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J. N. Andrews Honors Program
Andrews University

HONS 497
Honors Thesis

“The story which he never stops telling himself”:
Autobiography, Narrative Community, and the Deconstruction of Selfhood
in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*

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March 25, 2015

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Abstract

This paper examines narrative, biography, and selfhood in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931). The novel, a "play-poem," follows six friends' monologues from childhood to death. I analyze aspiring writer Bernard from his childhood of telling stories about companions to his inability to narrate his autobiography, arguing that he fails because he has no self to narrate. Referencing Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology's* (1974) theory of the deconstructed self identifiable only in conversation, I argue that Bernard destroys his identity by silencing his friends and becoming the sole speaker; Woolf's biographical theory thereby establishes the communal self, prefiguring tenets of postmodern philosophy.

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Dr. Beverly Matiko

HONS 497

25 March 2015

“The story which he never stops telling himself”:

Autobiography, Narrative Community, and the Deconstruction of Selfhood in Virginia

Woolf's *The Waves*

When writing *The Waves* (1931), Virginia Woolf set out to create a novel that mirrored the experience of human consciousness as much as possible, and in doing so she invented a new genre, which she dubbed the “playpoem.” As the name suggests, *The Waves* references the dramatic tradition through its use of intertwined monologues by six viewpoint characters – Bernard, Jinny, Louis, Neville, Rhoda, and Susan. Despite the fact that they claim markedly different viewpoints and personalities, they all speak in nearly identical, highly stylized speeches of first-person stream-of-consciousness prose. The only things distinguishing their thoughts from each other are simple, past tense attributions – for example: “I burn, I shiver,” said Jinny, “out of this sun, into this shadow” (*Waves* 6). Although *The Waves* lacks a traditional plot and narrator, it follows these six characters – childhood friends – through nine thematically important stages of their lives, from preschool play to aged reflections. Each of these stages, or “episodes,” is preceded by a thematically corresponding interlude: a short nature scene describing the rising and setting of the sun over the ocean during the course of a day. Both in these sections and in the diction of the six speakers, the text also reflects the artistic aspects typical of poetry through its highly descriptive, beautiful language and often symbolic or abstract representations of events. Complex, sensual, and often difficult, *The Waves* is Woolf's most experimental novel – and also, perhaps, her most self-conscious.

Though Woolf considered *The Waves* among her greatest works, she experienced a great deal of anxiety and mental strain while writing it. She notes in her journal that “never have I screwed my brain so tight over a book” (*Diary* 167). This, she acknowledges, is due in part to the novel’s innovative form, but it is also partly a result of her lifelong struggles with the relationships between narrative and representing the self, a major concern of *The Waves*. In a journal entry from July 28, 1940, Woolf complains about “The fictitious VW whom I carry like a mask about the world” (*Diary* 332). She traces a continual struggle with her perception of her appearance to others as inherently fabricated and concealing in nature. Definitive Woolf biographer Hermione Lee traces this artistic and intellectual struggle from Woolf’s early self-presentation in her journals to her compositions for the Bloomsbury Group and Memoir Club to several of her novels, including *To the Lighthouse* and *Jacob’s Room*.

The Waves often draws attention from critics because of its central character, the heroic Percival, who is often spoken of but never speaks, and then dies tragically young while abroad. In a longstanding critical tradition of reading Woolf’s novels as autobiographical, self-administered therapy in which she works through her past and various neuroses, Percival joins Jacob and Septimus Smith as representations of Thoby Stephen, Woolf’s beloved older brother who died of typhoid at the age of 26. After Thoby’s death, Lee notes, “the novels she would now write would almost all be elegiac” (227). As the specter of Thoby haunted Woolf’s writing, so it haunts Woolf criticism, which often focuses on loss and regret epitomized by characters such as Percival.

Less frequently examined, however, is how Woolf uses the character of Bernard, a gregarious, aspiring writer obsessed with understanding himself and narrating the world around him, to articulate a complex theory of autobiography that employs postmodern ideas anticipated by more than forty years. In his youth, Bernard

obsessively constructs meaning and identity for himself and others through imaginative storytelling. He sees story in general, and biography in particular, as a way of achieving solidity and immortality for himself and his friends, and so he constantly attempts to encapsulate their experiences as a counter to his own perceived fragmentation and ephemerality. At the end of his life and *The Waves*, however, Bernard attempts to understand and eternalize his life through autobiography, and discovers that biography is impossible. Prefiguring ideas articulated by Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (1974), Bernard concludes that there is no concrete self to be recorded; it is merely a linguistic construction co-created in conversation with others that can never be captured by one voice.

Virginia Woolf was widely read and educated in the classics, a background she shares with fictional Bernard. Two major thematic influences emerge in the text, most pointedly in Bernard's monologues and interactions with Neville: the archetype of the mythic hero, and the heritage of the traditional English literary canon as epitomized by Lord Byron and, most prominently, William Shakespeare. Critics have noted that Percival is the closest thing *The Waves* has to a traditional hero-figure; in college, Bernard describes him as a chivalric leader, saying, "Look now, how everybody follows Percival...his magnificence is that of some medieval commander" (25). Later, when Percival prepares to leave for India as a colonial administrator, Bernard and the others revere him and describe him in almost mockingly heroic terms, simultaneously referencing their knowledge of the heroic tradition and lampooning it. When Percival falls off a horse and unceremoniously dies a few pages later, Susan Rubinow Gorsky notes, "the only possible hero is twice destroyed, first through mockery of form and substance in his inability to speak or to fulfill his potential and then through his absurd

death" (223). This subversion of the heroic tradition becomes important to Bernard's attitude towards narratives of heroism and the role of the protagonist of a story, as he will vacillate his entire life between using heroic language to describe himself earnestly and exhibiting suspicion towards it. Referring to everyday life, Bernard says, "It is the effort and the struggle, it is the perpetual warfare, it is the shattering and piecing together – this is the daily battle, defeat or victory, the absorbing pursuit" (200). In the same narrative section, however, he rejects any romanticizing of Percival or daily life as a heroic struggle worthy of memorializing, saying: "Let us commit any blasphemy of laughter or criticism rather than exude this lily-sweet glue, and cover him with phrases" (196). Bernard has a keen knowledge of the tropes of the literary hero, but he swings between rejecting and embracing them.

Like many writers of her generation, Woolf rebelled against the Victorian literary canon and instead turned to the Renaissance and Romantic eras for inspiration. Echoes of an especially high valuation of Shakespeare occur in *The Waves*, especially between Neville and Bernard.¹ They discuss Shakespeare's work at length in college, and near the end of his life, Bernard looks to Shakespeare as someone who seemed a permanent and solid narrator of truth (63). Reflecting on his youth, he says, "Once Neville threw a poem at my head. Feeling a sudden conviction of immortality I said, 'I too know what Shakespeare knew.' But that has gone" (167). Most prominent, however, is the way all six characters' understanding of mortality and time are reminiscent of that expressed in Jaques's soliloquy in *As You Like It*: "All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players; / They have their exits and their entrances, / And one man in his time plays many parts" (II.vii.139-42). This concept of playing many parts reflects Bernard's anxiety about the performative nature of public identity, and the ultimately unknowability of other people – an anxiety he inherits from Woolf. "That Woolf was

conscious of human role-playing,” Nancy Walker notes, “of the deliberate selection of a self to present to others – is clear from numerous comments in her letters and diaries. In her worst moments, she felt that all life was a façade” (Walker in Howard 51). In light of this fear, Woolf plays with the concept of actor, character, and performance: when describing his interactions with others, Bernard complains that “They do not understand that I have to effect different transitions; have to cover the entrances and exits of several different men who alternately act their parts as Bernard” (54). In referring to acting, and to “entrance and exits,” Woolf intentionally recalls Jaques’s soliloquy – but also complicates the concept of performing the self by raising the issue of the multiplicity of selfhood – one that she will explore throughout the entire novel.

The definition of what it means to be a “self” lies, arguably, at the heart of *The Waves*. Because the novel features six characters with nearly equal prominence instead of one or two major protagonists and a collection of minor characters, their similarities and connections are highly emphasized. As Molly Hite notes in her introduction to the text, “Sorting out major characters from minor is part of the business of finding our way into novels. Once we know who is major, we can pay attention to that character’s speech, thoughts, and feelings” (xxviii). Because *The Waves* refuses to declare some characters more important than others, the reader must work to discover the thematic relationship between equal and divergent figures. Each of these characters contributes to a nuanced and complicated conception of selfhood. “To avoid oversimplification and falsity,” Gorsky explains, “three facets of characterization become necessary: the individual, the typical, and...the communal” (221). The simplest of these to understand is typical. Each character often seems more like the embodiment of a stereotype or psychological stance than a fully nuanced human being: Susan is the earth mother, Jinny is the sensual socialite, and so on.

At first glance, understanding the characters as individuals also seems simple. They have separate personalities, goals, and motifs: Rhoda is a fragile soul whose monologues are replete with images of tigers and flower petals. Susan is a wife and mother who loves the land and swings between embracing and resenting her life, often repeating the phrase “I love, I hate” (9). Jinny is obsessed with her appearance, and spends her time going to parties and flirting with men, reveling in her sexuality and seeming immortality. Louis is a self-conscious banker who never feels at home because his father is from Australia, and Neville is a sensitive scholar and poet continually isolated by his concealed homosexuality. Finally, Bernard, the self-proclaimed writer, spends his time traveling and writing, embracing the sensory and narrative experiences of life. These six characters can clearly act separately, and have different opinions about themselves, each other, and the world around them. Further examination of what composes and defines the individual, however, will reveal a far more complicated understanding of individuality than initially assumed.

The communal aspect of these characters is one of the most intriguing aspects of *The Waves*. Despite their differences in characterization and education – Bernard is a flamboyant writer, Susan is relatively uneducated – all of the characters speak with uniform style and diction throughout their entire lives, using complex metaphors and highly formal language both as small children and as adults. In his 1973 book *The World Without a Self*, James Naremore argues that this stylistic choice is a failure of the book.

There is little or no attempt in *The Waves* to make the prose adapt itself to the growth of the characters....Though the characters’ reactions to life evince a growing complexity, their language remains always formal and sophisticated. Furthermore, while the six voices are differentiated by temperament, the fundamental character of their language is always the

same; thus there is a sense in which the form of the novel tends to deny or qualify the content.

(158-59)

Though the style is beautiful, he concludes, “the prose is rather stifling in effect – the reader almost drowns in the language” (189). While she makes no efforts to deny the heaviness of the writing, Gorsky disagrees with Naremore’s assessment of its effectiveness, noting that the identical speech styles serve to blur the distinctions between individual characters and highlight the uniformity of human experience. This stylistic choice, she says, “creates a tension within the text, in which the characters share in the “‘omnipresent, general life’ of man,” and yet are even more separate than characters in a traditional novel, “incapable of indulging in traditional or satisfying dialogues and sealed in closely related but finally separate soliloquys” (231).

Even within the context of their narrative individuality, the six speakers of *The Waves* repeatedly emphasize that they are integral parts of each other. Though they spend the majority of the book expressing feelings of incompleteness and alienation, in the two episodes where they come together for reunion dinners, they experience brief and unparalleled oneness. This is especially pronounced when they unite to see Percival off to India: “We have come together...” Bernard says, “to make one thing, not enduring – for what endures? – but seen by many eyes simultaneously” (91). Jinny echoes this sentiment, noting that the union of the seven childhood friends, while brief, is profound and important to their identities: “Let us hold it for one moment...love, hatred, by whatever name we call it, 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” (105). The unity experienced in this passage, as the friends reminisce about their childhood and celebrate Percival’s future, is shattered

when he dies shortly afterward in India, and never fully regained. At their second dinner, looking back at their lives from the perspective of middle age, the six speakers again experience a moment of unity, but it is one tinged with feelings of regret and mortality. "Marriage, death, travel, friendship," Bernard recounts, "...town and country; children and all that; 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. Let us blaze against the yew trees. One life. There. It is over. Gone out" (168). These images evoke an indelible feeling of incompleteness common to the six friends; a fear that only together can they compose an entire person. Looking back on this moment in his old age, Bernard notes that "we saw for a moment laid out among us the body of the complete human being whom we have failed to be, but at the same time, cannot forget" (205). Whether the "complete" human to which he refers is the fallen Percival, or an imaginary amalgam of the six living friends is ambiguous; regardless, the inverse image implied is one of fragmentation and inadequacy.

The extreme closeness and temporary union of the friends results in Bernard occasionally having trouble distinguishing between himself and others. "It is not one life that I look back upon," he reflects near the end of the novel. "I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am—Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis: or how to distinguish my life from theirs" (205). This and similar statements have often been interpreted as if Bernard literally slips between personalities; an interpretation that suggests mystical experiences and the possibility that the characters share a mind or collective consciousness.ⁱⁱ I would argue, however, that this description is more a metaphoric expression of Bernard's recognition that he has been irrevocably shaped by those with which he has lived. Bernard understands himself always in relation to others – the closest he comes to a solidity of identity is in relationship with people who have

been sustained presences in his life. He confirms this concept when he describes his marriage: "I am inclined to pin myself down most firmly there before the loaf at breakfast with my wife," he says, "who being now entirely my wife and not at all the girl who wore when she hoped to meet me a certain rose, gave me that feeling of existing in the midst of unconsciousness" (193). Because Bernard has spent so much time with his wife, he feels more himself in her presence.

Bernard is a self-proclaimed storyteller and artist, and his desired profession shapes the way he interacts with others. As a young man he is obsessed with people-watching, and continually constructs snippets of stories about the people he sees in public. "I make stories," he explains. "I twist up toys out of anything" (159). He extends this imagination to his own actions, and lives theatrically whenever possible, attempting to behave as he imagines a famous author would. Bernard often quotes his future biographer, and in one exquisitely funny passage, attempts to write a letter the way that Lord Byron would (54-56). He imagines the recipient reading the letter and says, "It is going to be a brilliant sketch which, she must think, was written without a pause, without an erasure" (55). For Bernard, part of the joy of storytelling is the becoming – the ability to pretend to be someone else. He sees himself as a continuation of the great artists, Gorsky explains, styling himself after Byron, Hamlet, Napoleon, and Shelley at various points in the novel (224).ⁱⁱⁱ For Bernard, the entire world, himself included, must always be seen through the novelist's eye.

In his youth Bernard sees all people as possessing essentially narrative selves, and attempts to interpret their actions to fit this model. This habit begins when he is only a schoolboy playing with his friends and interacting with his teachers. "Let him describe what we have all seen so that it becomes a sequence," Neville says. "Bernard says there is always a story. I am a story. Louis is a story" (25). Fascinatingly, Neville

does not say that Bernard sees himself as a story, but that others are. In an action that mirrors his later insistence on others having one true, definable self, Bernard sets himself up as teller of others' stories, stories which he can incorporate into his ongoing internal monologue. "Did he not only wish to continue the sequence of the story which he never stops telling himself?" Neville asks. He draws attention to Bernard's objectification of others via the creative process, noting, "He began it when he rolled his bread into pellets as a child. One pellet was a man, one was a woman. We are all pellets. We are all phrases in Bernard's story, things he writes down in his notebook under A or under B" (49). Bernard sees himself as the protagonist of a narrative—and all others he encounters are side-stories.

Bernard's viewpoint as an artist troubles his belief in the possibility of the individual possessing a genuine self. When referring to other people, Bernard believes that the self can be definable and unchanging. Other people, Bernard claims, are always the same person no matter what the situation—but he himself has multiple "selves." "It becomes clear that I am not one and simple," Bernard declares, "but complex and many" (54).^{iv} As an extremely social person, Bernard co-creates these selves in interaction with others. Because he considers himself a different person for everyone he interacts with, he has difficulty defining himself when alone. "To be myself," he notes, "I need the illumination of other people's eyes, and therefore cannot be entirely sure what is myself" (83). When left alone, Bernard's lack of defined selfhood becomes more pressing than simply a question of ambiguity—rather, he feels his very identity disintegrate. "My being only glitters when all its facets are exposed to many people," he mourns. "Let them fail and I am full of holes, dwindling like burnt paper" (135). By setting up his fragmented and multitudinous self in contrast to genuine others, Bernard

expresses an unusual sentiment that the self he can try to know is actually less solid and definable than those of others he cannot.

Despite this anxiety about the fragility, and even the existence, of a stable inner self, Bernard still spends the majority of his life believing that there must be a defined and individual self that he can someday discover. “My true self breaks off from my assumed,” he says of it, implying an ability to separate his performative identity from the truth (56). Elsewhere, he addresses himself while simultaneously being himself: “But you understand, you, myself,” he says, “who always comes at a call...you understand that I am only superficially represented by what I was saying tonight” (55). Despite Bernard’s belief in this core self, from which all other manifestations of himself are referenced and drawn, it is something he is never quite able to articulate. In light of his earlier correlation between storytelling and selfhood, it becomes clear that Bernard links his inability to define himself with his inability to complete his great work as a writer. “I became aware,” he says, “of my own vague and cloudy nature full of sediment, full of doubt, full of phrases and notes to be made in pocket-books” (201). Paralleling his anxiety regarding his multiple selves, Bernard loses his certainty about the stories of others and begins to question whether he can ever tell one story about other people or events that fully expresses their reality. “Waves of hands, hesitations at street corners, some one dropping a cigarette into the gutter—all are stories,” he says. ‘But which is the true story?’” (160). As he previously sought a true inner self, so Bernard believes in a true story that he must discover. It is, he believes, his duty as a storyteller and subject living in the world—a duty that he doubts when not in the presence of those whose stories he tells:

That is, I am a natural coiner of words, a blower of bubbles through one thing and another. And striking off these observations spontaneously I

elaborate myself; differentiate myself and listening to the voice that says as I stroll past, 'Look! Take note of that!' I conceive myself called upon to provide, some winter's night, a meaning for all my observations—a line that runs from one to another, a summing up that completes. But soliloquies in back streets soon pall. I need an audience. That is my downfall. (83)

Here Bernard admits what his friends do not always recognize: in constantly making up stories he is not merely amusing himself anymore—he is looking for some deeper foundational meaning. Paradoxically, as he differentiates himself through observation, he hopes to find unity outside of himself—some sort of clarity that will give him definite and definable meaning. When surrounded by other people and situations, Bernard feels connected to the world and in harmony with his identity. When forced to be alone and turn his attention inward, however, he loses his sense of being caught up in a great and meaningful world, and instead confronts his fragmented and confusing self.

As discussed earlier, each of Woolf's six speakers has a theme that defines and often drives his or her actions; it is this theme with which they each attempt to achieve as sense of closure as they make their last speeches. After a lifetime of studying verse, Neville determines that all of life is poetry, "if we do not write it" (143). Jinny, finding her looks finally faded, resolves to put on makeup and continue surrounding herself with beauty (142). Susan, while wondering if she should have had a more expansive life, notes the order and prosperity she has created with approval (140-41). Louis and Rhoda, who Neville describes as "some fasting and anguished spirit," end their speeches on opposite poles of desperation; Louis reflects on the stifling torture of the responsibility of history, and Rhoda declares one last time that "Life, how I have dreaded you...oh, human beings, how I have hated you" before, we later learn from

Bernard, jumping from the cliffs of Gibraltar and ending her own life (148-51). In final gestures that emphasize both their distinct individuality and their unanimity in their desire to find meaning in their lives together and apart, all five characters speak their last words. Bernard, however, continues on. It is significant that, in his last speech enmeshed with his friends, Bernard does not draw conclusions, but instead speaks of new beginnings: "So, Bernard (I recall you, you the usual partner in my enterprises), let us begin this new chapter, and observe the formation of this new, this unknown, strange, altogether unidentified and terrifying experience – the new drop – which is about to shape itself. Larpent is that man's name" (138). To the reader, this should come as nothing if not expected. Bernard has been characterized through all of *The Waves* as someone who flits from one experience to another, moving through various permutations, always intent on moving forward and generating novelty.

As the eighth and last multi-voiced episode closes, the ninth interlude occurs more as a summary than an epilogue – Bernard, now the sole speaker, sits across from an unnamed, apparently unknown listener, and explains that it is time "now to sum up...now to explain to you the meaning of my life" (176). For the persistent reader, this final episode seems almost a reward. After struggling through difficult and constantly shifting prose, one is presented with a more traditional narrative form – the familiar character of Bernard retelling the story linearly and explaining what it means. This singular monologue, Susan Dick argues, is an anticipated relief: "Virginia Woolf has prepared us for this change in narrative by having Bernard anticipate the time when he would be called upon to sum up their lives. Thus we begin to read his account with the comforting assumption that this will be an autobiography of a life we already know" (38). As one reads these last pages and listens to Bernard's account of the lives of

himself and his friends, an unsettling reality become clear – Bernard’s stories are inaccurate. As Bernard retells the stories of their lives, he misunderstands personal struggles, omits entire character traits, and presents a portrait of his friends that reflects more of what he has thought of them than what they have thought of themselves. By replacing all six voices with his own, he is redefining and reinterpreting everyone’s lives.

Critical interpretations vary as to exactly what this stylistic shift – and the content of the final monologue as a whole – represents. In Gabrielle McIntire’s “Heteroglossia, Monologism, and Fascism: Bernard Reads ‘The Waves,’” she argues that Bernard embodies contemporary fears about fascist dictatorships, attempting to redefine his friends’ lives and enforce an all-encompassing group narrative upon them in a manner similar to the country-narrating dictators of Italy and the Soviet Union. At the same time, Woolf draws attention to the fact that all authorship is subtly fascist: “What happens, in effect,” McIntire writes, “is that through Woolf’s evocation of linguistic modes of dominance she succeeds in parodying both Bernard’s and her own attempts at authorship, disclosing that to force the past into order is an unwelcome necessity of narration” (35). In what one might consider a kinder interpretation of Bernard’s motives, Dick argues that Bernard’s final soliloquy is an attempt at self-definition and permanence; at projecting a framework of meaning backwards upon his life. This attempt is something that, with his collecting of phrases, Bernard has been preparing for his entire life: “From the time that they are children,” Dick notes, “the others share Bernard’s assumption that he will make sense of their lives by shaping them into a story” (41). While both of these arguments offer insight into the nature of Bernard’s narrative efforts, they are representative of a trend among critics that

attributes Bernard's failure to create a coherent narrative to the shortcoming of autobiography – not to the nonexistence of the singular self.

As I have noted, Bernard's defining characteristic throughout his life is that of the storyteller and biographer. All his life he has felt a compulsion to record and to understand the story of others' lives – but in his final monologue, the tension and uncertainty he has begun to exhibit regarding the viability of this pursuit reaches its climax. Mere sentences after declaring that he will reveal the meaning of his life, Bernard despairs that “in order to make you understand, to give you my life, I must tell you a story...but none of them are true” (176). Though he maintains that the more he looks at life, the more he sees no design, he still carries on a process illuminated by two very similar statements. “Let us turn over these scenes as children turn over the pages of a picture-book...” he suggests. “Let us turn over the pages, and I will add, for your amusement, a comment in the margin” (177). Shortly after, describing his childhood, Bernard notes that as a young man in school he “made notes for stories; drew portraits in the margin of my pocket-book and thus became still more separate” (179). With the repeated and marked use of motifs in this text, the connection between these passages cannot be accidental. Not only is Bernard, despite all he claims to have learned in his lifetime, repeating exactly a behavior from his childhood; the fact that he considers the entire account that follows the first statement “a comment in the margins,” paralleling the “portraits in the margin” suggests that what follows will be portraits – attempts to represent the personality and character of others.

This final soliloquy is the manifestation and synthesis of Bernard's twin life-long obsessions – immortality and storytelling. After spending his life struggling with shifting and ephemeral identity, he hopes to finally define who “Bernard” is. Here, Stephen

Howard notes, “autobiography is the linguistic codification of self-image, a ‘fixing’ of oneself in language” (49). Even though he has become increasingly dubious of the legitimacy of storytelling in general and biography in particular, Bernard proceeds anyway, because he knows no other way. For his entire life, the phrases and stories of biography have been an organizing principle, a way to create order out of the irreducible complexity and chaos of existence. “That is the biographic style,” he notes, “and it does to tack together torn bits of stuff, stuff with raw edges...one cannot despise these phrases laid like Roman roads across the tumult of our lives, since they compel us to walk in step like civilized people” (192). The context of this statement, however, immediately delegitimizes its efficacy, because he attributes these organizing actions to the fictitious biographer he had imagined as a young man – a biographer who is “dead long since” (192). Since Bernard’s biographer is a figurative manifestation of his autobiographical instinct, when he declares his biographer dead, he is also expressing his loss of faith in the self-actualizing power of narrative.

After his imagined biographer’s death, the philosophy of Bernard’s monologue shifts: instead of merely doubting the possibility of telling the correct story, he now doubts whether stories exist at all – and by extension, whether the self exists. Earlier he had expressed frustration at not knowing “which is the true story”; now, instead, he asks whether his failure is the result of stories’ nonexistence instead of his own inadequacy as an artist. These most shadowy and terrifying of doubts have haunted Bernard on occasion throughout his adulthood. As early as his mid twenties, Bernard muses, “Sometimes, I begin to doubt if there are stories. What is my story? What is Rhoda’s? What is Neville’s?” (105). This specific reference to Rhoda and Neville is significant, as they are the two characters who most frequently refer to their own nonexistence or lack of selfhood.^v In his greatest moments of doubt in the power of

stories, Bernard has tied himself to those whose beliefs about selfhood align with his fears.

Now, as an old man, Bernard reaches the climax of these long-held fears, and rejects all stories and selfhood at once. He addresses his self – and finds, fulfilling his early fears, that it is gone:

I spoke to that self who had been with me in many tremendous adventures...This self now as I leant over the gate looking down over fields rolling in waves of colour beneath me made no answer. He threw up no opposition. He attempted no phrase. His fist did not form. I waited. I listened. Nothing came, nothing. I cried then with a sudden conviction of complete desertion. Now there is nothing. No fin breaks the waste of this immeasurable sea. Life has destroyed me. No echo comes when I speak, no varied words. This is more truly death than the death of friends, than the death of youth. I am the swathed figure in the hairdresser's shop taking up only so much space. (210-11)

Bernard is despairing and adrift, lost in a world without stories and without the self. Having lost his last confidant, his last conversation, he is finally alone, and experiences what he considers the ultimate death: the death of selfhood. He does not have purpose, he has no “varied words” – instead of being a person, he is merely a “figure...taking up only so much space.” The sun has gone out, and the world is dark; all of life seems meaningless and withered (211). Though he has implied so much throughout the text, Bernard definitively claims that this death of the self and the death of stories are synonymous: “I, carrying a notebook, making phrases, have recorded merely changes; a shadow, I had been sedulous to take note of shadows. How can I proceed now, I said, without a self, weightless and visionless, through a world weightless, without illusion?”

(212). Bernard equates himself with his phrases – both are shadows, and both are weightless. After a lifetime of struggle, Bernard has finally decided that both narrative and the self are constructed and nonexistent; and in this decision, he moves the text ideologically from modernism to post-modernity.

In her 2008 J. N. Andrews Honors thesis, “Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*: Prefiguring Postmodernism in a Modernist Text,” Ashley Wynne argues that *The Waves* is an anticipatorily post-modern text via stylistic analysis of Woolf’s literary techniques. “By departing from certain modern conventions,” she notes, “while embracing others, Woolf is able to approach this text from a more postmodern perspective...” (19). While her conclusions are valid, I would assert that the post-modern nature of *The Waves* runs far deeper than mere authorial style; rather, the text hinges upon six characters who gradually reject notions of absolute truth, the definability of identity, and eventually, even the existence of the “true” self apart from language. A deep uncertainty underlies the text, and as the characters grow older they express a suspicion towards concrete worldview and overarching explanatory stories that mirrors Lyotard’s summation of post-modern thought as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard in Sire 216). More significant than the characters’ post-modern attitudes, however, is how Bernard anticipates major tenets of Jacques Derrida’s thought.

One of the most foundational texts of post-modernity, Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (1974), pioneers concepts of deconstruction, *différance*, and the impossibility of thinking or existing outside of language. In *Of Grammatology*’s first chapter, “The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing,” Derrida analyzes the concept of the “sign” and argues that Saussure’s separation into a representational “signifier” and an absolute “signified” is an error. Because it is impossible to think without language, which is inherently representational, arbitrary, and symbolic, every

signified must be explained or understood using other signifiers. “There has to be a transcendental signified,” he writes, “for the difference between signifier and signified to be somewhere absolute and irreducible” (20). This transcendental signified can theoretically exist, but without a non-arbitrary descriptive system, it can never be discovered.

Derrida then applies this endlessly shifting chain of meaning, in which each signified is simply another signifier, to understanding the self. Traditional metaphysics of ontology, he explains, see the inner being, or self, as a dependable signifier: “The word ‘being,’ or at any rate the words designating the sense of being in different languages is, with some others, an ‘originary word,’ the transcendental word assuring the possibility of being-word to all other words” (20). The difficulty, however, is that the “sense of being” cannot be understood without or apart from the word “being,” and so there is no way to determine the sense of being results from the word, or vice versa. To put it another way, there are outward manifestations of “I,” but there is no identifiable internal “I” separate from language and dialogue.

Derrida’s theory about the impossible desire for the nonexistent signified is manifested in Bernard’s anxiety about discovering a true and transcendental self, and a corresponding single story to which all others refer. He speaks of his many identities – “There are many rooms – many Bernards” – but notes that the transcendental signified self “I was to myself was different; was none of these” (192-93). For Bernard, “I” represents the hope of a transcendental signified – an unknowable and yet real core Bernard to which all outward expressions of Bernard refer. He expects this “I” to be different from every other Bernard – more complete, yet recognizably the source of all of his identities. When, in his old age, Bernard abandons stories and refers to phrases being merely “changes,” and to himself as “weightless,” he is acknowledging the there

are no signifieds or anchors to provide him with meaning. Though he never articulates these concepts precisely, Bernard's realization of the shifting and mutable nature of the self apart from any foundational truth arguably anticipates Derrida's concepts by 43 years.

My connection of Woolf to Derrida is not a novel one – Andrea L. Yates's 2006 dissertation *Derrida – Woolf: Riding the Hyphen* explores various applications of Derrida's deconstruction to Woolf's body of work. Her chapter on *The Waves* focuses on the place of silence in the text and its relationship to Derrida's criticisms of language; she reads Percival as a critic of language who demonstrates its falsity and impotence through the influence he exerts despite his mute absence. She does not, however, turn her attention to Bernard – nor does Ruth Porritt, whose paper "Surpassing Derrida's Deconstructed Self: Virginia Woolf's Poetic Disarticulation of the Self" does a close reading of the use of "I" in *The Waves*, noting how Woolf repeats "I" to the point where it becomes almost meaningless and reflects the foundationless nature of the characters' selves. While Derrida merely points out the splitting of the self, Porritt argues, Woolf goes further by identifying that self is given meaning by society, and suggesting "we"—as represented through the six voices of *The Waves*—as the solution for the loss of "I." "When we look within ourselves," she says, "we are not lost in an infinite regress of reflecting mirrors — rather, we find the visage of potential meaning carried by our dialogic others. Each individual voice has meaning, but it has meaning primarily with other voices" (335). Individuals do exist, but they exist as focal points of conversations, as the centers of webs of thought and dialogue extending outward in all directions.

Porritt's explanation of Woolf's meaningful self as communal is the key to unlocking Bernard's inability to complete his autobiography. Fearful of a lifetime of multiple selves and changeable identity, Bernard attempts to discover a concrete self

through eliminating all other voices, only to discover that his self has, apparently, vanished. This is not, however, because the self does not exist in any form – it is because he has ended all conversation and co-creation with Louis, Neville, Jinny, Susan, and Rhoda. Bernard is correct when he asks, “Who am I? I am not simple and one but complex and many,” because, from a deconstructionist point of view, he does not exist as an individual (54). A single voice can encapsulate who he is neither in memory nor in the present – storytelling fails because it must essentially be a community act. The multiplicity of human experience is such that there are no definable protagonists, no delineated beginnings and endings, and indeed, no clear boundaries between the self and others.

Ultimately, Bernard finds biography impossible because he does not possess all of the voices necessary to express who he is. As he grasps at straws to attempt to explain to his listener who he is and has been, he discovers that he is not the man that he was when with his friends, and he has no knowable way of going on. He finds himself unable to go on in light of the futility and imposed order of solitary existence. For a few brief pages, Bernard attempts to experience existence in a self-less state. He drops his notebook of phrases to the floor to be swept up, walks out into the countryside, moves slowly through town noting how he “must” go on (220). At the last moment, however, he finds himself unable to completely embrace a world without the individual self. Recalling his most deep-rooted habits of appropriating the heroic struggle and imagining himself as others, he thinks once more in the final lines of the noble, fallen Percival and vows to emulate him in an unceasing struggle against the inevitable:

What enemy do we now perceive advancing against us, you whom I ride now,
as we stand pawing this stretch of pavement? It is death. Death is the enemy.

It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying

back like a young man's, like Percival's, when he galloped in India. I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death! (220)

After all of his statements about the falseness of stories, Bernard again relies on them for his final words in the text. In doing so, he draws an interesting conclusion – that, regardless of whether or not they are true, he *needs* stories to find the will to live. Regardless of whether or not they are complete, regardless of whether or not they are accurate, the very act of storytelling is what sustains him. As long as he imagines himself as other characters, he can forget that he does not exist, and he can forget that he will soon find himself in a wordless oblivion, forever separate from his friends. As he walks the streets immediately before this passage, Bernard draws hope from a light on the horizon; “there is a kindling in the sky,” he says, “whether of lamplight or of dawn” (220). The fact that the light may be artificial is irrelevant; its effect is the same. This ambiguity reflects Bernard's final conclusion – the artificiality of storytelling and the falseness of identity do not affect their ability to give him motivation and purpose. Though he has admitted that he is like a wave, temporary and ever-changing, the power of narrative is enough to motivate him in one final surge forward, breaking onto the shores of death and the dissolution of the individual.

Through Bernard's final soliloquy, conclusions about the collective nature of selfhood, and eventual resolution to attempt to narrate as an individual regardless, Woolf articulates a theory of biography that is decades ahead of her time. She anticipates Derrida's deconstruction of the self and the transcendental signifier, and offers as solution narrative community and the power of multiple selves. After declaring traditional biography to be impossible, Woolf attempts to approximate the human experience by employing multiple voices. She leaves out the names, dates, and other

details traditionally associated with biography, and resists the impulse to draw conclusions or use traditional narration to impose form upon her characters. In doing so, she creates the most accurate biography possible within her framework – a single biography of seven people that acknowledges that biography can never begin or end with one person. Even as Bernard declares the impossibility of completing a work of biography, Woolf succeeds. The result is a text that declares its own impossibility, and thus remains ever elusive. No matter how closely *The Waves* is studied, it reflects its own philosophy: always impossible to pin down or define when its ideas and elements are drawn away from the holistic, ambiguous, and ever-shifting text.

ⁱ Shakespearean allusions and direct references are common in Woolf's work – in *A Room of One's Own*, she imagines Shakespeare's sister and her predicament of not being encouraged to write. In one of the novel's prominent motifs, the titular character of *Mrs. Dalloway* repeatedly returns to a passage from *Cymbeline*: "Fear no more the heat o' the sun / Nor the furious winter's rages" (4.2). In a repetition and inversion ripe for further study, Bernard alludes to this same passage – rather than be caught up in domesticity and materialism, he argues, one would "better be like Susan and love and hate the heat of the sun or the frost-bitten grass" (197).

ⁱⁱ See, for example, "The Meaning of Elvedon in 'The Waves': A Key to Bernard's Experience and Woolf's Vision," by Joseph Allen Boone.

ⁱⁱⁱ Despite Bernard's insistence on his own uniqueness, and the constant differentiations both he and Louis make between themselves, they both share this lineage. Louis often speaks of how he has the responsibility of carrying on a legacy. "My task, my burden, has always been greater than other people's," he says. "A pyramid has been set on my shoulders....It would have been happier to have been born without a destiny" (147). The difference is that for Louis, it is a burden and a continuation, whereas Bernard sees history as something to play with, inhabit, and be inspired by.

^{iv} Bernard is entirely incorrect in this assertion – Rhoda and Louis both repeatedly refer to the fragmentation and changeability of their respective selves. Rhoda sometimes rejects the existence of the self, saying "Identity failed me. We are nothing" (45). Elsewhere she describes herself as divided, saying, "I am broken into separate pieces; I am no longer one" (76). Louis also notes that he feels like several people: "Meeting and parting, we assemble different forms, make different patterns," he says (123). Unlike Bernard, however, Louis finds this multiplicity terrifying and dangerous. "If I do not nail these impressions to the board," he argues, "and out of the many men in me make one; exist here and now and not in streaks and patches, like scattered snow wreaths on far mountains...then I shall fall like snow and be wasted" (123).

^v In fact, Neville specifically connects this lack of selfhood with a lack of speech and narration – he refers to Rhoda, "with whom I shared silence when the others spoke" (148).

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