one thing after another. Beneath the gardens and madonnas in the paintings, for instance, one must find something nonrepresentational, "unvisual"--the significant form of pattern created by the lines and colors themselves. To see this, one must have, like Percival, "indifference one may almost say...save that he had also compassion" (111). Aesthetic detachment, of which Rhoda was capable, alone is insufficient; the artist must begin with keen and sympathetic sensitivity towards his subject matter--life. Bernard's experience in the National Gallery expands his consciousness of Percival and helps him master the art of life. He gains a certain control and perspective about life; he is no longer willing to vacillate weakly from one thing to another; moreover, he finally realizes that it is the rhythm of life and of prose which matters, not the story or the isolated phrase.

Thus, he increases his understanding of what he discovered at the farewell dinner for Percival: "We are not slaves...We are not sheep...We are creators" (104). As A. D. Moody says, death "is made acceptable by virtue of the creative will which raises a human continuity and civilisation above the brute process of nature"<sup>23</sup>. The value is not in the individual accomplishment, which too is subject to the life-death process, but in the continuity of man's creative will. We are not "raindrops, soon dried by the wind" only because "we come up differently, for ever and ever" (82). This is the form which lies beneath life's complexity; it is the unity among the multiplicity which, having supplemented his sensitivity with Percival's detached sense of

the whole, he seizes in his vision of "the eternal renewal" just before he dies.

Notwithstanding Bernard's affirmation of life which at the end wins out over Rhoda's point of view the over-all vision of human existence in *The Waves* is that of Mr., not Mrs. Ramsay. The threat of the void, the sense of isolation are almost always there; The moments of oneness are rare. Also the final passage of the novel in which Bernard rises to defy Death is reminiscent of the lines from Tennyson's poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade", quoted by Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*:

Stormed at with shot and shell,  
Boldly they rode and well  
Into the jaws of Death  
Into the mouths of hell...<sup>24</sup>

Like the attack of the Light Brigade and Percival's final charge, Bernard's assault on Death is courageous but useless: "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!" (211). Indeed, this final passage provides the moment of vision which illuminates the rest of the novel. It emphasizes the absurd nature of man's existence: like the wave, he rises only to fall. His continuous efforts are admirable; but seen from a detached point of view, they could be ridiculous.

The fact that Bernard never translates his vision into a work of art seems indicative of Virginia Woolf's increasingly pessimistic view of life. In her first novel Terence Hewet wants to write a "novel of silence", and there is some hope that someday he will. In *To the Lighthouse* Lily Briscoe has her vision and completes her painting. In *The Waves* Bernard is so overwhelmed by the meaningless, chaotic nature of life that his vision of the whole comes too late in his life for him to transform it into a work of art. His vision of the "fin", his dislike of stories, his interest in the moment, his search for an adequate "design", all suggest a strong similarity between his attitudes and problems and those of Virginia Woolf. The fact that he has more difficulty than Lily Briscoe did in achieving the kind of equilibrium which will enable him to function successfully as an artist suggests that, at least psychologically if not aesthetically, Virginia Woolf is likewise finding it more and more difficult to balance the "shifting"

with the "solid". Bernard's words might be hers when he says that others seemed to have found "something that stood them instead".

Thus I visited each of my friends in turn, trying, with fumbling fingers, to prise open their licked caskets. I went from one to the other holding my sorrow--no, not my sorrow but the incomprehensible nature of this our life--for their inspection. Some people go to priests; others to poetry; I to my friends, I to my own heart. I too seek among phrases and fragments something unbroken--(189).

Her despair of being able to find "something unbroken" is still more evident, as we shall see, in her last two novels.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Woolf, V., 1954, *A Room of One's Own*, London: 171-72. Hereafter references to this work will be indicated by page number.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*: 171.

<sup>3</sup> 1965, translation by Jean Stewart, London: 378.

<sup>4</sup> 1966, *Collected Essays*, IV, London: 2.

<sup>5</sup> Woolf, V., *The Waves*: 58. The similarity between this aspect of Bernard's personality and that of Desmond MacCarthy is pointed out by Leonard Woolf in *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911 to 1918*, 1964, New York: 142-43.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*: 133, 169.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Bernard wonders: "But why impose my arbitrary design? Why stress this and shape that and twist up little figures like the toys men sell in trays in the streets? Why select this, out of all that--one detail?" (134).

<sup>8</sup> Gassner, J., (ed.), 1935, "A Treasure of the Theatre", in *Modern European Drama from Ibsen to Sartre*, Vol. 2, New York: 388.

<sup>9</sup> 1965, *Virginia Woolf and Her Works*, trans. by Jean Stewart, London: 296.

<sup>10</sup> Cox, C. B., 1963, "The Solitude of Virginia Woolf", in *The Free Spirit: A Study of Liberal Humanism in the Novels of George Eliot, Henry James, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Angus Wilson*, London: 333. We have inserted in brackets the name of the character to whom each aspect refers.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard says later: "We suffered terribly as we became separate bodies" (171).

<sup>12</sup> 109, 88, 97. Percival is a "god" just as Mrs. Ramsay is a goddess (see Ch. I).

<sup>13</sup> Significantly, Louis compares Percival's "magnificence" to "that of some mediaeval commander" (26).

<sup>14</sup> Schaefer, J., 1965, "The Three-fold Nature of Reality", in *Studies in English Literature*, VII, The Hague: 155.

<sup>15</sup> The spirit of Mrs. Ramsay functions in a similar way in Part III of *To the Lighthouse*.

<sup>16</sup> Pippett, A., 1955, *The Moth and the Star: A Biography of Virginia Woolf*, Boston and Toronto: 292.

<sup>17</sup> Lord Tennyson, A., 1913, "The Holy Grail", in "Idylls of the King", *The Works of Tennyson*, Ed. Hallam Lord Tennyson, New York: 410.

<sup>18</sup> Moody, A. D., 1963, *Writers and Critics*, Edinburg and London: 48.

<sup>19</sup> Holtby, W., 1932, *Virginia Woolf*, London: 195.

<sup>20</sup> Brewster, D., 1963, *Virginia Woolf*, London: 126.

<sup>21</sup> Schaefer, J., "The Three-fold Nature of Reality", *op. cit.*: 139.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*: 152.

<sup>23</sup> Moody, A. D., *Virginia Woolf*, *op. cit.*: 61.

<sup>24</sup> The meaning of these lines are to be seen in terms of Mr. Ramsay's personality.