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BERNARD IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S THE WAVES

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Linda Heyniger

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

There is relatively little criticism of Virginia Woolf's novel The Waves, and none that deals extensively and exclusively with the complex character of Bernard. In this paper, I attempt to demonstrate that the problems of Bernard's personality exhibit some of Virginia Woolf's perennial concerns such as the problem of defining a self, relating life to art, and finding meaning in a life which must culminate only in death. During a lifetime roughly separable into three stages--youth, middle age and old age--Bernard fluctuates between seeking answers to the questions which haunt his introspection and losing himself in the daily activities around him. Finally, after his life is virtually complete, Bernard feels he has untangled the multiplicity of his own selfhood, thereby solving one of the mysteries of life. At the end of the novel, he feels he can see beyond subjectivity into the "true order of things." Rather than the nothingness which he feared he might find, Bernard discovers that all of creation is endowed with the order and significance he had attributed only to the "phrases" and "sequences" of his own imagination. Bernard's heroic stance against death at the end of the novel reinforces its tone as a celebration of life and the human mind rather than a tragedy.

A large part of my paper is a presentation of my own interpretation of the incidents in Bernard's life which seem to have a direct effect on his conception of reality or of his selfhood. Most of these incidents are so ambiguously depicted by Virginia Woolf as to be open to a variety of alternative readings. Such a lack of explicitness on the part of its author reinforces the novel's apparent intention to present, rather than solve, some of the mysteries of the human mind.

BERNARD IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S THE WAVES

Michael Payne makes the following statements about the character of Bernard in Virginia Woolf's The Waves:

Although Bernard has the last and the longest speech in the novel, we are not to assume that he is the central character or that his quest for order has been completely successful. All but Bernard are, however, fixed characters in that their personalities are revealed rather than developed.¹

It is true that there is no "central" character in The Waves. All six of the characters together exemplify, as Payne and others suggest, differing struggles toward psychological order. The six taken together come to represent the human mind as it seeks significance in experience, and their efforts are contrasted to the Nature of the interludes which obeys without question unalterable laws.

However, of all the characters in the novel, Bernard best personifies some of Virginia Woolf's specific concerns with the human mind--the way one distinguishes himself from the outside world, the relationship of life to art, and the way one deals with the fact of mortality. Moreover, Bernard's view of himself as an interpreter of experience, a seeker of "sequences," indicates that he represents the author's artistic alter-ego, and that his ambitions reflect those of the author in writing the novel.

As Payne points out, Bernard's personality is constantly developing rather than remaining static. Indeed, the reason for his summing up, the "longest speech in the novel," is that neither his personality nor his philosophy is unified until the end of the novel. The summing up itself constitutes one of the steps in Bernard's attempt to justify and interpret his own experience. Our knowledge of the other characters ends with the reunion at Hampton Court, but

we follow Bernard through old age up to his encounter with death.

During and after his summing up, Bernard struggles, as he had in his youth, towards a clarified vision of himself and of reality. By the end of the novel, he seems to have resolved many of the paradoxes of his personality and of his view of life. In this respect, his quest for order would seem to be what Payne says it is not-- "completely successful"; his feeling of victory even in the face of death becomes a tour de force of the human mind.

There are several difficulties of Bernard's personality which he seeks continually to resolve. One can be expressed as the tension between the will to unite with that which is outside the self and the will to establish a distinct identity. Another is the tendency to inhabit two worlds--that of art and contemplation where the mind creates its own order and that of mundane experience where one responds to the superficial order of daily demands.

The first problem is more complex than the second. I shall examine several general aspects of it in Bernard's personality, and then proceed to examine several experiences which mark stages in the development both of Bernard's selfhood and of his philosophical perspective. I shall place particular emphasis on his final experiences, which seem to resolve questions that he identifies in his youth but answers only after his life is virtually complete.

Bernard's conflicting desire to become one and distinct while fusing with others reflects what Ethel Cornwell suggests is Mrs. Woolf's contradictory view of personality. She says,

At one moment Virginia Woolf sees man as a separate, distinct entity (from this view comes the sense of human loneliness that pervades all of her work); at another moment, she sees him as an undefined, and undefinable

quantity, inseparable from the general stream of humanity from which he arises (from this view comes her theory that personal identity is an illusion.)²

Moreover, according to J. K. Johnstone, this instinct to retain selfhood while merging with that which is outside the self was a problem of Mrs. Woolf's own personality. He says,

. . . Though she wished to find union with a reality infinitely greater than her ego, she knew that one's soul must possess itself and be free before it can expand and communicate.³

Bernard's early inability to become one and distinct, to "possess himself," results from a variety of qualities, including his conception of himself as an artist, his thoroughgoing curiosity and scepticism, and his awareness of his own diversity.

He says of himself early in the novel,

. . . I shall go into more rooms, more different rooms, than any of you. But because there is something that comes from outside and not from within I shall be forgotten; when my voice is silent you will not remember me, save as the echo of a voice that once wreathed the fruit into phrases.⁴

Bernard regrets that he is always responding to that which is "outside." However, his sensitivity to that which surrounds him is an essential part of his role as an artist. He desires to pick the fruit of single experiences and synthesize it into "phrases," putting into order the constant variety and change of creation. Aware of the diversity of individuals, he feels he must unite them through his "voice." Thus his role as a "voice," an artist, is at once Bernard's personal weapon against isolation and meaninglessness and a cause of much of his difficulty in separating himself as an entity from what is outside him.

Bernard finds that, as an artist, he cannot extricate himself

either from his material or from his audience. He complains,

. . .soliloques in back streets soon pall. I need an audience. That is my downfall. That always ruffles the edge of the final statement and prevents it from forming.

(p. 255)

He suffers the perennial paradox of the artist--existing through communicating. He regrets that his being "only glitters when all its facets are exposed to many people" (p. 304), and complains, ". . .I need the illumination of other people's eyes, and therefore cannot be entirely sure what is my self" (p. 255).

Moreover, as an artist, Bernard finds that it is difficult to act as an interpreter of experience and at the same time consider himself a self-justified entity within it--to participate in life and intellectualize about it at the same time. Consequently, he remains precariously balanced between setting up a separate existence, as he sees Louis and Rhoda doing, standing loftily apart with their hands on the cold urn, and becoming one with his fellows. He says of Louis and Rhoda,

The authentics, like Louis, like Rhoda, exist most completely in solitude. They resent illumination, reduplication. They toss their pictures, once painted, face downward on the field. On Louis's words the ice is packed thick. His words issue pressed, condensed, enduring.

(p. 255)

Bernard feels he can never divorce himself intellectually from others, like Louis and Rhoda, nor can he deny his intellectual instincts and fit smoothly into the "chorus" of general humanity which he admires for existing "without end in view except dinner, love, money, and getting along tolerably" (p. 347).

It is not only his role as an artist, but also his philosophi-

cal scepticism that keeps Bernard from isolating a distinct self. He is wary of any system of truth, doubtful of the possibility of knowing others, and sceptical of the correspondence of the self one presents in society with one's inner existence.

Early in their lives, the other characters attempt to escape loneliness and the fear of mortality by associating themselves with some entity larger than themselves. Louis associates himself with history and economic status, Neville with logic and hero-worship, Jinny with the social world and physical ecstasy, Susan with nature and progeny, and Rhoda with nihilism and dreams. However, Bernard is interested in people in general and existence in general; he is aided by no specific perspective. Though he can appreciate the systems to which the other characters adhere, he can embrace none of them exclusively himself. He says,

Let a man get up and say, 'Behold, this is the truth,' and instantly I perceive a sandy cat filching a piece of fish in the background. Look, you have forgotten the cat, I say.

(p. 305)

Bernard feels that "to speak of knowledge is futile" (p. 256). He envies the assurance of Louis and Rhoda in making their negative pronouncements about the nature of life. He says,

My philosophy, always accumulating, welling up moment by moment, runs like quicksilver a dozen ways at once. But Louis, wild-eyed but severe, in his attic, in his office, has formed unalterable conclusions upon the true nature of what is to be known.

(p. 327)

Bernard's own pronouncements always admit of ambiguity. Even his "love of mankind" is, according to Neville, "crossed with humour at the futility of 'loving mankind'" (p. 259). His curiosity compels him to seek "contrasts" as well as "sequences."

Bernard is always aware of the limitations of his knowledge. He attempts to develop a deeper insight than his senses allow him by embroidering with his imagination that which he observes. He imagines the headmaster at home dangling his braces and contemplating his failure. Woolf-like, he conjectures about the nature of people he meets on trains. He visualizes India and Tahiti. However, even with the aid of his imagination, he feels he has no knowledge of other types of experience seen through other perspectives. He cannot know even the friends with whom he seems inextricably connected; he regrets in his summing up, "Our friends, how seldom visited, how little known . . . and yet. . . I do not know altogether who I am--Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis: or how to distinguish my life from theirs (p. 368).

Bernard's scepticism extends, like Virginia Woolf's, to the nature of personality itself. He is sceptical that the self available to the biographer is anything more than a convention necessary to order our relationship with others. He says,

After all, one cannot find fault with the biographic style if one begins letters 'Dear Sir,' ends them 'Yours faithfully'; 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 with the slow and measured tread of policemen though one may be humming any nonsense under one's breath at the same time. . . .

(p. 356)

He doubts that the self one presents in society corresponds to an inner identity, and notes that even the outer self lacks consistency. As he remarks in his summing up,

There are many rooms--many Bernards. There was the charming, but weak; the strong, but supercilious; the brilliant, but remorseless; the very good fellow, but,

I make no doubt, the awful bore . . . What I was to myself was different; was none of these.

(p. 357)

It becomes apparent to the reader that a dichotomy between Bernard's inner and outer self does exist: one self observes and imagines, and the other acts in society, earning a living from day to day. The first inhabits the timeless world of contemplation and art; the second exists in the world Bernard alternately calls the "machine," the world of "must, must, must," or the world of "Monday-Tuesday." To trace Bernard's progress from youth to age is to see the alternating predominance of the outer self, which responds to the ready-made order of society, and the inner self, which must create its own, existential order.

There seem to be three phases to Bernard's development, punctuated by the two dinners. In his young manhood, he crystallizes and articulates the problems of his personality. In middle age, he largely circumvents these problems by substituting external, worldly responsibilities for his personal ones, seldom breaking from his role as a provider and an integer in society to question his personal perspective. In his old age, he begins again to question himself and to attempt to resolve some of the inconsistencies of his personality. The symmetry of his evolution is at last completed when, in his extreme age, he regains what he had possessed in extreme youth-- the ability simply to exist without inquiry, accepting with existential faith his presence as a distinct being and assuming that what seems real to him is actually real. Bernard's simple and immediate apprehension of himself as an independent individual at the end of the novel differs from his early simplicity like Blake's Higher

Innocence differs from innocence itself.

His youth is taken up largely with the world of the imagination; Elvedon and the jungle are as real to him as the world of the school. Then, during his college years, Bernard begins to be concerned with the problems of his selfhood. After toying with the roles of Hamlet, Byron, and Dostoevsky, he settles on a specific persona for himself, which he has found largely through his friendship with Neville. However, despite his optimism about his new found "selfhood," his statement that he is "not one and simple, but complex and many" (p. 227) will remain true.

Up until Percival's death, Bernard's personality is not yet fragmented into the part which acts and the part which imagines and observes. It seems that the period of the farewell dinner for Percival marks the apex of his reconciliation of the two worlds.

At the time of the first dinner, Bernard is hopeful. He has not yet become "a faithful, sardonic man, disillusioned, but not embittered . . ." (p. 230). He is engaged to be married, and he places great confidence in Percival, who represents what is best in the world of the "machine." There exists some kind of balance between Bernard and his "opposite," Percival (p. 284), perhaps because Percival symbolizes for him the stability and predictability of the world outside himself. With such assurance, Bernard can afford to be introspective, creative and free.

Percival, the "hero" (p. 260) and the "God" (p. 269), solves the "oriental problem" not by contemplation, but by decisive action. He is a symbol to Bernard that the outside world is characterized by meaningful action just as the world of the imagination is character-

ized by meaningful thought. Like Susan, with whom he is in love, Percival, the Practical Man, must exist in order for the Artistic Man to be able to function freely. Bernard has said of Susan, "She was born to be adored of poets, since poets require safety; some one who sits sewing . . . (p. 348). Similarly, Louis says of Percival, "Yet it is Percival I need; for it is Percival who inspires poetry" (p. 202).

To Percival, for whom, as Josephine Schaefer points out, "being and doing are one,"⁵ Bernard attributes a denial of "the uselessness of human exertion" (p. 269) which he associates with India (the Orient). At the end of the farewell dinner, Bernard expresses his confidence that he and the imperialist culture with which he is associated are indomitable. He says,

We too, as we put on our hats and push open the door, stride not into chaos, but into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illumined and everlasting road. . . The yellow canopy of our tremendous energy hangs like a burning cloth above our heads. Theatres, music halls and lamps in private houses make that light.

(pp. 276-77)

Percival's death destroys the balance between the two worlds Bernard inhabits. He reacts to his insecurity at Percival's death by largely burying the part of himself which Percival had enabled to flourish--the impractical, artistic part that had made him lose his ticket to Waterloo and arrive late at games, wondering whether or not to free a fly caught in a web.

The timing of Percival's death in Bernard's life is especially apropos. Bernard is made aware of the cessation of life just at the point when he is most aware of its creation--during the birth of his

first child. However, this coincidence indicates more than the general life cycle of birth, reproduction and death. It suggests that Bernard's responsibility to his new child necessitates the end of his own youthful period of self-inquiry, replacing it with one of worldly concerns.

When Bernard first hears of Percival's death, he escapes into the timeless and deathless art gallery; however, he cannot remain there, for, as he notes, "One cannot live outside the machine for more perhaps than half an hour" (p. 282). In the art gallery, he evades the sense that his former Innocence has been replaced by Experience. After all, in their world outside of time, the madonnas can remain paradoxically "still as on the first day of creation" and "acquainted with grief" (pp. 359-60).

In the art gallery, Bernard temporarily regains his youthful feeling of "freedom," "immunity," and "conquest" (p. 360). However, when he reenters the world of flux and mortality outside, he finds that, even with his friends and his phrases, he is powerless against his feeling of "the incomprehensible nature of this our life" (p. 361). Percival's death has destroyed his hope that life held any ultimate comprehensible meaning.

From the time of this first real awareness of death, Bernard doubts that there can actually exist any "sequences" in a world in which "a drunk man staggers about with a club in his hand--that is all" (p. 362). He seems to escape from the question, "It goes on, but why?" (p. 362) by submitting himself to the world of Monday-Tuesday, making his living and talking to his wife at the breakfast table.

During his middle age, which is initiated after Percival's death, Bernard seldom breaks out of the machine long enough to question himself about his personal perception of reality. However, there is one occasion the summer after Percival's death when he does. This incident, which occurs at Susan's farm, presages the events of his old age which lead to his ultimate self-knowledge and a new confidence in his concept of life as significant rather than meaningless. Here he feels his first instinct to "fight" against nothingness.

In his summing up, Bernard describes this occurrence as the lowest indentation in his "curve of being" (p. 363). He is stung by "the need for opposition," but he realizes that he is no longer able to "explore" as he had in his youth, being now of the opinion that "the leaves and the wood concealed nothing" (p. 363). He contrasts his youthful ease in ending the horror of "dullness and doom" with his present helplessness against it.

However, rather than accept the sense of "what is inescapable in our lot"--"death; the knowledge of limitations" (p. 363), he resolves to "fight." His effort is to impose, by his own creative act of perception and faith, an order on the world around him. He describes his fight:

. . .this is the daily battle, defeat or victory, the absorbing pursuit. The trees, scattered, put on order; the thick green of the leaves thinned itself to a dancing light. I netted them under with a sudden phrase. I retrieved them from formlessness with words.

(pp. 363-64)

Bernard refuses to accept the meaningless activities around him which "cover over" man's unique creative spirit.

His sensation of omniscience and power on this occasion turns out to be only a "moment," after which Bernard returns to the world

in which he feels himself a passive receiver of order. He returns to London on the train and is absorbed again by its lights; from this point on until his old age, he takes his infinitesimal part in civilization. It is not until his third stage that he seeks again the "true order of things" (p. 363) at which his experience at Susan's farm had hinted.

During his middle age, Bernard chooses not to "fight," but to live from day to day without questioning the assumption made by those around him that "life is pleasant; life is good; after Monday comes Tuesday, and Wednesday follows Tuesday" (p. 365). It is appropriate that we hear of Bernard's middle age only through his summing up; he is omitted from the sixth section of the novel in which we observe the other characters in their daily pursuits, perhaps because the Bernard which acts unquestioningly in the "machine" is not the real Bernard.

In his summing up, Bernard describes the "chorus" in which he manages, during middle age, to lose himself. This chorus, which is associated with Percival and his "boasting boys" (p. 339), deafens him to the questions that haunt his silence. Its "comforting" noise is the very sound of the "machine"; he says,

That is the happy concatenation of one event following another in our lives. Knock, knock, knock. Must, must, must. Must go, must sleep, must wake, must get up . . . How we worship that sound like the knocking together of trucks in a siding!

(p. 339)

By the time of the reunion, which initiates his third phase, Bernard already recognizes that he has neglected the timeless world of contemplation through his attraction to the "chorus." Just prior to the first dinner, he had expressed the aims of his youth:

. . .I wish to go under; to visit the profound depths; once in a while to exercise my prerogative not always to act, but to explore; to hear vague, ancestral sounds of boughs creaking, of mammoths, to indulge impossible desires to embrace the whole world with the arms of understanding, impossible to those who act.

(p. 254)

Just before the second dinner, he admits that his tendency has been to remain in the shallows of daily life, without great wonder or torment, rather than "go under" as he had intended; he says,

We are all swept on by the torrent of things grown so familiar that they cast no shade; we make no comparisons; think scarcely ever of I or of you; and in this unconsciousness attain the utmost freedom from friction and part the weeds that grow over the mouths of sunken channels.

(p. 326)

Rather than enter the sunken channels of his own solitary perplexities, Bernard has slid easily through the weeds above them. It is not until the period following the second dinner that he explores once and for all the reaches of silence below the clatter of workaday society.

The period of the reunion at Hampton Court begins Bernard's final stage in which he realizes the potential of his visionary side. Finally, one morning, a drop forms and falls from the roof of his mind, and he asks, "What is lost? What is over?" (p. 303). Bernard sees that time has "fallen" and he has lost sight of his youth and its aims. His journey to Rome initiates his desire to cut across the current of useless years which has almost engulfed him-- to find in himself a "fin in a waste of waters" (p. 307).

Bernard's journey to Rome is a journey back to his inner self. In Rome, he can see that "London consists of fallen factories and a few gasometers" (p. 304). In the "eternal city," associated with art and religion rather than industrialism and "progress," he feels

that nothing is denied him. During this moment of escape from time, he feels that "Tahiti becomes possible" as it had been in his youth, and that all the facets of himself denied by his limiting role in the machine are still possible. He is finally drawn back into the world of "here and now" by the passing of an acquaintance, and he is recalled once again to London and the "chorus."

On his return from Rome, however, Bernard calls his friends to the reunion at Hampton Court. It is appropriate that it is at his instigation this time that the others meet and recall the idealism of their youth. Bernard, fresh from the "eternal city," has a new perspective on Hampton Court, the center of the "machine" to which he has so long paid homage. He sees that "the worship of kings" and the English society they represent is simply "a trick of the mind" (p. 334).

"Our English past--one inch of light" (p. 333) and its kings are associated with Percival by Bernard's ironic remark that "a king, riding, fell over a molehill here" (p. 333). Neville had suggested at the time of Percival's death that Percival's horse tripped over a molehill, recalling the blindness of humans to their own mortality (p. 280). Rather than center around Percival at this second dinner, the group begins to realize, with the help of Bernard, that they cannot depend on Percival and his society, but must depend only on their own minds to fight chaos and "the uselessness of human exertion."

The entire tone of the second dinner contrasts with that of the first. The "globe whose walls are made of Percival, of youth, of beauty" (p. 276) had burst with Percival's senseless death, and all of the characters had become aware of the "enemy" of time, death, and dissolution. Now the sun is waning and the possibility of choice or

change no longer seems to exist. John Graham suggests that Bernard, rather than Percival, dominates the second dinner because "it is too late for action. . . It is time to seek understanding," and that Bernard "seeks understanding before all things."⁶

During the second dinner, when the six characters feel themselves beginning involuntarily to merge, there is a sensation of "illimitable chaos" and "formless imbecility" (p. 333) which seems to result from their loss of individual identity. All the characters express their fear that they have dissolved as "separate drops," and have disappeared, "extinct, lost in the abysses of time, in the darkness" (p. 332). Bernard, who has felt himself becoming "featureless and scarcely to be distinguished from another," is recalled to the moment by the recollection of his own features, and he admonishes the others to "fight"; presumably he is exhorting his friends to exist together as individuals rather than try to escape their selfhoods to deny their age and their powerlessness against fate.

A more positive sense of fusion accompanies four of the characters as they walk out into the darkness and "fight" to overcome nothingness by cutting their faces against the darkness (p. 333). They feel that they succeed in forming a "many-faceted flower" that can "blaze against the yew trees" (p. 333), recapturing some of the exuberance they had felt during the first dinner, when they had looked at a real flower on the table.

During their walk, the four do not unite around externals such as Percival or the flower on the table; instead, they rely only on their belief in themselves; the many-faceted flower consists of "our life, our identity" (p. 369). Their feeling that they blaze against

the trees emphasizes the sudden change in their attitudes from their earlier agonizing doubts of their own insubstantiality. Bernard, at one point, had felt that "the tree alone resisted our eternal flux" (p. 349). Like Rhoda, he had sensed the fixity of solid objects compared with his own mutability. Here, however, he and the others have felt that their moment will persist. Bernard says,

. . . King William seemed an unreal monarch and his crown mere tinsel. But we--against the brick, against the branches, we six, out of how many million millions, for one moment out of what measureless abundance of past time and time to come, burnt there triumphant.

(p. 369)

The four return with "their wounds, their ravaged faces," from their "fight." However, they doubt that their victory was unqualified. All express feelings of unfulfillment; their success as a composite soul does not ensure their durability as individuals. Though for the characters who have long since established independent selves, the victory of communion at Hampton Court is climactic, for Bernard, the experience is especially equivocal. It does, however, prove to be a step in his search for completeness and independence.

Josephine Schaefer, perhaps because she makes no distinction between Bernard and the other characters, sees this dinner as the point when all of the characters are "quintessentially themselves"; she seems to consider it the "significant moment" of the novel.⁷ However, as the addition of the summing up implies, the story is not finished, at least for Bernard. His summing up is more than what Lodwick Hartley calls an "epilogue" to the rest of the novel.⁸ For Bernard, the most "significant moment" is his encounter with death at the end of the novel; this, rather than the reunion with his friends, culminates his experience.

Bernard sees the reunion at Hampton Court as an end in itself, but it is also important in preparing him for success in defining a coherent personal perspective. The combined effort against time and anonymity has augmented his particular intention to swim against the current of time and non-identity. He and his friends had felt themselves, for a moment, a center around which civilization curved rather than minute parts of the faceless millions who have lived and died. Bernard is yet to become such a "fin in a waste of waters" as an individual.

After the reunion, rather than retaining a sense of the power of his own mind, Bernard is sucked back temporarily into the "chorus." He is drawn to the "lights coming out in the bedrooms of small shopkeepers" (p. 338). He expresses his wish to become one of the indistinguishable voices in the roar of "almost senseless merriment, sentiment, triumph, desire" (p. 370). Claspng his train ticket firmly (since practical men never lose their tickets to Waterloo) he is rocked back into the security of the world in which no philosophical choices need be made.

However, during his third stage as an elderly man, Bernard seems gradually to resolve the paradoxes of his personality which have followed him all his life. By the end of the novel, he no longer finds it difficult to distinguish a "self" from others. Though he feels no isolation or separation from his friends, he finally reaches a point where he can actually revel in solitude; he feels, for the first time, the sensation of "myself being myself" (p. 382). By the time of his encounter with death, he no longer abdicates the visionary side of his personality by allying himself with the "machine": the lights of dawn

replace the "canopy of civilization" which had sheltered him. Though there is no one point at which he changes, his emergence as an integrated self does seem to hinge on his recapturing the confidence of his youth and his early sense that the world around him is characterized by the same kind of ideal order or "sequence" of which he conceives within his imagination.

After the reunion, Bernard has another experience similar to the one at Susan's farm which seems to result in his discovery of a self which is not divided into one part that acts and another that observes. This time, he himself, rather than the world around him, "puts on order." Though the new identity lasts only for a few moments, it renews his confidence in his personal perception of reality, and lays the groundwork for his eventual success as a coherent self.

Leaning over a gate looking into a field, Bernard feels for the first time the sensation of merely existing, without a dependence on the outward identity associated with his dealings with others or the "machine." He says of the new vision he gains, "A space was cleared in my mind. I saw through the thick leaves of habit" (p. 373). However, as on the occasion the summer after Percival's death, he is at first overcome by despair. This time he condemns his own imperfection as well as that of "nature." He says,

Leaning over the gate I regretted so much litter, so much unaccomplishment and separation. . . Life had been imperfect, an unfinished phrase.

(p. 373)

He cries out to the exterior self upon which he usually depends to recover himself from such desperate moments of insight; this time, however, he receives no answer. The self he ordinarily assumes is dead, at least for a time. At first, without this accustomed self,

he can see nothing but a terrifying "dust dance" by the non-light of a psychological "eclipse." The dance seems a parody of his own life, which has been filled with the "indefatigable busyness" of meaningless activity. He recalls himself "fetching and carrying," racing here and there like a dog on the scent who only occasionally looks up from the ground (p. 374). He admits to himself the failure of his attempts to find a significant existence in the world of Monday-Tuesday--that which is mutable, vain, and full of unsubstantial shadows (p. 375).

Having noted the illusions of his earlier life, he wonders what there remains for him to do. He asks, "How can I proceed now . . . without a self, weightless and visionless, through a world weightless, without illusion?" (p. 375). After the eclipse in which he sees nothingness, however, Bernard's vision returns; then he sees more clearly than ever that, perceived by the inner self without the intermediary of an illusory outer personality, existence is beautiful in itself; he realizes that his perceptions are valuable even without an audience to whom to relate them. He describes his wonder at the "new world" around him:

So the landscape returned to me; so I saw fields rolling in waves of colour beneath me, but now with this difference; I saw but was not seen. I walked unshadowed; I came unheralded. From me had dropped the old cloak, the old response . . . I walked alone in a new world . . . unable to speak save in a child's words of one syllable; without shelter from phrases. . . I who have always gone with my kind; solitary I who have always had someone to share the empty grate, or the cupboard with its hanging loop of gold.
(pp. 375-76)

Bernard finds here his first respite from the dependence on others to make his own experience meaningful. Ever since his first awareness (which also concerned the cupboard handle's "hanging loop of gold"), Bernard had transformed all his sensations into phrases to be delivered

to an audience at some later time. Here, he experiences simple and unselfconscious being.

Gradually Bernard's ordinary "blindness" returns. He sees a train down in the valley as he descends from his mystic height to the "machine." Already, the world has become "habitual" again. However, he has seen beyond the superficial order of the ephemeral world an intrinsic order and meaning of existence which satisfies his need for "sequence." He has seen "the house, the garden, and the waves breaking" (p. 376) that had provided the background before which he and his friends had played their parts. The reader had always been aware of the interludes which, like stage settings, remained outside the scope of the characters themselves. However, in his new awareness, Bernard not only acts on the stage, but is conscious of the inner workings of the theatre.

Instead of experiencing an individual moment in an individual day which comes and goes like a page turned in a book, Bernard feels he has seen the entire book and that he can comprehend its story. He says, "The old nurse who turns the pages of the picture-book had stopped and had said, 'Look, this is the truth'" (p. 376).

By the time he delivers his summary, Bernard seems to have retreated, at least temporarily, to his old dependency on others, since he is speaking to an audience, his dinner partner. However, Bernard feels that his life is a completed object with "roundness, weight, depth" (p. 341) even before he begins his act of summarizing or putting it into "phrases." Throughout his summary, he is plagued by the same doubts that have haunted him all his life. However, towards its end and in the silence following the departure of his acquaintance,

he begins to regain once and for all his confidence in his understanding of his own life and of existence in general.

The last experience before Bernard's encounter with death occurs, appropriately, at a dinner table, perhaps the same table as that of the reunion--he says, "We sat here together" (p. 377). This experience at the dinner table is as complex and varied as his earlier mystical experiences, and it seems to follow the same pattern of despair alternating with hope.

First, he feels the elation of communication; he has always loved to tell stories. However, this story is one of life itself, not a result of his creative imagination. As he recounts it, he begins to feel that it is just as impressive as any idealized "phrase" or "sequence" of his dreams. As he tells the story of himself and his friends, he feels no separation either from them or from his listener. The summary becomes his tale of tales, since it transforms its author rather than its audience. It is as if, in recounting his life, he somehow completes it.

After he finishes his tale, Bernard begins to describe his present sensations. He is aware of his rising above the superficial part of himself, the "hairy man," and becoming chaste and empty, able to comprehend all, "like some cool temple" (p. 378). He describes his feelings:

Immeasurably receptive, holding everything, trembling with fullness, yet clear, contained--so my being seems, now that desire urges it no more out and away; now that curiosity no longer dyes it a thousand colours. It lies deep, tideless, immune . . . now that he is dead, the man I called 'Bernard'. . . .

(p. 378)

Again Bernard is confident that he can interpret "the mystery

of things" (p. 379), and he describes to his dinner partner the setting of the interludes in their own language, again seeming to gain omniscience. However, just as there is always a shadow in the room described by the narrator in the interludes, Bernard still lacks some ultimate knowledge. He says, "What does the central shadow hold? Something? Nothing? I do not know" (p. 379). Only his death can answer this last question.

Bernard is suddenly recalled by the presence of his dinner partner to the moment and the world of "Monday-Tuesday" in which he is simply an "elderly man, rather heavy, grey above the ears . . ." (p. 379). Again he is seized by misgivings and painful feelings of inadequacy. However, after his partner leaves, he reassures himself, and is able at last to say,

Let me now raise my song of glory. Heaven be praised for solitude. Let me be alone. Let me cast and throw away this veil of being, this cloud that changes with the last breath. . . Now no one sees me and I change no more. Heaven be praised for solitude that has removed the pressure of the eye, the solicitation of the body, and all need of lies and phrases.

(p. 381)

Bernard basks in his new sense of self, and compares himself to the "solitary sea-bird that opens its wings on the stake" (p. 382).

As in his experience in the field, here Bernard no longer perceives in terms of grandiose phrases, but in "a little language such as lovers use, words of one syllable, such as children speak. . ." (p. 381). He drops his phrase book to the floor, no longer needing an audience and realizing that only by a "howl" or a "cry" could he express his sense of freedom, ecstasy and proximity to nature.

He is again interrupted by the world of "must, must, must"; the waiter hints for him to leave, and he is roused to go and catch

"some last train" (p. 382). However, this time, instead of reentering the "machine," Bernard emerges into the night and escapes the "musts" which pursue him. Instead of the artificial lights, he chooses the light of dawn with its "eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again" (p. 383). In describing the emerging light, he echoes the language of the interludes; now, however, he includes in the assemblage of inanimate objects and animals the "cottagers" waking to perceive it. Here he does not seek a secure position within the "chorus" of the cottagers; instead he sees them and their lights from a distance, and feels that he recognizes their place in the cosmos.

When Bernard becomes aware of the enemy, Death, he rides against it, refusing to acknowledge its power to subdue him in his creative and visionary state. In this final act of defiance, he reconciles his two facets of vision and action, and regains the confidence of his youth and of Percival.

Whether Bernard's encounter with Death is meant to be the time of his death itself or simply his preparation for death is unclear. However, in either case, the awareness of his own death provides a new dimension to his insight into his life. Like the narrator, "She," in the early versions of The Waves, Bernard gains an objectivity after his life is complete which he lacked earlier. "She" is quoted by John Graham:

I am trying to find, in the folds of the past, such fragments as time, having broken the perfect vessel, still keeps safe. . . For it is only when the thing had happened and the violence of the shock was over that one could understand, or really live; only when one had left the room and was walking home at dead of night. Then, in that darkness, which had no limit, very dark, whose shores were invisible, whatever happened, expanded;

and something dropped away. Then, without companion, one loved; spoke with no one to hear; and carried on an intercourse with people who were not there more completely than [when] one's chair was drawn close to theirs.

At the end of the novel, Bernard seems to feel himself one thing--some ultimate perceiver, and all things--that which is perceived. The wave is both within him and outside him. His attitude is far from one of tragedy¹⁰ and "disillusionment" or "loneliness and loss."¹¹ He has experienced the "rise and fall and fall and rise again" of his selfhood and belief in his vision, but the cycle ends on the upsurge. His final image is one of defiance, as he looms, "unvanquished and unyielding," against the changing sea and sky.

The last sentence of the last scene does seem to cast an element of ambiguity on Bernard's self-assurance. Michael Payne, for one, feels that it suggests that "flux is an ultimate reality";¹² he feels that, through this final statement, the interludes, which have represented "natural time," have the last word over the "psychological time" of the monologues.¹³

However, Virginia Woolf herself suggests that she uses this last echo of the interludes for aesthetic rather than thematic reasons. In perhaps the most explicit statement of purpose she provides anywhere regarding The Waves, she makes the following comment in her diary:

It occurred to me . . . that I would merge all the interjected passages into Bernard's final speech and end with the words O solitude: thus making him absorb all those scenes and having no further break. This also is to show that the theme, effort, effort, dominates; not the waves: and personality: and defiance: but I am not sure of the effect artistically; because the proportions may need the

intervention of the waves finally so as to make a conclusion.¹⁴

Bernard's confidence at the end of the novel is a personal victory, but it has a larger significance for the novel. Implicit in the concern of the novel as a whole is the problem death presents to the philosophical perspective of the living. The idea had surfaced with Percival's death, and it culminates in the last scene where Percival reappears in Bernard. Percival's death had caused Bernard to question the significance of existence. His question, "It goes on, but why?", is the same question the reader asks himself as he observes the "effort, effort" of the six characters whose lives must culminate only in death.

No one can answer such a question as whether or not there is a non-subjective order and meaning to life, despite the fact of death. However, The Waves stimulates such a question. Cyril Connolly writes,

. . . The Waves is a group of five or six huge panels, which celebrate the dignity of human life and the passage of time. It is one of the books which comes nearest to stating the mystery of life, and so, in a sense, nearest to solving it.¹⁵

The "celebration" of life, which constitutes the main body of The Waves exhibits various aspects of human dignity, especially the way the mind strives to complete itself and unite with that which is universal. Bernard comes to represent, as Joh Graham suggests, "the archetype of the race as it struggles with its creative powers against the tyranny of time."¹⁶

Bernard's mind seems to have become capable of seeing beyond the limits of subjectivity, since, at the end, he obliterates the distinction between the human utterances and the "sea; insensitive nature"¹⁷ of the interludes. He has succeeded in separating his

consciousness from the "hairy man" which had encased it. He has turned his own life over in his hands like a globe and looked at it objectively. What he seems to realize is that there is beauty, symmetry, and significance in his own experience which needs no record or permanence to justify it. His "phrase book" he discards as an artifact, simple and static, which is at best a symbol for that which is infinitely complex and uncapturable--life itself.

Bernard cannot escape Death. He is a finite wave in an infinite sea of waves. However, unlike Rhoda, who jumps from a cliff into the waves, Bernard does not embrace death as a release from life. Instead, he battles it with his one weapon--the creative force of the human mind. He becomes the champion of Life, feeling no weakening of his powers, but a strengthening of them. It is as if in him and through him all creation exists, and he is capable of defeating even death.

Bernard compares himself to Percival. Whether or not he will be defeated by death as Percival was defeated in India is unknown, and it is irrelevant to his heroism. He remains an appropriate figure-head of the human mind as it encounters the unknown, confident that once it is known, it will be revealed as part of a larger order. Bernard is eager to encounter "the true order of things" (p. 365), once and for all, having found that, with each new expansion of his perspective, he had always seemed to come nearer to the truth, as when he crept from the arch of the current leaves "out into a wider world" (p. 365).

Throughout his life, Bernard had encountered difficulties in separating himself from others and reconciling the opposing aspects

of his experience. Consequently, he had doubted both the concept of self and the possibility that one's personal perception of reality could have any objective significance. However, the creative "effort, effort" of his mind to find "sequence" both in his selfhood and in the world around him results in his discovery of some seemingly objective order of which death is no negation. By the end of the novel, we feel that, for Bernard, the perception of order is no longer a "perpetual illusion" (p. 365). In short, Bernard's effort to find some objective order is, as far as he is concerned, "completely successful."

Virginia Woolf makes no direct comment on the lives of the six characters she presents in The Waves. Like Bernard, she tacitly expresses, in creating this "abstract mystical eyeless book,"¹⁸ her objections to the "arbitrary design" (p. 306) of most literature. She gives the illusion of merely presenting life and leaving it up to the reader to seek, as Bernard seeks, for "sequences" within it. He can find the novel significant or deny it any meaning; he can consider Bernard's optimism in the face of death another illusion or a justified philosophical stance. However, the real summing up of the novel, Bernard's final experiences, seems to suggest that man's endeavors to understand himself and his world can end successfully.

Notes

¹Michael Payne, "The Eclipse of Order: The Ironic Structure of The Waves," Modern Fiction Studies, 15 (1969), 215.

²Ethel Cornwell, The Still Point (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1962), pp. 172-73.

³J. K. Johnstone, The Bloomsbury Group (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954), p. 143.

⁴Virginia Woolf, Jacob's Room and The Waves (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959), p. 268. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.

⁵Josephine Schaefer, Reality in the Novels of Virginia Woolf (London: Mouton and Co., 1965), p. 148.

⁶John Graham, "Time in the Novels of Virginia Woolf," University of Toronto Quarterly, 18 (1949), 194.

⁷Schaefer, p. 156.

⁸Lodwick Hartley, rev. of The Waves, South Atlantic Quarterly, 31 (1932), 350.

⁹John Graham, "Point of View in The Waves: Some Services of Style," University of Toronto Quarterly, 39 (1970), 205.

¹⁰Graham, "Time in the Novels," p. 192.

¹¹Stuart Hampshire, "Virginia Woolf," in Modern Writers and Other Essays (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), p. 45.

¹²Payne, "The Eclipse of Order," p. 211.

¹³Payne, p. 210.

¹⁴Woolf, Virginia, A Writer's Diary, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1954), p. 159.

[Notes to pages 26-28]

¹⁵Cyril Connolly, Enemies of Promise (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1939), p. 63.

¹⁶Graham, "Time in the Novels," p. 195.

¹⁷Woolf, A Writer's Diary, p. 150.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 134.

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