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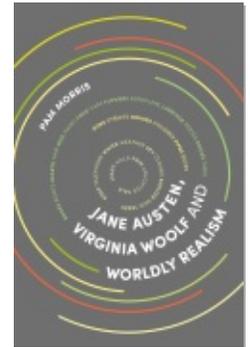
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The Waves: Blasphemy of Laughter and Criticism

The Waves (1931) is widely acknowledged as Woolf's most ambitious and achieved modernist work.¹ Woolf herself appears to underwrite the critical consensus as to its radical break with past conventions, most notably realism. In her diary entry, setting out her aims for the new novel, she writes, 'I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity [. . .] this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting from lunch to dinner: it is false, unreal, merely conventional.'² The impression that, in *The Waves*, Woolf is relentlessly excluding the social and material in order to focus upon the subjective and spiritual realms of experience is strengthened by further comments in her diary as to the novel's genesis. Her remarks are undeniably couched in what seems the language of idealist interiority. She writes, on 28 September 1926, of experiencing, while at Rodmell, an introspective, melancholy mood that she recognises as the intimation of a new novel. The solitude of Rodmell, she says, allowed expansion of 'this odd immeasurable soul' so that 'one goes down into the well and nothing protects one from the assault of truth' (*Diary*, 3.112). A month later, she notes in her diary that the new work is to be a 'dramatisation of my mood at Rodmell. It is to be an endeavour at something mystic, spiritual; the thing that exists when we aren't there' (*Diary*, 3.114). And yet this 'thing' that exists in our absence is not otherworldly or immaterial. Adding some remarks 'on the mystical side of this solitude', she concludes, 'it is not oneself but something in the universe that one's left with' (*Diary*, 3.113).

The bypassing of self and focus upon the physical universe here is crucial. *The Waves* is, indeed, a supremely ambitious work. Stylistically and thematically, Woolf moves radically beyond both individualist psychological realism and actualist social realism. Her

aim is to produce a comprehensive materialist vision of existence. It is a vision that bases understanding of human life upon the fact of self as embodied and thus in metonymic continuity with the vast scale and duration of the physical world. This worldly realism produces a new egalitarian regime of the perceptible. The language of *The Waves* ranges horizontally and inclusively from the motility of atoms, nerves and fibres to the movement of tides and solar system. Politically, this practice of worldly realism launches a comprehensive attack upon all the sacred tenets of idealist ideology. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf indicts the collaboration of idealist modes of thought with the working of the social and political system 'at its most intense' (*Diary*, 2.248). In *The Waves*, she turns her attention to the complicity of idealist views of culture with structures of power and inequality. She attacks the culture system at its most intense. In *Mrs Dalloway*, the heterogeneity of life that Clarissa Dalloway celebrates in the space of London streets is threatened by an authoritarian desire for discipline and regularity. In *The Waves*, the imposition of a vision of authoritarian conformity looks to globalised technology as a means of con-scripting universal space into its own regulated order.

Two events during the time Woolf was thinking about and writing *The Waves* would have intensified her concern with the cultural and political threat of idealism, reminding her, if that were necessary, of the perils of vision not challenged by fact. In 1927, following his death, a second edition of F. H. Bradley's *Ethical Studies* was published and in 1928, Clive Bell published *Civilization: An Essay*, with a dedication to 'Dearest Virginia'. In his preliminary address to Woolf, Bell recalls their early friendship in the pre-war days when 'we were mostly socialists' and before he had considerably modified those youthful ideas.³ Certainly there is little of socialism or even of egalitarianism in the 1928 essay, but Bell's understanding of 'civilization' and 'culture', as expressed in that work, shares much common ground with Bradley's idealism. Both texts are imbued with what Woolf, in *Mrs Dalloway*, understands as 'the spirit of religion', the urge to venerate an immaterial ideal at the expense of bodily life. Both Bradley and Bell subscribe to a regime of the perceptible as a vertical order, regulating who and what counts as worthy of notice and what is other and undistinguished within the nation and beyond. In subjecting the values and institutions they revere to the blasphemy of laughter and criticism in *The Waves*, Woolf expands the scope of her critique of idealist structures of thought to encompass global and scientific forces well beyond the elitist mental worlds of those like Bell and Bradley.

Both Bell and Bradley elevate an intensely individualistic notion of self. For each, the only purpose of human existence is spiritual and intellectual self-realisation.⁴ For Bell the aim is ‘complete self-development and complete self-expression’ (p. 98). Bradley writes, ‘the end and the standard is self-realization’.⁵ Drawing upon the tradition of Edmund Burke, Bradley sees self-fulfilment solely in terms of a conscious, intellectual and spiritual identification with the ‘soul’ of the nation as inhering in its culture, social order, laws and institutions. ‘But the child is not merely the member of a family,’ he declares, ‘he is born a member of the English nation’ (*Ethical Studies*, p. 169). This willed identification of self with an ideal of the nation entails acceptance of the duties that inhere in the station in life into which one is born. The religious reverence inculcated in the self’s identification with the nation as a vision of the Good entails within it the logic of sacrifice. Bradley writes, the heart of the nation, ‘rise[s] high and beat[s] in the breast of each one of her citizens, till her safety and her honour are dearer to each than life [. . .] and death seems a little thing to those that go for her to their common and nameless graves’ (*Ethical Studies*, p. 184). This total merging of self with nation even resolves the apparent antithesis between despotism and individualism, Bradley claims. ‘The truth of despotism is saved, because, unless the member realises the whole [nation] by and in himself, he fails to reach his own individuality’ (*Ethical Studies*, p. 188).

Certainly Clive Bell cannot be accused of chauvinistic glorification of the state. ‘Nationalism is a terrible enemy to civility’, he claims (*Civilization*, p. 109). His focus upon civilisation rather than nation as the location of self-realisation seems to comprehend a more expansive view of human achievement. Yet this turns out not to be the case. Bell’s definition of civilisation constitutes a more highly individualistic focus upon interiority at the expense of the material world even than Bradley’s. It is also entirely Eurocentric. Like idealists generally, Bell sees education as the primary means of fostering the perfection of the inner life. Indeed, education is the gateway to inner nobility, but Bell’s view of education invokes no sense of wider national life. ‘Civilized people’, he asserts, value knowledge ‘as a means to exquisite spiritual states’ of mind (*Civilization*, p. 92). ‘Without education [. . .] [there is wanting] the key to the inner palace of pleasures’ (*Civilization*, pp. 170–1). Given this exclusive focus upon interiority it is not surprising that his ideal of civilisation encompasses only the mental realm of those with access to an elite, public school, classical education. No aspect of the material world attaches to Bell’s view of a civilised national community. ‘Civilization’, he writes, ‘is

the flavour given to the self-expression of an age or a society by a mental attitude; it is the colour given to social manifestations by a peculiar and prevailing point of view. Whence comes this colouring view of life [. . .]? From individuals of course' (*Civilization*, p. 165). A civilised society, therefore, depends upon the existence of a group of highly cultivated individual people of sufficient influence and number 'to affect larger groups and ultimately whole communities' (*Civilization*, p. 166).

A state 'may be held to have become highly civilized', Bell claims, 'when an appreciable part of the mass, though barbarous enough [. . .] has yet absorbed a tincture of the precious dye' (*Civilization*, p. 191). This absorption of mental values by the community at large does not imply any progress towards political, social or economic equality, however. The need to provide for material wants is wholly inimical to the development of highly civilised minds. The poor, 'so long as to be poor means to be unfree and uneducated, are concerned actively with civilization only in so far as by their labours they make it possible' (*Civilization*, p. 71). A civilised society, Bell maintains, requires a leisured class and 'a leisured class requires the existence of a class of slaves' or, more preferably 'willing servants [. . .] people content to make sacrifices for an ideal' (*Civilization*, p. 205). For that reason, he argues, democracy and civilisation are incompatible: 'There has never been a civilized democracy', he declares (*Civilization*, p. 220). Moreover, he suggests, sweetness and light have certainly 'radiated from the courts of tyrants and usurpers' (*Civilization*, p. 226). In the present age, the example of Mussolini and Lenin may well spread across the world, Bell says, 'And I do not know that civilization stands in the long run to lose by the change' (*Civilization*, p. 224).

Bell's gender politics are no more democratic than his class sympathies. In the perceptible cultured community as he constitutes it, women are as mute and invisible as workers. In the highly civilised society of fifth and fourth century Athens, Bell notes, the only roles available to women were that of wife and mother or of *hetaerae*. Among the latter, most were common prostitutes, but a privileged few were cultivated enough to become companions and mistresses of highly civilised Athenians (*Civilization*, pp. 234–5). Bell implies that for present day British women the options are even more limited; 'they must become either wives or old maids' (*Civilization*, p. 236). For the former, once she is mistress of a house and mother of children, it is difficult for her to 'keep her place in the first flight' (*Civilization*, p. 237). Spinsterhood leads to an even worse fate. 'The peculiar intelligence and sensibility

of youth fade [. . .] her understanding shrinks [. . .] I sometimes wonder whether an old maid is fit for anything less than the kingdom of heaven' (*Civilization*, p. 238). The actual importance that Bell attaches to women's role in fostering a civilised nation is indicated in the mere eight pages he devotes to the subject, clearly as an afterthought at the end of his essay.

Even if Woolf did not read the second edition of Bradley's *Ethical Studies* when it was published in 1927, she would have been familiar with its ideas and teaching since these were widely discussed and dispersed throughout the intellectual and political domains. She most certainly read Clive Bell's *Civilization*, which Leonard Woolf dismissed as 'very superficial' (*Diary*, 3.184). *The Waves* constitutes a 'blasphemous' rebuttal, by means of criticism and ironic laughter, of the idealist glorification of self as cultured interiority and of a Burkean nation as revered tradition and guarantor of civilisation. Woolf overturns the vertical hierarchy of spirit over matter and thereby challenges the myths of individualism, interiority and spirituality that are sustained by it. *The Waves* insists upon the materiality not the spirituality of the self. No other novel can be so crammed full of descriptions of bodily sensation. Other novelists may well deal in more graphic detail with bodily excretions, tortured flesh and visceral experiences. Yet in most cases these details are significant in terms of the individual character to whom they happen and are more usually represented as part of extreme events and heightened moments within the narrative. In *The Waves*, the focus upon embodied matter is much more impersonal and is represented as the norm of life, not the exception; it is there for its own sake as part of the continuum of physical existence.

Whereas idealists, like Bell, impute value to human life only in so far as it attains 'exquisite states of mind', Bernard, in *The Waves*, recognises that we are all 'undifferentiated blobs of matter'.⁶ Instead of a vertical social order, this wholly unelevated view of human existence contributes to the novel's emphasis upon the communality of the body, as Gillian Beer points out.⁷ As in *Mrs Dalloway*, interiority is often experienced by the characters in *The Waves* not as private thought but as shared consciousness, as a metonymic movement through different perspectives. Poetry and culture, more generally, are shown, in *The Waves*, to depend upon the here and now of the common life of bio-social being. While education is valued by idealists as the primary means of transmitting civilised mental being, Woolf recognises it as a mechanism that conscripts the body into subjection. 'Civilisation' is depicted as a euphemistic abstraction

that spins an idealised veil over the imposition of coercive material practices and structures. Woolf's own vision wholly lacks the nostalgia and religiosity that typify both Bradley's and Bell's imagining of ideal or civilised national communities. It is a perspective she shares with Leonard Woolf: a futuristic recognition of the development of technological, global capitalism, the ultimate system of abstract macro idealism, and one capable of conscripting global space into the hierarchical order of a place.

Finally, through the ambitious scale of her novel, Woolf challenges limited views, like Bell's, of women's potential within the world of culture and the public sphere. In defiance of canonical tradition, Woolf sets out to discover a new empirical poetics. Her aim is to articulate a celebratory vision of the immensity and power of the universe that contains human life. Yet it will be a vision stripped bare of idealist religiosity and consolation. Woolf explores this ambition for a new artistic distribution of the perceptible in a series of essays written while she was preoccupied with *The Waves*. In all of these essays she calls for a rejection of the vertical hierarchy of novelistic form that lavishes attention on psychological individuality and a shift, instead, towards a wider, horizontal vision of human existence, as a continuity with the physical universe. Clearly there is a risk here of simply displacing subjective idealism with the macro idealism of universalism. In her essays Woolf counters this danger by insisting that the moment of comprehensive vision can only arise in the here and now of lived experience, that vision and fact must co-exist.

In her essay 'The Cinema' (1926), for example, she writes that the estranging effect of cinema which allows us to behold events 'as they are when we are not there' produces a more comprehensive vision of existence, the ability 'to generalise, to endow one man with the attributes of a race'.⁸ Yet this process of abstraction must be continually dissolved in the motility of actual existence in the here and now. 'We get intimations', she writes, 'only in the chaos of the streets, perhaps, when some momentary assembly of colour, sound, movement, suggests that here is a scene waiting a new art to be transfixed' (*Essays*, 4.595).

In 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future' (1927), Woolf again expresses the need to encompass the immediacy of actuality within a generalising vision. She praises Shakespeare's ability to move without a hitch 'from philosophy to a drunken brawl; from love songs to an argument; from simple merriment to profound speculation' (*Essays*, 4.431). She argues that the novel will evolve to comprehend both particularity and 'the wide, general ideas which civilization teaches'

(*Essays*, 4.434). This new form will focus very little upon individualising details of ‘the houses, incomes, occupations of its characters [. . .] but [instead] it will give the relation of the mind to general ideas’ (*Essays*, 4.435). Yet this philosophical vision derives from immersion in the material world. The ‘democratic art of prose’ is ‘so humble that it can go anywhere; no place is too low, too sordid, or too mean [. . .] It can lick up with its long glutinous tongue the most minute fragments of fact and mass them into the most subtle labyrinths’ (*Essays*, 4.436). It is from facts that the vision evolves.

In ‘Women and Fiction’ (1929) Woolf again argues that the new novel ‘will cease to be the dumping ground for personal emotions’ (*Essays*, 5.34–5). It will observe men and women ‘as they cohere and clash in groups and classes and races’. Future women writers ‘will look beyond the personal [. . .] to the wider questions [. . .] of our destiny and the meaning of life’ (*Essays*, 5.34). In the extended version of this essay, given as a lecture at Girton and published as *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Woolf chooses to end with a ringing rejection of individualism and the limited perspective this ideology imposes upon any art that embraces it. ‘I am talking’, she says, ‘of the common life which is the real life and not the little separate lives we live as individuals [. . .] we [shall] escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality; and the sky, too, and the trees.’⁹

There is no doubt that Woolf was personally preoccupied, during the period in which she was writing *The Waves*, with the nature of the physical universe and of the relationship of human life to that immensity. She recounts an intense experience that occurred one evening in February 1926, as she walked through Russell Square. She evokes a metonymic movement beyond the individuality of self out to the vastness of the physical world: ‘I see the mountains in the sky: the great clouds; and the moon which is risen over Persia; I have a great and astonishing sense of something there, which is “it”’ (*Diary*, 3.62). With this recognition of immensity comes also a sense ‘of my own strangeness, walking on the earth [. . .] of the infinite oddity of the human position’. Two years later, she describes a similar experience that begins with a feeling of loneliness and terror in which she ‘got then to a consciousness of what I call “reality” [. . .] something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky’ (*Diary*, 3.196). It would seem that this intense experience of the infinitesimal compass of a single human life in the scale of the life of the universe is what urges her shift of focus from the individual to human kind generally.

She writes, 'How little one counts, I think: how little anyone counts; how fast and furious and masterly life is; and how all these thousands are swimming for dear life' (*Diary*, 3.201). A vision of transient human life as metonymically part of the continuity of universal life offers a compassionate transcendence that is rooted in materiality rather than idealism. 'It may be', she suggests, 'that though we change; one flying after another, so quick so quick, yet we are somehow successive, and continuous – we human beings' (*Diary*, 3.218).

Woolf recognises these experiences as in some sense metaphysical. This is the term also used by Peter Walsh, in *Mrs Dalloway*, to describe Clarissa's sense of self as extended out into the wider world. Yet Peter also concedes that Clarissa Dalloway is 'one of the most thorough-going sceptics he had ever met' (*Mrs Dalloway*, p. 66). The language Woolf uses to recount her intense sense of connection to the larger universe evokes that of another determinedly anti-religious poetic sceptic: Lucretius. His poem, *De Rerum Natura*, was long regarded as the most dangerously blasphemous work of the classical writers. It is indicative of the high claim Woolf is implicitly making, contra Bell, for the role of women within cultural life that *The Waves* is a palimpsest of *De Rerum Natura* and of Shelley's unfinished poem, *The Triumph of Life*. Her choice equally declares the antipathetic position to the 'great tradition' she is occupying. Shelley, like Lucretius, is notoriously at odds with established authority.

All three 'blasphemous' texts open with a powerful poetic invocation to a totally non-spiritual, natural creative force, the engendering light of the rising sun. Throughout *The Waves* there are echoes of imagery from *The Triumph of Life*, especially in the words of Rhoda. Yet the primary importance of Shelley for Woolf's ambition in *The Waves* is that he unites poetic vision to worldly politics. Indeed, as Harold Bloom points out, Shelley shares the same philosophical heritage as Woolf. 'Shelley', Bloom claims, 'is the most Humean poet in the language [. . .] and it is Hume, not Berkeley or Plato, whose view of reality informs *Prometheus Unbound* and poems that came after.'¹⁰ In *The Triumph of Life* only the figures of Aristotle and Bacon among the great and famous of the world appear uncorrupted by false beliefs and illusions of power. Both are usually regarded as the originators of empirical materialism. The poem contrasts the grotesque triumphal procession of life with interludes of dream-like platonic vision but implies that both dystopic and idealist perspectives are illusionary. In *The Waves*, each of the six main characters describes the life in city streets as a procession. Woolf uses the discrepancy between these views of 'reality' to point to the subjective

screen habitually imposed upon the empirical world by subjective mental values and attitudes. So Jinny declares, 'This is the triumphant procession; this is the army of victory' (p. 161). Rhoda, however, contemplates the scene with revulsion, 'This is Oxford Street. Here are hate, jealousy, hurry and indifference frothed into the wild semblance of life' (p. 132).

Not only does Lucretius open *De Rerum Natura* with an image of the sun as source of life, like Woolf, he associates this creative force with a female image rather than a masculine solar deity. Throughout the poem, Lucretius' language, like Woolf's, foregrounds power and movement. The rising sun, Lucretius writes, will 'envelop and flood the whole world with [. . .] light [. . .] and [its heat] beats its way, so to speak, through waves of air'.¹¹ Lucretius' poetic imagination, like Woolf's, is particularly responsive to vast skyscapes of 'great caverns' and immense clouds 'swimming through the air' (*DRN*, pp. 513, 291). There is, in the language of both, a sense of the plenitude of the physical universe. Woolf even seems to have transplanted the description Neville gives of boyish comradeship lying in the long grass watching cricket straight from *De Rerum Natura* where Lucretius enthuses on the simple delight arising 'when stretched forth in groups upon the soft grass beside a rill of water under the branches of a tall tree men merrily refresh themselves at no great cost, especially when the weather smiles' (*DRN*, p. 97).

Like Shelley (whose poem is also a palimpsest of *De Rerum Natura*) and like Woolf, Lucretius fuses celebration of physical life with political critique. His passionate aim in writing the work was his desire to free human beings from the fetters of false belief in otherworldly powers by expounding the Epicurean materialist philosophy of the universe. At present, Lucretius writes, human life lies 'fouly grovelling upon the ground, crushed beneath the weight of Superstition' (*DRN*, pp. 7–9). The abject fear spawned by thought of non-existent powers and deities is cause of most of the greed, cruelty, ambitions and wars that curse human existence, Lucretius claims. He points specifically to idealism and its imposition of subjective mental visions upon the object world. 'We see in marvellous fashion', he writes, 'many things [. . .] which all try as it were to break the credit of our senses' (*DRN*, p. 313). They deceive us 'because of opinions of the mind which we bring to them ourselves' (*DRN*, p. 313). Lucretius' arguments against idealism, along with his atomic theory of matter, in which chance collisions 'heedless, without aim, without intention', produce the entire universe had

renewed relevance for Woolf's generation in the wake of Einstein's atomic theory (*DRN*, p. 177). In 1918, for example, H. Woods published a defence of materialism with the Lucretian title *On the Nature of Things*.¹²

What most outraged religious authority through the ages was Lucretius' insistence upon the materiality of the soul. The mind, he says, 'which we often call the intelligence [. . .] is part of man, no less than hands and feet and eyes are parts of the whole living being' (*DRN*, p. 195). Lucretius declares that only by means of the conjoined physical existence of body and mind is sensation and feeling possible (*DRN*, p. 213). Since both are material, both are mortal (*DRN*, p. 221). Woolf, too, attacks any spiritualised view of human life and subjectivity. Throughout *The Waves*, there is repeated focus upon the material basis of sensation and feelings. Subjective emotions and responses, normally taken as indication and guarantee of the uniqueness of individual sensibility or soul, are located in the corporeal system. Bernard comments on the feeling of domestic contentment at breakfast time with his wife, 'Muscles, nerves, intestines, blood-vessels, all that makes the coil and spring of our being, the unconscious hum of the engine, as well as the dart and flicker of the tongue, functioned superbly' (pp. 217–18). Jinny describes the heightened sensations arising after the dinner to bid farewell to Percival in bodily terms: 'our senses have widened. Membranes, webs of nerve have [. . .] spread themselves' (p. 110). Similarly, in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf writes, 'heart, body and brain [are] all mixed together and not contained in separate compartments' (p. 14). The soul situated 'half-way down the spine', kindles to a warm glow as a direct effect of good food and wine (p. 9).

De Rerum Natura combines scathing critique of the degradation of human existence in thrall to false beliefs with an expansive poetic celebration of the physical universe. Woolf's artistic ambition in *The Waves* is similarly two-fold. The narrative sections constitute a critical and ironic examination of the pretensions, inequalities and oppressions that result from veneration of false idealist beliefs. The interludes, by contrast, express a powerfully imagined evocation of the majestic sweep and immensity of physical life. Whereas Clive Bell locates a mythic ideal of civilisation in an elite subjective realm, Woolf sets out a wholly communal materialist vision of the universe. She focuses persistently upon the shared materiality of self and culture. Instead of the Burkean veneration of the nation as inherited traditions and institutions, Woolf calls attention to the processes whereby the self as a body is conscripted into the fetters of coercive

belief systems. To be embodied, she shows, is always already to be the site of cultural practice. Idealism needs to be rejected as an ideology because it veils corporeal forms of subjugation behind an elevated metaphysical rhetoric of spiritual self-realisation and cultural glorification.

Woolf's anti-idealism, her insistence upon the materiality of body and mind, accounts for the unusual narrative method and the structure of *The Waves*. It is a stylistics that constitutes a radically horizontal regime of the perceptible, replacing vertical hierarchies. The use of the word 'said' rather than 'thought' to distinguish the personal accounts given by the different characters underlines the embodiedness of each. Thought is the register of subjectivity. To speak is a physical act, engaging tongue, lips, throat and breath, 'the dart and flicker of the tongue', as Bernard says. Speech is thus one of those liminal sites where there occurs a metonymic transaction across the porous boundaries of self and world, the biological and the cultural; it is the recurrent enactment of bio-psycho-social being. The structure of the novel is also metonymic, expressing the horizontal co-extension of physical and social existence. The descriptive interludes move from sea and sky, operating as metonymies for the larger whole of the physical universe, to the house, with its table of plates and cutlery, as metonymies of the wider social and cultural world. To find 'lodgement', an embodied place in the social world, is a recurrent motif in the novel. Yet the plates, set out ready for food, point to the corporeal basis of cultural life, while the windows of the house transact the movement backwards and forwards between the two interconnected realms. The garden where the children's first social experiences are laid down is another metonymic site of cultural and physical contiguity.

'What have you made of life?' Neville asks on behalf of all six characters (p. 176). It is the question or compelled urgency that drives the idealist goal of individualist self-realisation. The novel radically undermines the ideological myth of self-making as an endeavour of innate mental will. Self emerges, is realised, as embodied being. Bernard describes how at bath-time water squeezed from the sponge 'pours down the runnel of my spine. Bright arrows of sensation shoot on either side. I am covered with warm flesh' (p. 19). Later in the novel Bernard expresses a wish that children might be spared that inscription into fleshly being (p. 200). The biographical narratives of the six characters have a strikingly Lockean, anti-idealist opening. The first word of the first sentences initiates the grammar of separation as the subject registers the sensations of a

world external to the self, “I see a slab of pale yellow,” said Susan.’ Later in the novel, Bernard again documents the empirical process of self-realisation, ‘I am not part of the street – no, I observe the street. One splits off, therefore’ (p. 94). The production of a factitious self from fleshly being, ensures, as Elizabeth Hamilton pointed out at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a residual fear of dissolution.¹³ As Louis says, ‘But if I do not nail these impressions to the board and out of the many men in me make one [. . .] then I shall fall like snow and be wasted’ (p. 141). Self-realisation as Louis suggests here, is an impulse driven more by fleshly vulnerability than by willed intellectual or spiritual seeking after perfection.

What is notably absent in the first section of the novel is the Freudian family. The self, as Woolf represents it, is not produced by individual psychology so much as by socio-physical forces. The children’s early and formative traumas derive from the shock of those events in which the social collapses back into the physical: violent death, sexual love, putrefaction. Bernard describes the process of individuation wrought by these encounters with brutal aspects of physical being, ‘The wax – the virginal wax that coats the spine melted in different patches for each of us. The growl of the boot-boy making love [. . .] the dead man in the gutter [. . .] the rat swarming with maggots [. . .] our white wax was streaked and stained differently by each of these [. . .] We suffered terribly as we became separate bodies’ (p. 202). In make-believe play and story-telling, the cultural is shown as already at work transforming physical actuality into a socially produced realm. Although the children impose the exotic adventures of imperialism on the English garden, their preoccupation is still the trauma of emergence of self from flesh and the fear of dissolution back into matter: ‘We are in a swamp now; in a malarial jungle. There is an elephant white with maggots, killed by an arrow shot dead in its eye [. . .] that is a hooded cobra [. . .] with a festering brown scar to be mauled by lions’ (p. 16). It is perhaps significant that loss of secure identity boundaries – swamp, jungle, putrefaction, wounds, death – is transposed to a non-English geography, the otherness of a space to be colonised.

In the narrative sections that follow early childhood, the characters speak as if they are making autonomous individual choices and pursuing interior personal goals. Yet their words equally suggest that far from self-realisation they are being made by the unrelenting pressures that constitute the continuity of physical and cultural being. Later in life, Neville says, ‘We have chosen now, or sometimes it seems the choice was made for us – a pair of tongs pinched us

between the shoulders' (p. 178). By the end of the novel there is little sense of chronological progression in the six lives. Their stories are more a series of repetitions like the waves on the shore than a linear trajectory towards self-realisation. Even Susan's narrative, which most approximates to the conventional *Bildungsroman* of unhappy childhood leading to eventual marriage and motherhood, is denied any sense of individual fulfilment.

Readers of *The Waves* sometimes complain that it is difficult to distinguish between the different characters. That would seem to be the anti-individualistic aim for a new form of novel that Woolf calls for in her essays of the time. Frequently, characters in *The Waves* express a sense of extended or shared consciousness. Neville says, 'As he approaches I become not myself but Neville mixed with somebody' (p. 67). Bernard, the character who is most attracted to imaginative identification with others, speaks of the desire 'to embrace the whole world with the arms of understanding [. . .] 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' (p. 93). In her diary of 1926, Woolf writes of what she terms the screen making habit: 'If we had not this device for shutting people off from our sympathies, we might, perhaps, dissolve utterly. Separateness would be impossible. But the screens are in the excess; not the sympathy' (*Diary*, 3.104). *The Waves*, then, can be read as an anti-*Bildungsroman*. It is Woolf's attempt to replace the self-centredness of the traditional realist novel with a worldly realist distribution of the perceptible foregrounding the material common life and culture of shared physical being and intersubjective consciousness. It is typical that Bernard's moment of extended sympathies is perceived by him as physical sensation, as oscillations and vibrations.

The Waves, thus, sets out an alternative sense of community to that of identification with the nation as spiritual ideal and location of abstract values demanding reverence. It constitutes a more radical recognition of the common life of shared fleshly being, in which the sympathies arising from the fellowship of physical existence are not totally screened off by self-preserving individualistic separateness. In the novel, all six characters experience moments when the boundaries of self give way to horizontal flows of consciousness. This shared commonality has its being in physical bodily events like eating. Neville describes how he loses 'all knowledge of particulars as I eat'. The occasion is one of the shared meals where they all meet up together. The experience causes even Louis to confess that

the ‘attempts to say, “I am this, I am that”, which we make, coming together, like separated parts of one body and soul, are false’ (p. 112). Bernard, as so often, sums up, ‘We have come together, at a particular time, to this particular spot. We are drawn into this communion by some deep some common emotion’ (p. 103).

Equally, though, the body forms the basis of social division and separation; distinctions are inflicted upon the flesh. Judith Butler draws attention to those reiterative practices, those habitual physical rituals and actions, which, through their constant repetition, inscribe a gendered identity upon the body.¹⁴ Woolf, too, foregrounds the way routine bodily events determine the gendering of self. Bernard recounts the behavioural rituals of leave-taking that accompany departure for boarding school, differentiated into ‘this hand-shaking ceremony with my father’ and ‘this gulping ceremony with my mother’ (p. 22). The masculine suppression of tears is enforced early in life. Later in his narrative, Bernard refers to the daily male ritual of ‘shave, shave, shave’ and a visit to the barbers is one of the final ‘ceremonies’ enacted in the story (pp. 153, 233). Louis’ reiterative hanging up his coat and placing his cane on entering his office constitutes a daily reinscription of masculine authority (p. 166). Susan recites as an incantation the habitual female practices of her daily life: ‘I knead; I stretch; I pull, plunging my hands in the warm inwards of the dough’ (p. 80). As she grows older she assures herself that ‘my body has been used daily, rightly, like a tool by a good workman, all over’ (p. 179). Jinny’s womanly self is continuously produced by the bodily sensation of her ‘silk legs rub[bing] smoothly together’ while her feet are pinched in her fashionable shoes (p. 81). Later, the practice of applying powder and lipstick sustains her identity against physical changes inflicted by age (p. 162). Even Rhoda teaches her body to do ‘a certain trick’ (p. 185). The emergent embodied self, the novel suggests, is, from the beginning, a process of simultaneous material and cultural production. Susan’s rooted, maternal, country life is as unnatural in that sense as Jinny’s city existence.

The physical inscription of a gendered identity is consolidated by differential educational experiences. In the early section and continuing throughout the narrative the six characters form three pairs, sharing very similar qualities. Both Rhoda and Louis are fearful, solitary and poetic. Bernard and Susan conform most to the normal social expectations of marriage and family. Jinny and Neville are epicureans in taste and promiscuous in pursuit of sexual encounters. Yet by the time they reach adulthood the social status of the woman in each

pair is utterly different from that of her male counterpart. Louis, Bernard and Neville are at the centre of public life, secure in commercial, intellectual and social approval and success. The women are marginalised from that public world. The novel suggests that education is the means by which women's exclusion is effected and it is an exclusion taught to the body as much as the mind.

For Clive Bell and for British idealists, education is seen as the main vehicle for progression towards the highest form of mental self-realisation. For Bell it offers the key to 'the inner palace of pleasures' (*Civilization*, p. 171). In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf had already satirised the telling contrast between the splendour of dining in a male college and the scantiness of provision at the college for women. In *The Waves*, she represents a similar stark difference in the facilities of the school attended by Rhoda, Jinny and Susan. It could hardly be further from a 'palace of inner pleasures', offering no higher aspirations than that of embroidery and occupations as nurses or missionaries for the empire (pp. 24, 31). The meagre and ugly material conditions of the school preclude any entry into a more inspirational mental realm. Susan records her hatred of the 'wind-bitten shrubs' and 'the ugly, the encaustic tiles' (pp. 24, 31). The dining-room smells of meat, the corridors of carbolic and the schoolrooms of chalk (pp. 34, 48). Unsurprisingly, no attachment is formed to this impoverished mental and physical experience. Women need to find other spaces within the social world that will provide them with a sense of physically belonging. The only positions on offer are those designated by their female bodies. For Jinny, a sexual milieu of entertainment and parties creates a sense of being bodily at home. 'This is my world [. . .]' she says, 'I am a native here' (p. 82). In domesticity, Susan finds 'a dwelling-place made from time immemorial after an hereditary pattern' (p. 179). Rhoda, in denial of her bodily self, is condemned to a hopeless search for the security of embodied belonging: 'I wish above all things to have lodgement' (p. 107). In these three characters Woolf ironically depicts the place allotted women in Clive Bell's view of their roles within civilized society: mothers, *betaerae*, old maids.

Bernard, Louis and Neville, by contrast, experience school physically as a world that is spacious, generous of provision and endowed with dignity. 'A noble Roman air hangs over these austere quadrangles'; there are a courtyard and statue, library and laboratories, and playing fields with towering elms (p. 23). A material world, in other words, that fosters an embodied sense of entering into possession of cultural heritage. 'I come like a lord to his halls appointed' is

Neville's initial response (p. 23). 'Above all, we have inherited traditions', Louis thinks gratefully and Bernard describes the ceremonies, like taking breakfast at the headmaster's table, by which the necessary routines sustaining physical life are transformed into elevated cultural rituals (pp. 45, 46). There are no distasteful smells of soap and meat here to register corporal being as mean and repugnant. The school lends itself to an idealist interpretation as embodiment of a spiritual community. All three men come to assume they will achieve entry into the great tradition as writers and play a full and ambitious part in national and international life.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf turns from the exclusion of women to wonder whether 'it is worse perhaps to be locked in' and asks what the effect is of 'the safety and prosperity of the one sex [. . .] and [. . .] of the effect of tradition' (p. 19). *The Waves* is an exploration of the cultural, political and social costs, both for self and for others, of mental enclosure within privileged entitlement to revered traditions. For idealists, national culture, tradition and heritage constitute the expression of the nation's best soul. Inculcation of these values is therefore the means of achieving spiritual realisation of the best self for those members of the community who are most in harmony with the highest form of national life. For idealists it is pre-eminently education that fosters this process of identification between individual best self and the nation as ideal community. It is this sense of privileged unity between self and nation that allows the material realities of sacrifice, coercive authority, colonial enforcement and even despotism to be veiled by a rhetoric of reverence, sanctity and nobility.

In *The Waves*, the factual reality that underlies and upholds a privileged vision of national identity is represented as that of a hierarchical, divisive and ultimately brutal order. The public school education of the three male characters interpellates them into mutually reinforcing value systems of religion, nationalism, heroism and sacrifice.¹⁵ Despite the 'spiritual' nature of these ideals, they are literally embodied in the material practices of school routine. Ideology is both naturalised and sanctified in bodily experience: the communal processions into chapel, the half-holiday on the playing fields in honour of the Duke's birthday, buckling on cricket pads and the physical adoration of sporting heroes like Percival. It is not individuality, certainly not elevated interiority, that is nurtured by this corporal regime but the conformity of homo-erotic tribalism. This finds expression in competitive nationalism as the boasting

boys brag of a father who has scored a century at Lords or an uncle who is the best shot in England (pp. 36, 23).

The dark underside of this glorification of physical prowess is an ethics of brutality. The boasting boys 'make little boys sob in dark passages' and leave butterflies with their wings torn off (p. 36). In the late 1920s, fascism and Hitler were on the march in Germany and Mussolini was dominating Italian politics. 'The world is passing through an era of dictatorship' commented a writer in *The New Statesman* on 9 October 1927.¹⁶ While Woolf was writing, Mussolini was conscripting boys in Italy into fascist youth organisations. In *The Waves*, the boasting boys are 'marching in troops with badges on their caps; they salute simultaneously passing the figure of their general' (p. 36). The analogy could not be clearer. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf equates all forms of adversarial competitiveness with the 'private-school stage of human existence where there are "sides", and it is necessary for one side to beat another side' (p. 80).

In *The Waves*, Woolf suggests that even national culture is impoverished by an idealist regime of the perceptible that devalues the embodied self and its continuity with the material world, elevating instead a dream of spiritual community. She overturns this vertical ordering, claiming that poetry demands a living, horizontal connection of the self to social and physical realms. It is through the voices of Rhoda and Louis that she explores the damaging effects of enclosure within an idealist vision and the consequent loss of connection to the common life of bio-social being. Both characters are in search of timeless verities not inhering in material existence. Rhoda dreams of 'a world immune from change' (p. 86). Louis sees himself as the companion of Plato (p. 76). In her essays, Woolf often speaks admiringly of poetry as the most universalising of literary forms but, she adds, the vision must be balanced by detailed observation of the actual. In the diary entry recording her aims for *The Waves*, she expresses her impatience with the particulars of routine life, the 'appalling narrative business of the realist' (*Diary*, 3.209). Poets, she continues, succeed by simplifying so that 'practically everything is left out'. So in *Mrs Dalloway*, the idealist dreams that 'all this fever of living were simplicity itself; and myriads of things merged in one thing' (p. 49). Woolf rejects this desire for idealist simplicity in *The Waves*, declaring, 'I want to put practically everything in' (*Diary*, 3.210).

Rhoda and Louis are the two characters in *The Waves* most closely associated with poetry. Both attempt to impose a subjective

screen upon actuality, shutting out what they do not want to see. 'So terrible was life', says Rhoda, 'that I held up shade after shade. Look at life through this, look at life through that' (p. 170). The allusions in their speech to Shelley's representation of Keats in *Adonais* suggest that both see themselves as wounded by contact with a hostile material world (pp. 78, 86). As in *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf implies that the idealist impulse, despite its rhetoric of elevated spirituality, is frequently motivated by flight from physical reality perceived as distasteful, even repulsive, especially in the mass. Rhoda voices a visceral fear of and disgust for human life generally. 'Oh, human beings, how I have hated you! [. . .]' she cries, 'I have been stained by you and corrupted. You smell so unpleasant, too, lining up outside doors to buy tickets' (p. 169). She equally disavows her own 'clumsy [. . .] ill-fitting body' (p. 85).

This rejection of the corporeal prevents her from embracing material existence. Instead, Rhoda seeks to impose a subjective idealist vision of a perfect but inhuman world upon imperfect actuality. It would be a world without 'compromise and right and wrong on human lips' (p. 192). In total contrast to Woolf's view that the mental screens are in excess not the sympathy, Rhoda's would be a world without compassion, with no sense of continuity with the shared common, embodied life of physical existence. So fanatically does Rhoda pursue the dream of perfection, she fails to notice physical suffering, 'the poor hold[ing] out matchboxes in wind-bitten fingers' (p. 164). Ultimately, her Romantic visions of icy caverns and marble columns where the swallow dips her wing are beautiful but ethereal, bereft of life (p. 85). Bernard records, 'The willow as she saw it grew on the verge of a grey desert where no bird sang' (p. 210).

The allusion to Keats's *La Belle Dame sans Merci* implies that words shrivel into silence in an uninhabited place. Despite her shrinking from the world, Rhoda senses that poetry requires a shared, living community that can only exist among embodied beings. It is not spirit alone that nurtures art, it needs equally the life of the body. After reading Shelley's poem, 'The Question', Rhoda dreams of gathering a garland of unworldly flowers to present: 'O! to whom? [. . .] to whom shall I give all that now flows through me, from my warm, my porous body?' (p. 44). In addition to a living audience, poetic inspiration, Rhoda recognises, draws nourishment from a shared bodily life. Art is inherently democratic not exclusive, or otherworldly, or dwelling in palaces of the mind. 'I am drawn here across London to a particular spot, to a particular place [. . .]', Rhoda says, 'to light my fire at the general blaze of you who

live wholly, indivisibly and without caring' (p. 107). 'What can one make in loneliness?' she asks, and acknowledges that even the most heightened poetic pilgrimages 'start always in your presence, from this table, these lights, from Percival and Susan, here and now' (pp. 133, 114).

As David Hume had said much earlier, artistic inspiration is a horizontal not an individualistic force; it 'runs along the earth; is caught from one breast to another'.¹⁷ Woolf echoes Hume in *A Room of One's Own*: 'masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice' (p. 49). Cultural vitality cannot be nurtured when it is locked within the subjective self or constitutes a purely mental vision whether individual or national; it requires also the democratic motility of ongoing embodied social life. Bernard describes the red carnation on the table at the farewell meal for Percival. The single flower has become 'a seven-sided flower, many-petalled [. . .] a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution' (p. 104).

Rhoda's voice articulates a powerful refutation of exclusionary class and gender prescriptions, like those of Clive Bell, for the preservation of an exquisite spiritual 'civilization' for the privileged few. Unable to accept the embodied womanly identities prescribed, Rhoda never succeeds in finding a sense of belonging and thus a living, as opposed to an imaginary, audience. She represents one fate of the woman artist in a 'civilization' that extols only an exclusive gender and class tradition. She is denied cultural heritage and is bereaved of recipients for her song. Conversely, national culture remains unnurtured by her woman's voice and perspective. Within an elite regime of the perceptible she is invisible and mute.

The critique of Louis' idealism is both harsher than that of Rhoda's and a more direct challenge to the political consensus. Louis' Australian origins and accent are the source of a sense of vulnerability and exclusion that renders him eager to identify with values and institutions that command reverence. The disciplined procession into chapel pleases him in its imposition of homogeneity upon the variety of boys in the school (p. 25). In the figure of the headmaster he secures for himself an imaginary sense of empowerment: 'my heart expands in his bulk, his authority' (p. 26). Whereas Rhoda's poetic vision screens out the material messiness of physical life, Louis' poetic aim, like that of the idealist in *Mrs Dalloway*, is to bring all the 'fever of life', the 'myriad things' into a formal unity, to impose a regime of the proper upon the unregulated (*Mrs Dalloway*, p. 49).

His desire is ‘to make a steel ring of clear poetry that shall connect the gulls and the women with bad teeth, the church spire and the bobbing billycock hats’ into one vision (p. 105). There is something more than a little worrying about the steeliness of Louis’ image of poetry’s function here. Louis recognises that the ‘disorderly procession’ of physical city life, the ‘vapourish smell of beef and mutton’, the commonplace conversations, waitresses with trays of apricot and custard constitutes ‘the central rhythm [. . .] the common main-spring’ of existence (pp. 75–6). Yet he remains always an outsider to this common life, lacking sympathetic, embodied extension into the being of those he watches and overhears. They remain for him an alien, physical animality, nothing but bodies, ‘twitching with the multiplicity of their sensations’ (p. 75).

Neville recognises that Louis’ idealism renders him unable to share ordinary human hopes, anxieties and sorrows because he is ‘too cold, too universal’ (p. 39). He is unable to respond sensuously to the grass and trees of the playing field, admitting that they only ‘hint at some other order, and better, which makes a reason everlastingly’ (p. 30). His solemn conviction remains that ‘the discrepancies and incoherences [. . .] must be resolved’ (p. 167). ‘I have tried’, he says, revealingly, ‘to draw from the living flesh the stone lodged at the centre’ (p. 167). Bernard, in his final soliloquy, sees Louis as ‘without those simple attachments by which one is connected with another’ (p. 204). Louis himself admits that ‘so imperfect are my senses that they never blot out [. . .] the serious charge that my reason adds and adds against us’ (p. 182). Lacking the capacity for sensuous response to the materiality of embodied life, Louis is trapped in his own mental universe. He is, he concludes, ‘happiest alone’ (p. 183). Louis’ reiterated ‘I, I, I’ reminds one of Woolf’s comment in *A Room of One’s Own* that the egoistic dominance of the letter ‘I’ in much male writing produces an aridity in which nothing will grow, and in which ‘the fountain of creative energy’ is blocked and shored up ‘within narrow limits’ (p. 76). Far from nourishing civilisation, the idealist tradition of the individual talent risks producing an unsympathetic cultural sterility.

There is, however, a greater cost and danger than that of loss of cultural vitality inhering in the compulsion, as represented in Louis, to press the multiplicity of life into a subjective vision of an orderly, disciplined ideal. His assertion, in response to the varied mass of city life, ‘I will reduce you to order’, articulates both a poetic and a political vision (p. 76). As has been recognised, Woolf modelled Louis, at least in part, on T. S. Eliot.¹⁸ Eliot wrote his

doctoral thesis on F. H. Bradley's philosophy. In *The Waves*, Louis' values are extremely close to those of Bradley. Through the character of Louis, Woolf explores the complicity of ideals of culture with forms of national and international capitalist domination. The linkage of poetry and world capitalism may seem unlikely. It comprehends, however, Woolf's radical insight into idealism as a system of thought frequently driven by a desire to impose control and conformity upon what is perceived as unregulated and different to the self. It is a desire, that, as she says in *Mrs Dalloway*, is prepared to smite roughly out of the way 'the dissentient or dissatisfied' (*Mrs Dalloway*, p. 85). The privileged educational heritage offered to the three male characters in *The Waves* does not constitute a generous, egalitarian ideal of national community, as shared human fellowship. Rather, as Woolf represents it, it entails the subscription of self into the repressive cultural hegemony of a brutal nationalistic masculinity. It is a heritage adapted for those it so trains to impose national and colonial rule.

Clive Bell was not the only one within the Bloomsbury circle to write on civilisation in 1928. In that same year, Leonard Woolf published *Imperialism and Civilization*. The title indicates Leonard Woolf's very different perspective from that of Bell's backward-looking classicism. Leonard Woolf's is a perspective devoid of reverence and idealism. Indeed, he recognises the way the rhetoric of cultural and intellectual superiority is used to justify the imposition of Western imperial rule. The fact behind this vision, he insists, is a rapacious and ruthless exploitation of the colonised world.¹⁹ Woolf points specifically towards the influence of British idealism when he argues that national self-interest is elevated into a form of religion in which the state becomes a glorified object of worship.

The revered conception of national culture not only serves to cover aggressive colonial expansionism with a veil of glory. The imposition of Western culture upon colonised peoples inculcates a sense of grateful inferiority in any so interpellated. As Jane Marcus points out, in a pioneering realist reading of *The Waves*, it is a novel primarily 'concerned with race, class, colonialism'.²⁰ The novel additionally asserts that national culture, identified as civilisation per se, is the prime means of perpetuating these various forms of subordination. Challenges to Western cultural domination were certainly being voiced by colonised peoples themselves during the time that Woolf was writing *The Waves*.²¹ This was especially true of India and Leonard Woolf points to Ghandi as demonstration of 'the renaissance of Asiatic civilization in its conflict with the imperialist civilization

of Europe' (*Imperialism*, p. 58). Woolf challenges the Eurocentrism of idealists like Bradley, here, reminding them that Asia, too, has its traditions of civilisation.

The contrast between growing resistance to cultural imperialism in countries like India and the attitude adopted by white supremacist colonialists in Australia is stark. During the late 1920s, Australian politics and media were characterised by a passionate and vociferous insistence upon total identification with British culture and traditions. An article in *The New Statesman*, on 17 September 1927, comments, 'The vindication of British blood which repeats itself in numberless perorations is no mere frill of patriotic oratory: the people is intensely, almost alarmingly British.'²² It seems likely that in the character of Louis, Woolf ironically represents Australian desire for British hegemonic identity. Her purpose is also serious. Leonard Woolf refers to Australian white supremacists in the context of his discussion of South Africa and the southern states of America. All three are cultures typified by a repressive determination to exclude peoples regarded as other and hence potentially contaminating of the purity of 'blood' sustained and made evident in traditions of cultural ideals. A subjective but pervasive myth of white, Western identity is held in reverence even as it functions brutally to coerce and discipline a recalcitrant racial diversity.

For Leonard Woolf, civilisation, far from being identified with cultural superiority, is inseparably linked to financial, industrial and technological expansion and dominance. In *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf, too, draws attention to those systems of transport, commerce and communication that form the infrastructure of empire. Often these references are linked to ideas of control and power. Early on in the narrative, Bernard approaches London by train and he compares the capital with that of the classical world. 'Not even Rome herself looks more majestic', he says. Yet the London he sees is not characterised by classical architecture but by industry and technology, 'by gasometers, by factory chimneys' (p. 91). The image Bernard uses to describe the impact of the hurtling train into the city is, disturbingly, that of invasion and violence, military and sexual. It is 'like a missile [. . .] about to explode in the flanks of the city like a shell' (p. 91). Shells are part of new, deadly forms of industrially mass-produced weaponry underwriting Western global supremacy.

Travelling in the novel is a recurrent experience of all the characters, as they cross and recross national and international space, in a way that inevitably shrinks its imagined dimensions. The text further suggests the way technology diminishes the scale of the

world, bringing it within a systematised order. As Bernard answers the telephone, unregulated space becomes place, namely the British Empire. Technology, simply by the invisibility of its means, enhances the sense of intellectual mastery so that, ‘my mind adjusted itself to assimilate the message – it might be [. . .] to assume command of the British Empire [. . .] [and] had created, by the time I had put back the receiver, a richer, stronger, more complicated world in which I was called upon to act my part’ (p. 218). Undoubtedly there is irony in the presentation of Bernard, here, since he is the least commanding and coherent character. The same is not the case with Louis who also looks to technology as a means of imposing his personal control impersonally across the vastness of global geography. ‘I am half in love with the typewriter and the telephone,’ he says ‘with letters and cables and brief but courteous commands on the telephone to Paris, Berlin, New York’ (p. 138).

Louis aspires to follow in the footsteps of statesmen like William Pitt, First Earl of Chatham, who oversaw British colonial expansion and is credited with the birth of the Empire. Percival represents the heroic romance of an ideal of empire as venerated in public school traditions.²³ Louis points to the future form of global rule: financial, technological and cultural domination. ‘I roll the dark before me,’ he claims, ‘spreading commerce where there was chaos in the far parts of the world’ (p. 139). Louis’ language, here, not only makes the racist identification of darkness with chaos, his boast of the universalism of commerce is indistinguishable from current neo-liberal rhetoric. Louis’ response to chaos, both at home and abroad is ‘I will reduce you to order’ (p. 76). The order that he seeks to impose, like that of British idealists such as Bradley, is hierarchical and male, an order in which each fulfils the duties of his station. Workmen should earn ‘two pound ten a week at the command of an august master’ while the corridors of power resound to ‘the heavy male tread of responsible feet’ (pp. 139, 140).

Woolf brings the blasphemy of mockery to bear on Louis’ pride in Western sanitary ware, as he boasts of toilets, swimming baths and gymnasiums exported to those unhygienic, dark places of the world (p. 183). Yet there is serious critique too. International trade in Western industrially-produced goods inevitably brings, along with those material things, the value systems, ways of life, structures and institutions inhering in their forms. A study of the introduction of toiletry goods to Zimbabwe, for example, revealed how this consumer innovation instituted new demands and norms into the society that ‘once established, acquired a life and a legitimacy of their own’.²⁴

In effect, global heterogeneity is traded, quite literally, for financial, commercial and cultural homogeneity.²⁵ The space of a multiply varied world becomes a homogenised place. As Louis explains, those superior mental attributes of the will, ‘assiduity and decision’, have imposed system upon physical geography. It is their force that has ‘scored those lines on the map [. . .] by which the different parts of the world are laced together’ (p. 139). Louis astutely recognises, as the thorough-going idealist that he is, that dominion works most efficiently when the order of the perceptible is a naturalised consensus; one world in which patterns of consumption and the vertical values of status and life style they sustain are accepted as inevitable. ‘The weight of the world is on our shoulder,’ Louis asserts, ‘its vision is through our eyes’ (p. 140).

In *The Waves*, Woolf articulates a vision of reality that challenges the dominant regime of the perceptible as propagated by idealists like Louis. She reverses the vertical hierarchy that elevates Western subjective individualism and abstract universalism. Her counter vision is that of worldly realism: the horizontal, inclusive continuum of embodied selves, social and physical worlds. The structure of the novel formalises Woolf’s Lucretius-scale ambition to present a wholly materialist account of the universe that is two-fold in expressing both critique and celebration.²⁶ The narrative sections of *The Waves* follow Lucretius in showing that coercive idealist modes of thought are responsible for much of the cruelty, domination and exclusion that human beings suffer and inflict upon bodily life in the name of glorified cultural and national myths. The deities of Woolf’s modern world are the venerated abstractions of nation, culture, civilisation, religion, commerce and technology that coerce the world into a regulated place by means of the subordination of bodies.

While Woolf subjects these venerated forms of authority to mockery and to criticism she moves, in the interludes between the narrative, to a poetic celebration of the immensity and motility of global space. The language of the interludes is frequently described as lyrical. It is even suggested that Woolf’s writing in these sections can be thought of in terms of the unconscious, or of the semiotic drive set out in Julia Kristeva’s theory.²⁷ Yet, in the main, the language of the interludes is emphatically empirical.²⁸ It is in the mode of the children’s first responses to the world: ‘The stalks are covered with harsh, short hairs,’ said Jinny, ‘and drops of water have stuck to them’ (p. 5). This could be understood as Woolf’s intent. Just as children come fresh and indiscriminately to experiences, so she evokes a new regime of the perceptible in which the physical world is as much

regarded as the mental. 'I want to put everything in', she declares of *The Waves*. And indeed, the novel stretches the field of the perceptible from the life of intestines to the unbounded distances of skylscapes and oceans.

The writing directly challenges the idealist contention (and more recent anti-realist ones) that knowledge of the world beyond the self is unattainable. This is not to suggest that Woolf naively assumes the transparency of language or the total objectivity of knowledge. As Bernard says, words 'hide with thickness instead of letting the light through' (p. 239). Despite the rejection of idealism, Woolf is very clear that to describe the world without a self, although desirable, is actually impossible. Within the interludes, the constitutive and interpretive function of language is foregrounded by means of frequent deployment of the comparative phrase 'as if'. This draws attention to the subjective element brought to all acts of observation and their cognitive assimilation. Strikingly, the comparisons are made between some aspect of the larger physical universe and a homely domestic object, somewhat in the way a child might express it. In the first interlude, for example, 'the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it', the dark horizon gradually lightens 'as if the sediment of an old wine bottle had sunk' and the unrisen sun burns below the horizon 'like the smokey fire that roars from a bonfire' (p. 3).

This linguistic pattern of comparison effects a repeated syntactic continuum between the two material worlds that constitute the universe: that of culture, in the widest sense, and that of the physical realm. It invokes, moreover, a temporal continuum between the here and now of ordinary life and the widest sweep of existence. In addition, the phrase 'as if' provokes a sense of the active sensation of observing and semantically ordering what is being observed. This linguistic tracking of the physical act of perception is further emphasised by the use of very precise notation as if for the purpose of scientific empiricism. 'The sun had now sunk lower in the sky. The islands of cloud had gained in density and drew themselves across the sun so that the rocks went suddenly black' (p. 151). The impression produced is of meticulous attentiveness to the scene and things in themselves as perception changes continually in the fading light. The aim is to convey the physical world without the screen of subjective self.

This does not imply the attainment of objectivity devoid of any human perspective. The prose of the interludes frequently uses deictic formulations such as 'now'. Deictics are a recurrent stylistic feature of Woolf's writing, as they are also of Jane Austen's. In *The*

Waves such features are particularly striking. By definition, deictics are always particular, and function to anchor discourse in an immediate temporal and spatial context. In *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism*, Ann Banfield suggests that Woolf's use of 'here/now' deictics within past tense discourse 'is crucial in creating perspectives whose language is subjective without being psychological'.²⁹ Woolf's experimental use of language in the interludes thus suggests a way of perceiving and representing reality that acknowledges the subjective, constructed nature of all denotation. Yet because of the immediacy and intensity of the 'here and now' focus, the objects observed impinge themselves, rather than the observing subject imposing the screen of self upon the external world, as idealists tend to do. One problem with abstraction and universals is that they lack the sharpness of what is experienced by the senses. Woolf's artistic achievement in the interludes is to convey a celebratory vision of universal life that is intensely realised even while it is temporally and spatially unbounded. This unlimited spaciousness provides a stark contrast to the regulated inscription of the globe by empire and capitalism.

It is perhaps somewhat easier to evoke a poetic, empirical vision of the physical universe than it is to see individual life in similar celebratory terms. Human existence as a physical fact lacks immensity, duration and power. 'Our flame, the will-o'-wisp that dances in a few eyes, is soon to be blown out, and all will fade' Bernard observes in his closing monologue (p. 229). It is the apparent 'formless imbecility' of life, as Neville terms it, that drives an emergent being to magnify the idea of self by imposing its desires for grandeur, power and identity upon the actuality of the world. Yet these interpretive screens function to separate the self from a grander view of human life that is common, non-individualistic and continuous with the whole of physical reality. In her autobiographical writing, Woolf suggests that a sudden shock that disrupts the flow of quotidian existence often produces a momentary loss of social self and thus allows an almost impersonal awareness of human life in its relationship to the universe.³⁰

In *The Waves*, Bernard experiences two such moments. The first is produced by a sudden perceptual estrangement at the sight of two figures turned away so that they lack individuality. 'There are figures without features robed in beauty' (p. 226). 'Thus in a moment,' he says, 'in a drawing room, our life adjusts itself to the majestic march of day across the sky' (p. 227). The death of Percival produces another such moment. Alienated from the process of living going

on all around him, Bernard is able 'to see things without attachment, from the outside, and to realize their beauty in itself [. . .] pretence and make-believe and unreality are gone, and lightness has come with a kind of transparency, making oneself invisible' (p. 220). Woolf's language is precise here. This is not a moment of inwardness, of subjective vision of an ideal truth. It is a sharp sense of materiality, of things in their own being freed from the neediness of self. Bernard quickly recognises the danger of trying to immortalise this moment, to imbue it with veneration and thereby impose transcendent meaning. 'So the sincerity of the moment passed;' he notes, 'so it became symbolical; and that I could not stand. Let us commit any blasphemy of laughter and criticism rather than exude this lily-sweet glue; and cover him with phrases' (p. 221).

The blasphemy of laughter and criticism is, I suggest, a good way of describing Woolf's worldly realism in its antagonism to idealist structures of thought, and to the spirit of religion and reverence that idealism seeks to impose.³¹ Bernard's response to religious ritual, with its trumpets, ceremonies and coats of arms, and to Louis' desire to 'roof us all in [. . .] confine us, make us one, with his red ink' (p. 235), is to seek out some curious gargoyle, some battered nose or absurd tombstone. Like Septimus, in *Mrs Dalloway*, Bernard turns to things and their incongruities for the sanity of laughter. The dissolution of the idealist urge for authority, fixity and conformity, held in place by the lily-sweet glue of veneration, is enacted earlier in the novel when the headmaster's sonorous benediction, bidding the boys acquit themselves like men, is disrupted by the random, incongruous importunity of a bee (p. 46). Laughter and the challenge of the empirical world of things are the two forces that idealist absolutism, in all its forms, finds most difficult to withstand. The continuous, dynamic process both of the origin of vision and its dissolution in the motility of life are, for Woolf, equally the means of art and of human knowledge. The ludic impulse that is inevitably inscribed in the very fact of a bio-psycho-social self is also the ground of the vision, of the utopian possibility of change. There is always an alternative viewpoint.

At the end of the novel, Bernard is reluctantly hauled back into embodied being by the reiterative process of pulling his coat on over his arms. As he steps out into the darkened streets it is as if 'the canopy of civilization is burnt out' (p. 247). A canopy is traditionally the emblazoned cloth held over a sovereign or priest, emblematic of their majesty and power and protecting them from the physical world. For idealists, 'civilization' functions as a canopy imbuing a sense of

power and authority and protecting those inside its enclosure from a larger reality. It is, in Rhoda's words, 'so vast a bubble that the sun might set and rise in it and we might [. . .] escape from the here and now' (p. 187). Bernard's escape from that bubble or canopy allows for a momentary utopian vision, but it is a vision grounded in the physical cycles of the world and perceived in terms of a common life: 'There is a sense of the break of day [. . .] some sort of renewal [. . .] Another general awakening' (p. 229).

Notes

1. Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction*, is one of the few critics to argue that *The Waves* is an aesthetic failure, pp. 82–95.
2. *Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 3.209.
3. Clive Bell, *Civilization: An Essay*, pp. v, vi.
4. Bell's emphasis on states of mind almost certainly comes from the ethical teaching of G. E. Moore as much as from Bradley. Although Moore was an empiricist in terms of epistemology and attacked idealist rejection of knowledge arrived at by the senses, his ethics were centred upon the mental life. Michael Whitworth, *Virginia Woolf*, quotes Keynes's comment that for Moore 'Nothing mattered except states of mind' p. 132. Moore's philosophy is hard to pin down and by 1922 he had come to dismiss his own essay 'The Refutation of Idealism' as confused (see G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Studies*, 1922, p. viii).
5. F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, p. 125.
6. Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 205.
7. Gillian Beer, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground*, p. 50.
8. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, 4.349. For comparison of Virginia Woolf's concern with the technology of modernity to that of Walter Benjamin, see Pamela L. Caughie, ed., *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.
9. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 86.
10. Harold Bloom, ed., *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, p. 381; for a more recent exploration of Shelley's complex relationship to Hume, scepticism and materialism, see Tim Milnes, *The Truth about Romanticism: Pragmatism and Idealism in Keats, Shelley, Coleridge*, pp. 105–44.
11. *De Rerum Natura*, p. 107. Further references to this work will be given in the text as DRN. Woolf recorded reading Lucretius in September 1918 (*Diary*, 1.192); there are a number of translations of Lucretius in Woolf's library, now in Washington State University Library.
12. H. Woods, *On the Nature of Things*.
13. Elizabeth Hamilton, *A Series of Popular Essays*, 1.272.

14. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, pp. 9–10.
15. Michael Whitworth, *Virginia Woolf*, discusses the way ‘*The Waves* addresses the presence of militarism above all in education’ and he links this interestingly to the anti-militarism tradition within the suffrage movement, pp. 157–67.
16. ‘A Study in Dictatorship’, *The New Statesman*, 8 October, 1927, p. 807.
17. David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, p. 114.
18. Gillian Beer, ‘Introduction’, *The Waves*, p. xxxiii.
19. Leonard Woolf, *Imperialism and Civilization*, pp. 10–11.
20. Jane Marcus, ‘Britannia Rules *The Waves*’, in Karen Lawrence, ed., *Decolonizing Tradition: New Views of Twentieth-Century ‘British’ Literary Canons*, pp. 136–62; Linden Peach, *Virginia Woolf*, documents the novel’s responsiveness to the Indian independence struggle that was much in the news during the late 1920s, pp. 155–67.
21. See, for example, Ikbal Ali Shah, ‘The Revolt of Asia’, *The New Statesman*, 2 April 1927.
22. ‘Australian Nationalism’, *The New Statesman*, 17 September 1927, p. 707.
23. Linden Peach reads *The Waves* as Woolf’s exploration of what the end of Empire will mean for British upper-class masculinity; the death of Percival, he claims, can be understood as ‘analogous to the demise of the British in India’ (p. 163). This is a persuasive reading but what also needs to be stressed is Woolf’s recognition of the continuity of economic, technological and cultural imperialism. In this sense Louis’ global imperialist idealism replaces Percival’s more unthinking conformity to earlier British traditions of empire.
24. Elizabeth Shove, *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organization of Normality*, p. 89.
25. For a neo-liberalist account that celebrates the triumphant global spread of Western corporate technology and finance, see Thomas Friedman’s bestseller, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*; I am indebted to David Harvey’s discussion of Friedman’s thesis in *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom*, pp. 51–9.
26. For a fascinating account of the scale of Lucretius’ own achievement, see Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began*.
27. See Makiko Minnow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels*, pp. 152–86; Garrett Stewart, ‘Catching the Stylistic D/rift: Sound Defects in Woolf’s *The Waves*’, *English Literary History*, 1987, vol. 54, p. 128.
28. In his 1924 *Daedalus or the Future of Science*, J. B. S. Haldane attacks the narrow classical education as extolled by Clive Bell, commenting ‘if we want poets to interpret the physical science as Milton and Shelley did [. . .] we must see that our possible poets are instructed [. . .] science is vastly more stimulating to the imagination than are the classics’ (pp. 28–9).

29. Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism*, p. 317.
30. *Moments of Being*, pp. 84–5.
31. Gillian Beer, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground*, comments briefly on the ‘humour of *The Waves*’ (p. 67); this is a pervasive feature of Woolf’s writing that is consistently overlooked by critics.