ENCOUNTERS IN NARRATIVE FORM: ETHICS AND NARRATIVIZING CHARACTERS

IN CONRAD AND WOOLF

by

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(Under the Direction of Jed Rasula)

ABSTRACT

The defining feature of the modernist novel is its formal innovation of the representation of human consciousness. The specifically modernist mind, moreover, is often viewed as a product of its historical context. Georg Simmel, for instance, famously theorized about the “metropolitan type,” whose affect has been blunted and who encounters others with mutual “strangeness and repulsion.” Modernist aesthetics, according to the critical consensus, developed in response to these historical conditions and sought to reflect the fragmentation and chaos of modernity. The present study argues instead that Joseph Conrad’s and Virginia Woolf’s formal innovations resulted from their desires to both reflect the reality of how nonfictional everyday minds relate to one another and to renegotiate normative narrative procedures they perceived as ethically problematic.

I open by framing Conrad and Woolf as writers who weaved the perilous and auspicious natures of their own pursuits of nonfictional people—Almayer (A Personal Record) and “Mrs. Brown” (“Character in Fiction”)—into their characters’ fictional pursuits of other minds. Conrad and Woolf break radically with novelistic convention by creating narrativizing characters—characters who impose the form of a narrative onto a narration of another character’s life-events
in an attempt to account for the other’s thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires. Ultimately, Conrad and Woolf are preoccupied both with exploring the singular opportunities available to us as we seek to interpret other minds and with the ethical risks inherent in such endeavors. Located at the intersection of several recent critical turns (or returns), namely the narrative, cognitive, affective, and ethical turns, this study examines Conrad’s and Woolf’s narrativizing characters and how they function to instantiate the ethical possibilities and risks inherent in narrativizing other minds at the level of form. This project is located within the emerging field of cognitive narratology and offers new insights into the representation of consciousness and modernist narrative forms.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to

Dr. Mary Ann Nash, who taught me about mitochondria, *Canis lupus*, the periodic table, and, above all, how a person should be;

my father, who taught me how to read and always to ask “what is the meaning of our lives?” and “how should we live?”;

and to Jonathan, who listens to my ideas, edits my work, and still, after all these years, attempts to account for me.
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This dissertation would not have been possible had Adeline Virginia Woolf, 1882–1941, not been “a writer of such English as shall one day burn the pages.” Although I was an English major in undergrad, I was never assigned Woolf in class, and I cannot imagine now the turns my life might have taken had I not met this brilliant mind and all the other minds which populate her unparalleled corpus. However, as fate would have it, one spring break I decided to read Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway and Michael Cunningham’s The Hours in Prague before Stephen Daldry’s film The Hours was released in Boston. Reader, I wandered into the book Mrs. Dalloway, and Virginia Woolf changed my life. The closing line—“For there she was.”—still sends shivers up and down my spine every time I reread it.

Of course, though my passion for Woolf was my initial impetus to study twentieth-century British literature and feminist and narrative theory, among other things, at the graduate level, I’m also thankful for the many others who have aided me in articulating—both to myself and others—just what Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf were up to. My greatest debt in this regard is to Dr. Jed Rasula, who has always believed in me and my work. I would also like to thank Dr. Adam Parkes, whose enthusiastic reading of my chapter drafts motivated me to keep writing and made me realize that I have something to contribute to the field of modernist studies, and Dr. Tricia Lootens, who taught me feminist theory and pedagogy and is a model feminist teacher-scholar. I also owe a great deal to Dr. David Bradshaw, Worcester College, Oxford University, who welcomed me as a fellow Woolfian, and to Barbara Bradshaw, Dr. Jamie McClung, Dr. Kalpen Trivedi, and the UGA at Oxford Program for affording me the opportunity
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CHAPTER 1
THE MODERNIST NOVEL, EVERYDAY MINDS, ETHICS, AND NARRATIVE FORM

The modernist novel has traditionally been defined in formalist and innovatory terms: modernism was a “radical period” (usually demarcated as having occurred between 1890 and 1939) during which modernist writers practiced “revolutionary modes and techniques” as a direct result of “revolutionary changes in the culture itself” (Perloff 574). Using these same innovatory terms, critics have often characterized the modernist novel as rejecting materialist externality in favor of “an emphasis on subjectivity, inner states of consciousness, and fragmentary and discontinuous characterization,” marking a radical break from the Victorian novel’s realist project (Palmer, Social Minds, 184). According to this model, the resolute turn inward of the high modernist novel of the 20s was followed by a return to social realism and moralism in the political novel of the 30s.

Two hugely influential theorists, Georg Lukács and Fredric Jameson, each fault modernist writers for conceiving man as an ahistorical being. Lukács argues that modernist writers “strictly confine [their heroes] within the limits of [their] own experience[s]” and construct heroes who “do not develop through contact with the world; [they] neither form nor [are] formed by it” (397). Jameson, for his part, characterizes modernist novels as “powerful ideological instrument[s] in the perpetuation of an increasingly subjectivized and psychologized world, a world whose social vision is one of a thoroughgoing relativity of monads in coexistence” (210).
Both attackers and defenders of modernist aesthetics agree that the defining feature of the modernist novel is its formal innovation in the representation of human consciousness. Modernist writers famously turned inward, striving to represent mimetically the interiority of specifically modern minds, ones usually viewed as products of their historical context. Georg Simmel, for instance, theorized about the “metropolitan type,” whose affect has been blunted and who encounters others with mutual “strangeness and repulsion” (15). Modernist aesthetics, according to the critical consensus, developed in response to these historical conditions and sought to reflect the fragmentation and chaos of modernity.

This dissertation examines two major modernist novelists’ formal innovations—Conrad’s use of a first-person narrator who does not assume the function of a traditional third-person omniscient narrator and Woolf’s use of free indirect discourse sans a traditional omniscient narrator. Through an examination of these modernist writers’ own discursive statements about their formal methodology and close study of their actual novelistic practices, the present study argues that Conrad’s and Woolf’s formal innovations resulted from their desires both to reflect the reality of how nonfictional everyday minds relate to one another and to renegotiate normative narrative procedures they perceived as inherently ethically problematic.

This study reveals that these writers were intently focused on the question of how to present formally the situated mind as it accounts for other minds. Conrad’s and Woolf’s writer creation myths—their own stories of why they (began to) write—are based on real-life experiences in which they encountered someone for whom they could not adequately account. Woolf’s encounter with “Mrs. Brown,” an elderly woman with whom she shared a railway carriage, is perhaps more familiar, appearing as it does in her famous manifesto “Character in Fiction” (1924). Yet Almayer, a man who attempts to import a pony into the wilderness and
invites Conrad to dinner, singularly haunts Conrad as much as “Mrs. Brown” haunts Woolf: Conrad claims in his 1912 A Personal Record—published some seventeen years after the publication of Almayer’s Folly and some twenty-seven years after having met Almayer—that he is still paying the price for accepting that dinner invitation and that Almayer is “responsible for the existence of some fourteen volumes, so far” (PR 83). I call Conrad’s and Woolf’s attempts to account for Almayer and “Mrs. Brown” narrativizations. Conrad and Woolf do not merely narrate their encounters, or recount the sequence of events, but rather narrativize them, imposing the form of a story onto their narrations. Moreover, these novelists translate their own real-life experiences into fiction by creating narrativizing characters, ones who share their compulsive desire to narrativize others, or to imbricate other minds as characters with their own points of view in narrative form.

These novelists’ formal innovations foregrounded the act of narration and heightened the destabilizing effects of an unauthoritative first-person narrator and free indirect discourse by the “effacing or minimizing [of authorial tonal] cues” (Hite, “Introduction,” lxii). Modernist novels, in their increasingly experimental “slippage[s] between narrator and the character-focalizer,” more radically destabilize readerly expectations than Jane Austen’s novels had (Mezei 72, 85). Woolf’s eventual effacement of the narrator altogether in her later works reaches its apotheosis in her 1931 novel The Waves, in which not only an omniscient narrator but also a “major” voice which may be construed as authorially sanctioned is absent. Paradoxically, it is the removal of authorial tonal cues—those cues “that in most fiction are crucial to locating the author’s values and thus help readers discover what they are supposed to think and feel about the events and characters in a story”—that creates in the reader both a greater desire to know a character in the absence of any cues and a lingering doubt as to any character’s final “knowability” (Hite,
“Introduction,” lxi). Free indirect discourse allows a distance between the knower and the other mind—the object of knowledge that can never be known perfectly—that nonetheless collapses that distance by speaking in the terms of the other mind’s valuations. Hence, the desire to know the other and the other’s unknowability are precariously held within the tensions of the formal properties of free indirect discourse itself.

The direct link between modernist formal innovation and the desire to reflect the ways in which everyday minds relate to one another I posit, however, does not fit the standard critical model. Jesse Matz, in “The Modern Novel” (Blackwell’s Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture [2006]), calls into question the standard narrative of modernist exceptionality and especially the “distinction” of the modern as it plays out across the pages of the novel. The novel, of course, has always been “new”; moreover, Matz claims that “the novel could never be as radically modern (as fully experimental—as much a rupture) as other kinds of modern art, because it could never entirely root out the novel’s traditional concern with the problem of the individual’s relation to the larger world, or completely dispense with such things as the ethics built onto narrative cause and effect” (224, emphasis mine). In order to produce autonomous works of art that were morally ambiguous, in other words, modernist novelists would have to pull out the novel by its roots and eradicate that which ties novel forms to social relations and ethics, a task which, according to Matz, the very form of the genre itself disallows: “Even Hans Castorp and Faulkner’s Benjy must engage with others, must come to us through certain socially collaborative means, in lines of filiation that link them to larger worlds of politics, commerce, and belief” (224).

If reading Matz’s argument about the modern novel leads one to speculate about why such canonical modernists as Conrad and Woolf wrote novels at all, this is because Matz sets up
the novel here as fundamentally different from “Imagist poems and abstract pictures” and claims that the modernist novel’s modernism is tainted by its novelistic qualities (224). Perhaps sharp divisions such as these—subjectivity versus relationality, aesthetics versus ethics—are what cause many literary critics to overlook the ways in which modernist novelists sought out the novel form in order to renegotiate (by way of formal means) their social relations with readers and characters and to emphasize such typically novelistic concerns as human relationality and ethics.

In Conrad’s famous manifesto, “Preface to The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’” (1897), he asserts that the task of the artist is “[t]o arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth,” to “make [his audience] see” in a “moment of vision” before the “return to an eternal rest” (148, 147). The artist’s task according to Conrad is to “snatch” a “passing phase of life” and to “hold up unquestioningly, without choice and without fear, the rescued fragment before all eyes and in the light of a sincere mood” (147, emphasis mine). If the artist is “deserving and fortunate,” his “presented vision” may “awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity” (147). The plural beholders, here, includes not only the audience but also the artist, who both holds up and himself views the rescued fragment, even as he “present[s] an unrestful episode in the obscure lives of a few individuals out of all the disregarded multitude of the bewildered, the simple, and the voiceless” in a “single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe” (146, 145). Conrad’s artist is above all sincere in his aim to present a rescued fragment that is “obscured by mists,” even for the artist, so that they may all interpret this fragment together and become bound to each other and to all mankind in the process (148). This radical re-imagining of the artist-audience relation is also prominent in Woolf’s most famous manifesto, “Character in Fiction” (1924): readers, she
claims, are “partners in this business of writing books,” and there should be no “division between reader and writer” but rather a “close and equal alliance” (SE 53).

To achieve this alliance, Conrad and Woolf rejected the omniscient presentation of “transparent minds” (Dorrit Cohn) that would signify their authority over their readers and characters and their readers’ authority over their characters; they close the distance between authors and readers and characters and in doing so radically broke with novelistic conventions. Because everyday minds, for instance, do not have access to definitive inside views of other minds, these authors experimented formally in order to reflect these realities. Conrad describes his seeking after a new form for the novel as requiring “a number of different people seeing others from different angles”; many characters in Lord Jim, including Marlow, offer definitive “readings” of Jim’s behaviors as if his mind were transparent, but the authoritative omniscient narrator of the first four chapters disappears and Marlow the unreliable narrator is left to muddle through until the novel’s ambiguous end—like all our attempts to understand even those closest to us (qtd. in Ambrosini 197).

The effect of Conrad’s receding from his place of authorial omniscience in Lord Jim is only heightened by Woolf’s later and more radical formal experimentation. “[T]he indeterminancy and instability of free indirect discourse” had of course “always put the onus on the reader, who has to decide where in all this the author stands,” but by “effacing or minimizing [authorial tonal] cues,” Woolf effectively dismantles readers’ expectations that the implied author has privileged knowledge about her characters (Mezei 72; Hite, “Introduction,” lxi). Conrad and Woolf employed formal strategies in order to recede from the traditional position of authorial omniscience because they perceived normative narrative procedures as ethically problematic. Therefore, this dissertation will read their formal innovations as responses to an
ethical imperative to renegotiate writer-reader relations. To this end, I will examine both the ethical opportunities and the ethical risks they understood as inherent in the process of forming narrativizing characters.

In Conrad’s and Woolf’s writer creation myths, they claimed ethical imperatives motivated them to narrativize other minds. The extent of Conrad’s and Woolf’s concerns about the ethical aspects of their novel-writing is remarkable. In his 1912 *Personal Record*, Conrad recalls the circumstances surrounding the composition of his first book, *Almayer’s Folly* (1895). He claims that several real people he used to know “began to live again with a vividness and poignancy quite foreign to our former real intercourse” as he wrote in “the front sitting-room of furnished apartments in a Pimlico square” (23). Almayer, his wife, daughter, and a host of others, Conrad remarks,

came with a silent and irresistible appeal—and the appeal, I affirm here, was not to my self-love or my vanity. It seems now to have had a moral character, for why should the memory of these beings seen, in their obscure, sun-bathed existence, demand to express itself in the shape of a novel, except on the ground of that mysterious fellowship which unites in a community of hopes and fears all the dwellers on this earth?” (*PR* 24, emphasis mine)

Conrad’s real-life experiences of Almayer, his wife, daughter, and others who lived at far-flung outposts of the British empire captured his imagination. Furthermore, Conrad believed that he had to answer the “calling” to be an interpreter of those he had met. Woolf, likewise, considers the “duties and responsibilities” of all us common readers in her famous manifesto “Character in Fiction” (1924). “Character” is only one of a number of essays that contains Woolf’s arguments about the modern novel and her self-styled “quarrel” with Bennett-Wells-
Galsworthy. The major points of this argument are also developed in other essays, including “Modern Novels” (1919) and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1923). Of the several versions of Woolf’s essay, “Modern Fiction” (1925) is the one most often cited and anthologized. “Modern Fiction” contains the passage most often cited in reference to modernist novel aesthetics: it begins “Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day,” describes “the incessant shower of innumerable atoms” that impress the modern mind, and ends with the pronouncement that life is a “luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (9). This passage is so often cited because it corresponds to the agreed-upon explanation of modernist aesthetics that I referenced earlier, namely that it developed in response to historical conditions and sought to reflect the fragmentation and chaos of modernity.

My touchpoint version of Woolf’s modernist aesthetics manifesto, as has probably become obvious by now, is not “Modern Fiction” but “Character in Fiction.” This is so because it is the version in which Woolf explores in greatest detail the character of “Mrs. Brown” and because it is here that she most explicitly outlines the ethical imperative we all have as “fellow travelers with Mrs. Brown.” “Mrs. Brown” is the name Woolf gave to a woman she briefly encountered on the railway from Richmond to Waterloo. As she tells the story in “Character,” Woolf once traveled with an elderly woman and a man in a railway carriage. Woolf felt herself to be interrupting a conversation between the two when she quickly boarded the train. Though the man seemed to be holding something over the woman (perhaps she was signing over some property to him, Woolf speculates), she proceeded to ask the man an eccentric question, cry, and then pull herself together to answer one of his pushy questions in a dignified manner. Though she was very small and clearly suffering, Woolf also characterizes her actions as heroic. This woman is a symbol for Woolf of where all novels begin—with a stranger in the corner opposite.
We must, Woolf insists, as both novelists and novel readers, answer the call to “never, never desert” her: “Something ha[s] to be done. At whatever cost of life, limb, and damage to valuable property Mrs. Brown must be rescued, expressed, and set in her high relations to the world before the train stop[s] and she disappear[s] for ever (53, 54, 51).

While Woolf uses her encounter with “Mrs. Brown” to explain why it is she (or anyone) writes novels, Conrad, too, offers a similar explanation in *A Personal Record* by recounting in great detail the composition of his first piece of writing, the first manuscript page of *Almayer’s Folly*. Explicating his motives for writing is his chief aim in *A Personal Record*: “It was not the outcome of a need—the famous need of self-expression which artists find in their search for motives. The necessity which impelled me was a hidden, obscure necessity, a completely masked and unaccountable phenomenon” (69, emphasis mine). Continuing, Conrad claims, much like Woolf had (here is “Mrs. Brown” making someone write a novel about her), that Almayer made him do it. Seeking to recreate the scene of the first time he put pen to paper, Conrad attempts to recall what he had been reading the day before (maybe one of Trollope’s political novels) and what he had been thinking about. Though he is certain that he “was very far from thinking of writing a story,” “it is possible and even likely that [he] was thinking of the man Almayer” (73). Like Woolf’s encounter with “Mrs. Brown,” Conrad’s encounter with Almayer is so haunting because the thoughts and motives underlying his actions and speech are not easily understood. Almayer, like “Mrs. Brown,” who is by turns frail and pitiful, tenaciously eccentric, and heroically dignified, is difficult to account for.

The importation of a pony into the wilderness (a plan conceived by Almayer and carried out by the men aboard Conrad’s ship) may have been “part of a deep scheme, of some diplomatic plan, of some hopeful intrigue. *With Almayer one could never tell.* He governed his conduct by
considerations removed from the obvious, by incredible assumptions which rendered his logic impenetrable to any reasonable person” (75, emphasis mine). The impression Almayer makes on Conrad, of course, derives from external evidence—he foolishly desires a pony be brought to him, then is suddenly indifferent when the pony escapes, and perhaps even more tellingly, looks at one point as if he is going to let all his letters fall overboard without ever having read them, almost as if he is afraid of his own mail. (This particular piece of behavioral evidence, that Almayer does not seem to be interested in the content of his letters, has a fascinating parallel in a Woolf story, “The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection,” to which I will turn shortly.) Woolf’s impression of “Mrs. Brown,” too, had necessarily been derived from external evidence, from what she said and did.

But this insistence on Conrad’s part that he could not refuse Almayer’s dinner invitation despite Almayer’s inexcusable conduct and perverse ingratitude and that he always thinks kindly of Almayer despite the anguish his writing has caused him suggests that the key to understanding what Conrad calls the “hidden, obscure necessity” to write is his relation to this other mind that intrigues him. As he addresses Almayer’s “shade” at the close of the fourth section of A Personal Record, Conrad defends himself against the charges Almayer might make against him, namely that he has stolen his name for his own uses and has not presented him faithfully. Conrad answers these charges by declaring that he has wrapped Almayer’s “unhonored form” (his sullied reputation) with “a royal mantle of the tropics” by imagining what might have motivated his actions (“the anguish of paternity” [84]). Conrad, in other words, has honored him with his narrativizations, even if these can never do full justice to an individual’s life-story.

Conrad and Woolf are not the only ones to find the pursuits of other minds absorbing ones, for characters across their oeuvres also pursue the shadows of other characters. Marlow
desires to hear Kurtz discourse and to catch glimpses of Jim and Flora de Barral through rents in the fog; Terence Hewet and Evelyn Murgatroyd desire to know Rachel Vinrace, even as Rachel attempts and fails to make the voyage out to other minds in Woolf’s first novel; Peter Walsh desires to know why Mrs. Dalloway makes him feel the terror and the ecstasy, and she attempts to account for a stranger’s suicide; Lily Briscoe desires to see all the way round Mrs. Ramsay, both before and after she has died; Bernard desperately needs to sum up by telling the story of himself, Rhoda, Jinny, Susan, Louis, Neville, and Percival to a distracted audience of one. Sometimes there are “moments of vision,” in which one character seems to see through another as if she is transparent, or seems to see the other as if for the first time.

Perhaps one of the most arresting of these moments of transparency can be found in Woolf’s “Moments of Being: ‘Slater’s Pins Have No Points’” (January 1928, *Forum*):

Fanny [Wilmot] had surprised [Julia Craye] in a moment of ecstasy. [Julia] sat there, half turned away from the piano, with her hands clasped in her lap holding the carnation upright, while behind her was the sharp square of the window, uncurtained, purple in the evening, intensely purple after the brilliant electric lights which burnt unshaded in the bare music room. Julia Craye sitting hunched and compact holding her flower seemed to emerge out of the London night, seemed to fling it like a cloak behind her. It seemed in its bareness and intensity the effluence of her spirit, something she had made which surrounded her, which was her. Fanny stared. ¶All seemed transparent for a moment to the gaze of Fanny Wilmot, as if looking through Miss Craye, she saw the very fountain of her being spurt up in pure, silver drops. She saw back and back into the past behind her. She saw the green Roman vases stood in their case; heard the choristers playing
cricket; saw Julia quietly descend the curving steps onto the lawn; saw her pour out tea beneath the cedar tree; softly enclose the old man’s hand in hers; saw her going round and about the corridors of that ancient Cathedral dwelling place with towels in her hand to mark them; lamenting as she went the pettiness of daily life; and slowly ageing, and putting away clothes when summer came, because at her age they were too bright to wear; and tending her father’s sickness; and cleaving her way ever more definitely as her will stiffened toward her solitary goal; travelling frugally; counting the cost and measuring out of her tight shut purse the sum needed for this journey, or for that old mirror; obstinately adhering whatever people might say in choosing her pleasures for herself. She saw Julia—(CSF 220, emphasis mine)

This Woolfian “moment of being” echoes an earlier Conradian one. Woolf, in fact, herself cites this “moment of vision” from Lord Jim in her chapter on Conrad in The Common Reader:

[The French lieutenant] pronounced, ’Mon Dieu! how the time passes!’ Nothing could have been more commonplace than this remark; but its utterance coincided for me with a moment of vision. It’s extraordinary how we go through life with eyes half shut, with dull ears, with dormant thoughts. Perhaps it’s just as well; and it may be that it is this very dullness that makes life to the incalculable majority so supportable and so welcome. Nevertheless, there can be but few of us who had never known one of these rare moments of awakening when we see, hear, understand ever so much—everything—in a flash—before we fall back again into our agreeable somnolence. I raised my eyes when he spoke, and I saw him as though I had never seen him before. (104, emphasis mine)
These moments of vision represent our often awe-inspiring ability to read other people based on even the slightest external evidence—to register, at least for a fleeting moment, the French lieutenant’s *cliché* and pair of tarnished shoulder-straps as evidence that he has been passed over by time itself or the way Julia Craye holds a carnation as evidence for the very shape of her being, as well as a whole succession of imagined scenes from her past. The possibility of achieving one of these rare moments of great insight, as I have suggested above, is what motivates Conrad and Woolf, as well as Conrad’s and Woolf’s characters, to engage in the process of narrativizing other minds.

Yet both Conrad and Woolf increasingly realized not only the ethical possibilities inherent in the process of narrativization but also its attendant risks and dangers. I will return in chapters two and five to closer studies of these novelists’ critiques of the process of “penetrat[ing] a little farther” into others’ interiorities (*CSF* 224). Charlie Marlow and Bernard are the supreme figures for the artist in Conrad’s and Woolf’s canons; despite their privileged positions, however, *Chance* and *The Waves* offer damning critiques of their motivations for telling others’ stories and their methods for doing so. Perhaps the most pointed critique of this process of narrativization can be found in Woolf’s “The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection” (*Harper’s Magazine*, December 1929). The story originated from Woolf’s observation while visiting Ethel Sands in Normandy in July 1927 that she did not open her letters (*CSF* 306). Woolf writes in her diary on 20 September 1927: “How many little stories come into my head! For instance: Ethel Sands not looking at her letters. What this implies. One might write a book of short significant separate scenes. She did not open her letters” (*D III* 157). As Susan Dick points out in her “Notes and Appendices” to *The Complete Shorter Fiction*, the final line of the first typescript draft reads: “Isabella did not open her letters” (306).
This short story opens as an unnamed narrator remarks, “People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms any more than they should leave open cheque books or letters confessing some hideous crime” (CSF 221). She then continues to comment on the empty rooms in the house, comparing herself to a “naturalist” and claiming that “[o]ne could not help looking” (221). After introducing the mistress of the house as Isabella Tyson, the narrator attempts to intuit what Isabella is doing now, having left the house half an hour earlier carrying a basket. Imagining first that Isabella must be picking flowers in the garden, the narrator then wonders what kinds of flowers Isabella would pick—she decides on the “burst[ing]” convolvulus and “light and fantastic” traveler’s joy and rejects the “upright aster,” the “starched zinnia,” and her own “burning roses” (222). She quickly upbraids herself, though, realizing that “after knowing her all these years one could not say what the truth about Isabella was; one still made up phrases like this about convolvulus and traveller’s joy” (222, emphasis mine). Bristling at the thought that the rich spinster’s rugs, chairs, and cabinets know more about her than she and her other houseguests are “allowed to know,” she then muses about all the little drawers in the cabinets and what secrets those drawers must contain, for Isabella had never married though she had many friends and acquaintances. Suddenly, a large black figure looms in the looking-glass: the man has brought the post. This captures the narrator’s imagination; if she could just read those letters, she declares, she would know everything not only about Isabella but about life too. But Isabella, she imagines, will read the letters and cut them up into pieces and hide them away in the cabinet drawers, for she did not want to be found out. This only serves as a challenge to the narrator, who decides that Isabella will “no longer escape” (223). Then, in a chilling passage that renders the process of narrativization the “penetration” of a mind like the prizing open of an oyster, the narrator asserts:
she must prize [Isabella] open with the first tool that came to hand—the imagination. One must fix one’s mind upon her at that very moment. One must fasten her down there. One must refuse to be put off any longer with sayings and doings such as the moment brought forth—with dinners and visits and polite conversations. One must put oneself in her shoes. If one took the phrase literally, it was easy to see the shoes in which she stood, down in the lower garden, at this moment. They were very narrow and long and fashionable—they were made of the softest and most flexible leather. Like everything she wore, they were exquisite. And she would be standing under the high hedge in the lower part of the garden, raising the scissors that were tied to her waist to cut some dead flower, some overgrown branch. [ . . . ] Here with a quick movement of her scissors she snipped the spray of traveller’s joy and it fell to the ground. As it fell, surely some light came in too, surely one could penetrate a little farther into her being. Her mind then was filled with tenderness and regret. . . . To cut an overgrown branch saddened her because it had once lived, and life was dear to her. Yes, and at the same time the fall of the branch would suggest to her how she must die herself and all the futility and evanescence of things. And then again quickly catching this thought up, with her instant good sense, she thought life had treated her well; even if fall she must, it was to lie on the earth and moulder sweetly into the roots of violets. So she stood thinking. (224, emphasis mine)

At the story’s climax, Isabella comes nearer to the house and appears larger and larger in the looking-glass. This is an “enthralling spectacle” for the narrator:
Everything dropped from her—clouds, dress, basket, diamond—all that one had called the creeper and convolvulus. Here was the hard wall beneath. Here was the woman herself. She stood naked in that pitiless light. And there was nothing. 

_Isabella was perfectly empty. She had no thoughts. She had no friends. She cared for nobody._ As for her letters, they were all bills. Look, as she stood there, old and angular, veined and lined, with her high nose and her wrinkled neck, she did not even trouble to open them. (225, emphasis mine)

The shock of these final definitive and dehumanizing statements is foreshadowed by the earlier metaphors of violence used to describe the narrator’s “penetration” of Isabella’s mind. I emphasize this story’s presentation of narrativization here because it serves as a forewarning counterbalance to an exclusive focus on ethically productive scenes of narrativization. Though they often present the desire to know the other as a positive one, both Conrad and Woolf are aware of the dangers when narrators presume to know what cannot ever be perfectly known—other minds. When the narrator’s narrative that Isabella’s “hidden” self can be revealed by her letters is proven false, she retaliates by asserting that Isabella is “perfectly empty.” By contrast, as we will see in chapter four, the narrator of an “An Unwritten Novel” first despairs when her narrativizations about “Minnie Marsh” are proven false yet ends by rhapsodizing the “unknown figures” she embraces and draws to herself despite the failures of her narrative.

My framing of Conrad and Woolf here as writers intensely preoccupied with ethical questions directly opposes the “inward turn model” most famously expounded by Lukács and Jameson. The myth of the modernist writer as aesthetically withdrawn and therefore ethically and sociopolitically disengaged has come under fire by critics who seek to challenge divisions between “modernist” and “committed” writing. Jessica Berman’s _Modernist Commitments:_

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*Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism* (2011) argues that modernisms represent a range of political engagement and that this engagement is “strengthened rather than hindered by formal experimentation.” Berman’s book offers a much-needed rapprochement of ethics and politics, as contemporary theorists of both these subjects have largely avoided discussing their interrelationship.

Other recent studies have also specifically set out to recuperate modernist novelists’ sociopolitical and ethicoaesthetic visions. Among the most notable of these are Lorraine Sim’s *Virginia Woolf: The Patterns of Ordinary Experience* (2010) and Melba Cuddy-Keane’s *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere* (2003). In her last chapter, Sim turns to Woolf’s “ethics of the ordinary,” an idea closely tied to Woolf’s concerns about intersubjectivity and community. Cuddy-Keane, likewise, presents Woolf as a “democratic highbrow,” one who advocated both “democratic inclusiveness and intellectual education,” and in so doing “forged a positive answer to one of her culture’s most pressing concerns” (1).

Many other critics also participating in the recent turn to ethics (as evidenced by the anthologies *The Turn to Ethics* [2000] and *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory* [2001]) have joined Berman, Sim, and Cuddy-Keane in rejecting the “inward turn” model for understanding modernist writing. The most notable recent full-length studies are Vicki Mahaffey’s *Modernist Literature: Challenging Fictions* (2007), Andrew Gibson’s *Postmodernity, Ethics, and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas* (1999), David Parker’s *Ethics, Theory, and the Novel* (1994), and Adam Zachary Newton’s *Narrative Ethics* (1995). All these studies read modernist writing, as do I, as a fundamentally ethical phenomenon. Cuddy-Keane even goes so far as to suggest that “it may be the modernist text that best models an ethical praxis” (‘Ethics,” 217).
Newton’s *Narrative Ethics*, though it does not focus exclusively on modernist novels, argues that “narrative ethics” is a “defining property of prose fiction, [and is] of particular import in nineteenth- and later twentieth-century texts” (8). Newton reads all narratives, as do I, as having their own singular ethical stakes, namely “the ethical consequences of narrating story and fictionalizing person, and the reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, witness, and reader in that process” (11). Most crucial for this study, however, is Newton’s provocative claim that “formal innovations in the novel dovetail with an increased anxiety about what it means, simply, to render oneself, and to affect others, narratively; what does it mean to assume (or defy) the responsibilities which storytelling perforce assigns?” (31). Conrad and Woolf, as I will demonstrate throughout this dissertation, not only felt such anxieties but deliberately set out to probe the inherent ethical possibilities and risks of processes of narrativization.

For the most part, critical discussions aligned with the ethical turn have not incorporated specifically novelistic formal innovation into these artists’ proposed sociopolitical and ethicoaesthetic visions. Notable exceptions in Woolf scholarship include Herta Newman’s *Virginia Woolf and Mrs. Brown: Toward a Realism of Uncertainty* (1996) and Maria DiBattista’s *Imagining Virginia Woolf: An Experiment in Critical Biography* (2009), nuanced studies of Woolf’s aesthetic project that illuminate her ethical and feminist aims. Conrad scholars, of course, have long worked at the intersection of ethics and narrative theory: the most influential of these include Ian Watt (*Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* [1979]) and Wayne Booth (*The Rhetoric of Fiction* [1961]). The present study seeks to develop and extend these scholars’ work by positing that Conrad and Woolf turned to the novel *specifically because* human relations and ethics are so inextricable in its formal structures and because their ethicoaesthetic aim was to re-present and re-invent the ways in which individuals, both fictional and real, related to one
another; their start was to change radically the ways in which they related as implied authors to their reading publics.

This study takes Molly Hite’s work as its paradigm because it offers the most sustained engagement with Woolf’s ethicoaesthetic aims as developed through a close analysis of her experimentations in form. Her article, “Tonal Cues and Uncertain Values: Affect and Ethics in Mrs. Dalloway,” appeared in Narrative in 2010 and she is currently writing a book that “explor[es] Woolf’s use of muted or conflicting tonal cues and the ‘Edwardian’ generation of feminist writers who are Woolf’s unacknowledged precursors and competition” (Cornell webpage). In a study of Woolf’s middle-period novels, Hite claims that “[a]lthough Woolf uses potentially authoritative third-person narrators in all her novels,” “the narrators[’] tonal cues within the[se] text[s] are frequently contradictory, inconclusive, or simply absent” (252, 249, emphasis mine).

Hite presents Mrs. Dalloway as exemplary in regards to its muted or conflicting tonal cues, or “affective indeterminancy”: we do not know how we should respond affectively to certain elements of the narrative discourse, how to “assign what [we] perceive to be authorially sanctioned feelings and thus values to the main events and characters” (250). The result, Hite persuasively demonstrates, is that critics come to “strikingly divergent interpretations that conflict on the value and role assigned to the title character, the nature of the climactic scene, and the attitude readers should have toward the second, shadow protagonist, Septimus Smith” (250). Woolf uses this “tonal undecidability” as a strategy to defamiliarize the reader from her habitual evaluative responses, Hite maintains, adding that this strategy also has a mimetic motivation (as a twentieth-century agnostic, Woolf is in no position to make evaluative pronouncements on other people from on high) and affectively engages readers (who must interact with the text but
are never allowed to “arrive at affective stasis”) (266). Thus, Hite makes striking (and text-based) claims about Woolf’s formal innovations that she then convincingly suggests make up an ethicoaesthetic strategy that Woolf deployed across a range of her middle-period fiction. Hite’s scholarship is also unique in that it proffers a theoretical model of affectivity and thus also participates in the recent “affective turn” in cultural and literary studies. (I will turn to another important contribution to modernism and affect studies, Jonathan Flatley’s *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* [2008], in chapter three.)

Hite’s work is so groundbreaking, in my view, because it closely attends to Woolf’s actual formal practices and to the ethical implications of this methodology in a rhetorical context, thus closing a gap between the “merely” typological approach of a critic such as Dorrit Cohn and theoretical approaches that do not attend closely enough to “the messy contingency of actual phenomena” (McHale, “Islands,” 190). The most essential of these typological formal-linguistic studies are Dorrit Cohn’s *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (1978) and *The Distinction of Fiction* (1999) and Ann Banfield’s *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction* (1982).

In Cohn’s *Transparent Minds* and *The Distinction of Fiction*, she references Käte Hamburger’s *The Logic of Literature* to claim that the distinction of fiction—defined by Cohn as “literary nonreferential narrative”—is its representation of transparent minds. Cohn singles out free indirect discourse as one of the technical devices that “remain unavailable to narrators who aim for referential (nonfictional) presentation” (16). Banfield’s *Unspeakable Sentences* similarly relies on what she claims is a fundamental disjunction between free indirect discourse and ordinary communicative acts: she attempts to demonstrate throughout her book that certain
sentences, including those containing free indirect discourse, are “unspeakable” because they occur only in written texts and never in speech or in the written imitation of speech.

Brian McHale has perhaps offered the most effective counterargument to Banfield’s criticism of the communication theory of narrative, ultimately concluding that “grammar cannot of itself serve as an adequate theory of narrative, or of text” because it operates on the assumption of a “horizontal relation among linguistic units spaced out along the same plane of the text—a relation among ‘neighbors,’” whereas textual sentences exist on a “vertical dimension,” in which “sentences giv[e] rise to reconstructions, reconstructions contextualiz[e] sentences, sentences in turn modify their interpretative contexts, and so on” (“Unspeakable Sentences,” 39, 34).

My purpose here, however, is not to discredit Cohn’s or Banfield’s model but to use these models to clarify my own argument’s salient points. Conrad and Woolf, of course, were aware that the “singular power possessed by the novelist” was her ability to reveal the inner lives of her characters at will (Banfield, Transparent, 4). They often did use free indirect discourse sentences and an omniscient narrator to reflect exactly what it is everyday minds cannot know about other minds in ordinary communicative situations. As this study will demonstrate, however, they sought to renegotiate this hierarchical model of writer-reader, writer-character, and reader-character relations based on what they perceived as an ethical imperative. By formal means, they sought to reconfigure these normative narrative models and to create narrators and character-narrators that existed on a continuum of knowledge about other minds. Rather than create omniscient narrators who present transparent minds, Conrad and Woolf both give their narrators some of the abilities Cohn and Banfield claim make fictional narrators so distinctive and present scenes like ones everyday minds create, ones that are not authorially sanctioned.
Some critics have begun to reframe the study of fictional representations of consciousness by taking an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates findings from the cognitive sciences: cognitive psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, evolutionary biology, artificial intelligence, and philosophy of mind (MLA Discussion Group Petition Text: Cognitive Approaches to Literature). My attention to fictional representations of characters’ cognitive processes, and especially to what cognitive psychologists call “theory of mind,” will align this dissertation with the work of those critics who undertake cognitive approaches to literature at the intersection of literature and cognitive psychology, especially Lisa Zunshine, David Herman, Alan Palmer, and George Butte. The way I present Conrad’s and Woolf’s methods of mimetic characterization here necessarily means that I must draw on “folk-psychological” or “common sense” models psychologists have developed to explain how people “attribute mental states, properties, and dispositions both to themselves and to their social cohorts” (“Cognitive narratology” ¶ 34). I also employ a postclassical approach to consciousness representation by attending not only to “inner speech” but also to what Alan Palmer calls “social minds in action” throughout my extended discussions of specific textual passages.

The present study’s focus is on the ways in which people encounter other minds in narrative form. This description, as I have outlined in the above analysis of Conrad’s and Woolf’s creation myths, applies to these writers, who authored narratives, they claimed, as a direct result of their encounters with Almayer and “Mrs. Brown.” It also applies to Conrad’s and Woolf’s narrativizing characters, who shape their stories of others into ones with beginnings, middles, and ends or create scenes that might have happened in order to theorize about what other minds think and feel. But this description also encompasses another encounter—that of the reader encountering the words on a page that represent other minds. These encounters between
readers and character-minds are very carefully staged by Conrad and Woolf. Because narrative shape—first impressions, climactic middles, and definitive or ambiguous ends—has such a great effect on the experience of reading other minds, this dissertation stages its readers’ successive encounters with minds narrativizing other minds in a similar fashion.

I have begun with an analysis of Conrad’s and Woolf’s writer creation myths—with why and how, according to their autobiographical writing, they began to “form” other minds. In successive chapters, I often begin the discussion of a text by unpacking its opening telling situation or scene in order to reveal how this opening shapes the subsequent reading experience. I also place a great deal of emphasis on the climax or climaxes of a given text. These points of maximal tension are, of course, the ones designed to bear the most structural weight and are often the ones that readers return to when they reread. An argument such as mine about the process of encountering other minds in these texts must not only be supported by evidence from these climactic scenes but must also be propelled by what these scenes themselves emphasize.

Likewise, I often close my treatment of specific texts with careful attention to ends and endings—closing lines, scenes of death and suicide, last words, last looks, final analyses. By loosely structuring my own work in this way, I hope to emphasize that readings of these novels must take into account these narrative cruxes if they are to have real explanatory power.

*The Waves*, Woolf’s most formally experimental work, might seem to merit an exception, since it is in many ways a “plotless” novel. Yet it too contains beginnings, middles, and ends, and even as it pushes back against reader expectations, its successive moments must be considered as beginnings, climaxes, and ends if we are to account for how it works to stage for readers encounters in narrative form. Thus, the organizational structure is roughly chronological in nature, and reflects on what initially motivated Conrad and Woolf to write narrativizing
characters, as well as on how this central preoccupation plays out across subsequent texts and appears in later works (especially in *Chance*, “The Lady in the Looking-Glass,” and *The Waves*) as either ambivalent or outright indictments of how figures for the author narrativize other minds.

In my second chapter, entitled “Character in search of three forms: Conrad’s Marlow, ethics, and narrative form,” I delineate how Conrad renegotiates writer-reader, writer-character, and reader-character relations by disallowing his narrator-character Marlow the authority of a traditional first-person narrator, one who assumes the functions of the traditional third-person omniscient narrator. Rather, Conrad breaks with the conventions of authorial omniscience and third-person narration in order to set in motion a new ethics of character-reading and –writing that can be traced throughout the Marlovian tetralogy (“Youth” [1898, 1902], *Heart of Darkness* [1899, 1902], *Lord Jim* [1900], *Chance* [1913]).

More specifically, Marlow functions to instantiate the ethical possibilities and risks inherent in narrativizing other minds at the level of form. As Marlow narrativizes those he encounters—Kurtz, Jim, Flora—we are made aware that when someone—whether implied author, narrator, character, or implied reader—writes the stories of others’ lives, he does so as the result of some underlying motivation and under the pressures of his own and audiences’ expectations and narrative form. Thus, I read the Marlovian tales as metanarratives in which Marlow encounters a person and shapes her life-story according to narrative processes that are sometimes tailored to specific audiences. Because both Marlow and his audiences (the Intended and the men aboard the *Nellie*) are desperate for the sense of an ending, Marlow provides not one but two deathbed scenes in *Heart of Darkness*, complete with satiating, culminating last words. Though Marlow feels pressure to redeem Jim (“one of us”) in the narrative form of a colonial
romance, he ultimately finds it difficult to do so; Chance’s Marlow, however, is more than willing to assign a genre to Flora’s gender, thus effectively “form”ing her into a heroine in a romance.

Just as Conrad appropriates the boy’s adventure tale, the colonial romance, and the romance in order to foreground and critique Marlow’s methods of narrativization, Woolf utilizes the Euphrosyne’s voyage to South America in The Voyage Out (1915)—incidentally her first voyage out as a novelist—as a backdrop to test her heroine’s powers of making the voyage out to other minds. In my third chapter, “Rachel Vinrace among the faces: The crisis in reading other minds in The Voyage Out (1915),” I will argue that Rachel, the protagonist of Voyage, dies because she cannot adequately solve the problem of other minds or find a way to relate to others—and that these crises in interpretation and relation are mapped onto a coterminous crisis in reading.

By analyzing the early manuscripts and Woolf’s revisions during her first foray into novel-writing, I examine her emphasis on the ways in which Rachel’s social life and miseducation thwart her development as a traditional Künstlerroman heroine. Because the miseducated Rachel’s subsequent psychic disintegration and physical breakdown are precipitated by her lack of ability to read other minds, the ethicoepistemological problem of other minds is also a highly significant feminist one across Woolf’s œuvre. Louise deSalvo “recovered” Melymbrosia, the complete early version of the novel, and most critics concur with her claims that Woolf’s later revisions were largely a form of self-censorship and that Melymbrosia is the more effective and sociopolitically engaged of the two versions. I will depart from the prevailing self-censorship thesis and will argue instead that Rachel dies not because she becomes less
outspoken and critical of her society but because she fails to relate her self to those around her and that this failure stems from her miseducation.

Rachel, during the course of the novel, learns she can go in and out of rooms, in and out of other people’s minds, though she also learns she may be impeded because everyday minds are accessible but not transparent. Her desire to do so, however, recedes when she becomes ill and deliberately disengages from those around her. A study of Woolf’s other short fiction, novels, and essays reveals that Rachel is an unusual character in the Woolf canon in that she ceases to be affected by others at the end of the novel; her lack of response to others’ affect aligns her instead with Mrs. Dalloway’s Septimus Warren Smith and The Waves’s Rhoda, both characters who take their own lives. Thus, I read Rachel’s death as a warning not to neglect the importance of the successful voyage out to other minds for characters’ lives and as a condemnation of a society that has not equipped its heroine for the necessary incursion in out of other rooms, in and out of others’ minds.

My fourth chapter, “‘For there she was’: the encounter with the ordinary woman in Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse,” investigates what happens to the modernist preoccupation with ethics and narrativizing characters when the character others desire to narrativize is an “ordinary” woman—an MP’s wife, say, or a mother of eight. Surprisingly, Woolf sets these women (and not women artists like Lily Briscoe) apart and privileges them as model common readers of other minds. Though we do gain access to the privileged character-reading minds of Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay partly through scenes in which they transcend the immanent sphere in isolation (most famously by retreating to an empty room during a party and by becoming one with the third stroke of the lighthouse, respectively), Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs.
Ramsay are ultimately portrayed as two of many “social minds in action” (Palmer), even as they retreat from their (sometimes public) roles in the domestic sphere.

Because Woolf privileges intersubjectivity (the ways in which characters are represented representing other minds) over subjectivity (an individual’s “private” world as defined apart from any other subjects), chapter four investigates the ways in which Woolf’s characters represent other minds in a cross-section of Woolf’s oeuvre, with particular attention devoted to Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, the short fiction, especially “An Unwritten Novel,” and nonfictional pieces (essays, diary entries, letters, and autobiographical sketches). In a careful study of what Woolf called her “tunneling process,” I will argue that Woolf was preoccupied with the question of how to represent formally the process of everyday minds attempting to account for other minds based on external behavioral evidence (on what others say and do.) Mrs. Dalloway emerges in this analysis as a model common reader due to her characteristically pronounced ethicoaffective responses, as does Mrs. Ramsay due to her propensity for intersubjective vision.

In chapter five, “‘That is the blow you have dealt me’: (Re)writing the self in The Waves (1931), I present Woolf’s most experimental work as a culmination of the modernist preoccupation with ethics and narrativizing characters. It is no accident, I maintain, that the “plot” of Woolf’s most formally innovative work consists of the six characters’ attempts to narrativize both themselves and others, even as they come to recognize the precarious and constructed nature of their own narratives. I suggest this work be read as a culmination of the modernist novel’s captivation with ethics and narrativizing characters because it is these six characters who are most explicitly and continuously engaged in narrativizing their own and others’ lives and who are most aware of the ethical risks and possibilities inherent in this process.
Each character is implicated in the shifting relations of the whole, each affects and is affected in an endless cycle, a turning away from and a turning toward the other. Many narratives are spun out of many encounters before Bernard sets himself the impossible task of “summing up” and faces the inevitable end of all our narratives.
CHAPTER 2

CHARACTER IN SEARCH OF THREE FORMS: CONRAD’S MARLOW, ETHICS, AND NARRATIVE FORM

In the first tale in which he appears, “Youth: A Narrative” (1898, 1902), Marlow pauses to ask his audience of four, the director of companies, an accountant, a lawyer, and an unnamed narrator, the Marlovian question “Do you see?:” “Do you see the lot of us there, putting a neat furl on the sails of that ship doomed to arrive nowhere? [. . . ] You understand this?” (88)

“Youth” ends with an enthusiastic reception, an answer to the question, “Do you see?:”

And we all nodded at him: the man of finance, the man of accounts, the man of law, we all nodded at him over the polished table that like a still sheet of brown water reflected our faces, lined, wrinkled; our faces marked by toil, by deceptions, by success, by love; our weary eyes looking still, looking always, looking anxiously for something out of life, that while it is expected is already gone—has passed unseen, in a sigh, in a flash—together with the youth, with the strength, with the romance of illusions. (99, emphasis mine)

Marlow, here, achieves the aim of the artist as outlined in Conrad’s “Preface to The Nigger of ‘Narcissus’” (1897); his narrative has “arrest[ed], for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth” and has “compel[led] men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and colour, of sunshine and shadows; to make them pause for a look, for a sigh, for a smile” (148). Marlow has held up the narrative, the “rescued fragment,” “before all eyes” and has made his audience “pause for a look, for a sigh, for a smile” (147, 148). In “Youth,” Marlow is a Benjaminian storyteller, one whose “gift is the
ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life” (Benjamin 108). In this first telling situation, Marlow’s tale is flawlessly transmitted and received.

The transmission and reception of Marlow’s narratives following “Youth”—Heart of Darkness (1899, 1902), Lord Jim: A Tale (1900), and Chance: A Tale in Two Parts (1913)—of course, become increasingly problematic. It is very hard to determine what exactly Marlow, let alone Marlow’s audiences, sees of Kurtz, Tuan Jim, or Flora de Barral. What is clear is how profoundly these “moments of vision”—Marlow’s seeing and hearing Kurtz and his Intended together or seeing glimpses of Jim “through the shifting rents in a thick fog”—affect not only Marlow, but also the varied audiences of his tales, both oral and written (HoD 183; LJ 55). If much has been made of Marlow’s lament that “it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence,” not enough attention has been paid to the unnamed narrator’s response to this direct address: though it so pitch dark that the “listeners could hardly see one another,” the narrator “listen[s] on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give [him] the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by [Marlow’s] narrative” (130).

If the artist’s imperative is to make men pause together for a look, increasingly that vision is no more clear to Marlow than it is to members of his audience. In other words, Conrad is redefining the terms on which an artist and his audience relate to one another; no longer does an artist simply “snatch in a moment of courage, from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life” in order to present this vision to her audience, for this “is only the beginning of the task” (P 147). What remains is for the artist “to hold up unquestioningly, without choice and without fear, the rescued fragment before all eyes,” including those of the artist (147, emphasis mine). This “rescued fragment” that is to be examined under the scrutiny of all eyes in Marlow’s canon after “Youth” is a character—Kurtz, Jim, Flora. And what Conrad the artist achieves in his
presentations of Marlow’s narrativizations of these characters is a re-negotiation of writer-character, writer-reader, narrator-character, and reader-character relations: while we as readers, Conrad, and Marlow all desire to see, to completely understand these men and this woman, we are never set at rest in a complete knowledge which would signal our “mastery” of these characters and their lives’ meanings. This re-negotiation sets in motion a new ethics of character-reading and –writing that can be traced throughout the Marlovian tetralogy (“Youth,” *Heart of Darkness, Lord Jim, Chance*) and that is instantiated at the level of form. Marlow as narrative device is here crucial; as he narrativizes those he encounters, we are made constantly aware that when someone—whether implied author, narrator, character, or implied reader—writes the stories of others’ lives, she does so as the result of some underlying motivation and under the pressures of audiences’ expectations and narrative form.

I will turn now to a discussion of how narrational ethics (Newton) are instantiated at the level of form in Conrad in order to foreground his break with the conventions of authorial omniscience and first-person narration. In Conrad’s texts, as Michael Levenson argues in *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine, 1908–22* (1984), we can see “the conventions of omniscience breaking down” (5). One of the “immediate consequences” of the “rejection of omniscience,” Levenson continues, is “the creation of characters who can assume the traditional functions of the omniscient narrator (though, of course, on a more modest scale): to direct attention, to interpret incidents, to evaluate behavior” (9). In other words, one of the immediate consequences of Conrad’s rejection of omniscience is Marlow. Though Ian Watt maintains that Henry James was the greatest influence on Conrad’s development of formal technique—he singles out *The Spoils of Poynton* (1896) for especial attention—he states that “Conrad’s use of Marlow, of course, has no equivalent in James; it represents, above all, a much
more extreme and overt break with the distance, impersonality, and omniscience of third-person narration” (205).

As Yael Halevi-Wise points out, Conrad’s use of Marlow as a narrative device is far from unprecedented in the history of the English novel: as Jane Eyre, David Copperfield, and Pip recount their earlier experiences from a mature vantage point, they appear as the highest authority on their own lives and their subjective perspective contributes to a generalized standard of moral and material achievement. These fictional imitations of autobiography, confession, or journal writing are therefore based on the assumption that the person who lived through certain events, and is able to recount them from a mature perspective, is a source of information as reliable as the authoritative voice of an omniscient narrator. (104)

Conrad, however, departs from this tradition because Marlow, from *Heart of Darkness* on, does not achieve “the stability of a first-person ‘autobiographical’ narrator who possesses all the pieces of the puzzle and evaluates his or her past experiences from an enlightened vantage point” (Halevi-Wise 120). Marlow, in other words, beginning with *Heart of Darkness*, is not a Benjaminian storyteller, for not only does he not possess the ability to relate his own life according to the conventions of an authoritative first-person narrator who assumes the functions of the traditional third-person omniscient narrator, but it is also not his own life which he is at pains to relate.

Marlow’s function as character-narrator is to instantiate the ethical possibilities and risks inherent in narrativizing other minds, ones which are necessarily not transparent to us, at the level of form. The Marlovian tales are meta-narratives about the ways in which we encounter others and narrativize their lives into “forms” that are shaped by narrative processes (even if
those processes are resisted) and sometimes tailored to specific audiences. In other words, by foregrounding Marlow’s motivated narratorial acts rather than his authority or the “story” (Chatman), Conrad’s texts emphasize the compulsion to imbricate the minds we encounter in the form of life-stories, as well as foreground the attendant ethical risks and ambiguities that necessarily result from such narrativizations. “As Ford Madox Ford recalls in Thus to Revisit: Some Reminiscences, throughout their collaboration, ‘Conrad’s unceasing search was for a New Form for the Novel” (Ambrosini 196). Conrad explains his search for a new form in this 1913 dictation: “I am the only one in our generation who seems to be seeking a new form. Not that I deliberately sought it—stories came to me so. I had to have a number of different people seeing others from different angles. I had already adopted the form before I had fully realized it. And then I knew it was essentially mine, so I continue in it” (qtd. in Ambrosini 197, emphasis mine).

As we will see later, Conrad’s method, having characters “see others from different angles,” parallels Woolf’s descriptions of her own method in “Unwritten Novel” and her revisions of Mrs. Dalloway from short story to novel, and it is these innovatory techniques, which break with the conventions of omniscience, that this study will analyze as representing major contributions to the new form of the English modernist novel.

Conrad’s novels “above all else foreground the activity of ‘reading’ itself,” for “[r]eading and the attributing of meaning is, it seems, one of the conditions of being human” (Fothergill 5). The danger of any encounter, these texts imply, is that the ethical imperative to narrativize the other, to “seek fit words for his meaning,” is fraught with moral peril; the seduction to create stories out of lives, to shape beginnings, middles, and ends, is always with us, and though Marlow succumbs to these seductions in Heart of Darkness, as I argue in the following section, he ultimately mostly resists this temptation, though others do not, in Lord Jim (LJ 306).
Chance, however, he fails, once again, by denying a woman the same fate as Jim, to remain “under a cloud.” Chance is, then, a metanarrative about how Marlow narrativizes women with a difference and rushes headlong into the hermeunetic trap of assigning a genre to Flora’s gender.

**Marlow’s encounter with Kurtz—the desperate need for the sense of an ending**

Marlow, at a crucial juncture in his journey toward Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, relates,

> I think I would have raised an outcry if I had believed my eyes. But I didn’t believe them at first—*the thing seemed so impossible*. The fact is I was completely unnerved by a sheer blank fright, pure abstract terror, unconnected with any distinct shape of physical danger. What made this emotion so overpowering was—how shall I define it?—the moral shock I received, as if something altogether monstrous, *intolerable to thought and odious to the soul*, *had been thrust upon me* unexpectedly. This lasted of course the merest fraction of a second, and then the usual sense of commonplace, deadly danger, the possibility of a sudden onslaught and massacre, or something of the kind, which I saw impending, was positively welcome and composing. It pacified me, in fact, so much, that I did not raise an alarm. (171–2, emphasis mine)

What is this “thing that seemed so impossible,” this thing “intolerable to thought and odious to the soul” that has been “unexpectedly” “thrust” onto Marlow? One would assume that this passage, when read excerpted, refers to Marlow’s witnessing of Kurtz “presiding at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites,” say, or to the “half a dozen slim posts” capped with human heads that line Kurtz’s Inner Station (155). Yet what so horrifies Marlow is merely the fact that a light burns within the small cabin and that Kurtz is not there. Why is the simple
fact of Kurtz’s leaving the cabin and crawling toward the wilderness so destabilizing to Marlow? I would suggest that it is Marlow’s need for narrative closure, for a final confrontation in which the meaning of Kurtz’s life will be disclosed to him through language, that renders Kurtz’s possible escape into the wilderness so terrifying in a moral sense for Marlow. Marlow needs—just as the Intended states she needs—“something to live with” (186). In attending in this way to Marlow’s psychological motivations, I depart from most critics, who “see Marlow’s traits as emanating from the functions he serves rather than from his psychology,” and assume, as does Bernard Paris, that Marlow is a mimetic character whose actions can be understood as having motivations and, moreover, that it is Marlow’s “sense of alliance with this man [Kurtz] by whom he is appalled” that is the greatest mystery in Heart of Darkness (3, 42).

Marlow’s moral panic that Kurtz will have simply disappeared before Marlow can achieve the sense of an ending is so destabilizing for Marlow that he quickly continues his narrative with every indication that at no point previously and at no point in future is he as certain about his own actions as he is now. Yet, paradoxically, the reading experience—from the moment when Marlow discovers Kurtz’s absence till the steamer makes its getaway with Kurtz safely tucked aboard, a span of only a few pages—is the most confusing and confounding of the whole book. It is difficult at points even to tease out where Marlow and Kurtz physically are in relation to one another and what, at any given moment, they are actually doing. Added to these confusions about basic plot are symbolic figures—a black figure “striding on long black legs, waving long black arms” with antelope horns on its head and a “barbarous and superb woman” “stretching tragically her bare arms”—whose basic motivations and utterances are lost on Marlow and so are unavailable to the reader (173, 175).
Despite the fact that this passage is the most confusing one of the entire narrative, demanding, almost, that the reader go back and reread what she has just read in order to clarify for herself even a basic understanding of plot, Marlow claims that “[t]he night was very clear” and that he “was strangely cocksure of everything that night” (172). Moreover, Marlow claims that in “a flash of inspiration” he “did say the right thing” to Kurtz, ‘You will be lost—utterly lost’” (173). He “affirm[s] steadily” that Kurtz’s success in Europe is assured; he is “convinced” that the “heavy, mute spell of the wilderness” alone “ha[s] driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations” (173).

The “terror of [his] position,” Marlow claims, “was not in being knocked on the head,” “but in this, that [he] had to deal with a being to whom [he] could not appeal in the name of anything high or low” (174). Marlow claims that he must—“for my sins, I suppose”—go through “the ordeal of looking into it,” of overseeing Kurtz’s supposed wrestling with his own soul, presumably as a priest might undergo the perilous ordeal of exorcising demons (174). Indeed, Marlow’s extraction of Kurtz into the pilot-house is accompanied by “strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language; and the deep murmurs of the crowd” were “like the responses of some satanic litany” (175). Marlow, here, clearly narrativizes his role in this section of the tale as a hero-confessor, although he had not earlier ever made any justifying claims for his presence in Africa. It is his proximity to, almost his presiding over, Kurtz’s “supreme moment of complete knowledge” that gives him, he believes, a vision of Kurtz’s changed features, “as though a veil had been rent” (177).
What so enthralled Marlow, really, is that he believes he has finally heard what he came to hear; he has been “honoured with its [Kurtz’s wraith’s] amazing confidence before it vanished altogether” (154). It is Marlow’s pronouncement that he felt completely abandoned when he realized that he may never receive the “gift” of hearing Kurtz speak, that he couldn’t have felt more “lonely desolation” “had [he] been robbed of a belief or had [he] missed [his] destiny in life,” that causes a member of his audience to sigh and exclaim that Marlow’s sorrow at the assumed loss of Kurtz was absurd (152). Yet it is just this fascination of Marlow’s with Kurtz’s future pronouncement that drives the narrative and determines Marlow’s narrativization of Kurtz. This need of Marlow’s that propels the narrative—and at all points Heart of Darkness privileges the motivated narratorial act over the story itself—is exactly what renders his interpretation of Kurtz suspect. Marlow has given Kurtz’s life a full narrative shape with a beginning, a middle, and an end and, more importantly, he has not allowed Kurtz to destabilize any of his own narratives, for instance, about the machinations of fate—if Kurtz has been corrupted, it is due to the “heavy, mute spell of the wilderness” “alone,” which had “taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation” (173, 153). If Kurtz’s retreat had incited moral panic in Marlow, who cannot conceive why Kurtz would not want to be “saved,” he very neatly returns this lost sheep to the fold by wrestling with him and presiding over a supposedly final and redeeming cry, a “moral victory” (179).

But has Marlow truly encountered Kurtz? Or has he heard only what he set out to hear, witnessed what he set out to witness, “the expression of some sort of belief” (179)? Marlow’s failure to account for Kurtz to the Intended is due to his belief that “he w[ill] have to keep back alone” the “invading and vengeful rush” of the wilderness into the Intended’s house in order to
“save another soul,” a soul which I read, in accordance with the textual evidence, as having already been weighed in the balances and found wanting (182). And it is the scenes of these two “salvations” to which everything in Marlow’s journey leads. Conrad himself placed great emphasis on the question of the effectiveness of the story’s ending in a letter to William Blackwood, dated 12 February 1899: “I wonder what you will think of the end of the story. I’ve been writing up to it and it loomed rather effective till I came to it actually. Still I am not altogether dissatisfied with the manner of it; but of course one cannot judge one’s own fresh work—at any rate” (L 2 165). He refers to the effectiveness of the ending, too, in this earlier letter to David Meldrum, dated 2 January 1899: “A mere shadow of love interest just in the last pages—but I hope it will have the effect I intend” (L 2 146).

But Conrad’s most suggestive statement of his ending’s importance is found in his “famous apologia pro arte sua, in which he defends the value of his work by defining it as ‘a calm conception of a definite ideal . . . pursued with pain and labour,’” in a letter to William Blackwood, dated 31 May 1902, “in which he most strongly insists on his control over his art”: “This is my method based on deliberate conviction. I’ve never departed from it. I call your own kind self to witness and I beg to instance Karain—Lord Jim (where the method is fully developed)—the last pages of Heart of Darkness where the interview of the man and the girl locks in—as it were—the whole 30000 words of narrative description into one suggestive view of a whole phase of life and makes of that story something quite on another plane than an anecdote of a man who went mad in the Centre of Africa” (Ambrosini 40; L 2 417).

The effectiveness of the ending, I infer from Conrad’s letters, has to do with the reader’s registering the effect of the encounter with Kurtz on Marlow, ultimately with understanding Marlow’s motives (the “suggestive view of a whole phase of life”) as he begins to align himself
more and more with Kurtz (after all, he now shares Kurtz’s love interest). For Conrad, it is not,
in the final analysis, Kurtz’s life story which fascinates the reader and “locks in” the narrative
but what Marlow will do out of loyalty to him—lie—which elevates the story to another plane of
existence. If Conrad “wr[ote] up to” this ending, and awaited patiently his readers’ reactions to it,
he was also aware that his readers might miss “the idea”: “There are two more instalments in
which the idea is so wrapped up in secondary notions that You—even You!—may miss it,” he
writes to Edward Garnett (L 2 157). This possible future lapse in reader reception is already
anticipated in the frame of Heart of Darkness itself, to which I will now turn.

Heart of Darkness opens on a scene of perfect stillness. “The Nellie, a cruising yawl,
swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind
was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait
for the turn of the tide,” begins the unnamed frame narrator (103, emphasis mine). And as
Marlow breaks off his tale, “s[itting] apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating
Buddha,” “[n]obody move[s] for a time” (186, emphasis mine). These bookended scenes of
stillness, moreover, are all explicitly linked to the idle⁹ quality of all present both before, during,
and after the tale: the lawyer has “the only cushion on deck, and was lying on the only rug”; the
accountant toys with some dominoes (read: ivory); Marlow “s[its] cross-legged right aft, leaning
against the mizzen-mast” “with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards”; and the director
comes to sit down among them after securing the anchor (103). After “exchang[ing] a few words
lazily,” they opt not to begin that game of dominoes, feeling instead “fit for nothing but placid
staring” (104, emphasis mine).

This perfect stillness, of course, belies the ways in which the frame audience’s “desire for
finality,” its desire to “be set at rest,” “[p]erhaps the only true desire of mankind coming thus to
light in its hours of leisure” and “for which our hearts yearn with a longing greater than the longing for the loaves and fishes of this earth” is never sated (Notes 20). This framed scene of telling is a deliberate foil to “Youth” ’s (“H of D was meant in my mind as a foil, and Youth was supposed to give the note” [L 2 271]), where the audience is perfectly set to rest, all heads wagging in agreement at story’s close. Though “Youth” emphasizes its characters’ scene of leisure with Marlow’s refrain of “Pass the bottle,” the scene aboard the Nellie is not meant to be one of unqualified leisure. In fact, what all five men have been waiting for during Marlow’s tale, the turn of the tide, is missed due to their inattentiveness.

By paring down the outer frames to such Minimalist descriptions of the men’s actions—really inactions—Conrad has effectively created an audience whose collective ineffectiveness—an inability to judge correctly and watch for the tide—stands out starkly as the group’s sole defining feature. As David Bradshaw argues, “the bare truth is that the frame narration and the tale by Marlow it encompasses will only be told because of the incompetence of the Nellie’s crew,” made up of “affluent City types” and Marlow, “a ship-less mariner-cum-loafer (hardly the British work ethic personified)” (“Snags,” 12). Bradshaw is right to read these inconsistencies (this quintet of supposed seasoned sailors’ obvious blundering, Marlow’s proclamation that he “can’t bear a lie” and his lies) as “portals of this tale” that function similarly to “the heads on the stakes at the Inner Station: warn[ing] those who approach it to beware” (13). In addition to casting suspicion over the whole scene of Marlow’s narration, including on his own and his audience members’ motivations for telling or listening, this framing situation casts a shadow of doubt over the reading experience as well.

While the modernist difficulty of the work almost demands that the reader participate in the meaning-making enterprise, it is ultimately unclear whether what the frame narrator, and
possibly the remainder of Nellie’s crew, have been patiently anticipating, along with Marlow, the moments of Kurtz’s and the Intended’s “redemptions,” have rung true or merely served as a distraction from the realities, the “covert plots”¹⁰ or “turnings of the tide” missed by Marlow’s idle tale. Have we as readers, in other words, been seduced into a lazy reading of the tale; have we swallowed up Marlow’s insistence on the profundity of Kurtz’s last words and the Intended’s innocence in the whole matter, thereby missing the ways in which the tale lulls the reader by providing neat narrative paradigms (the Faustian anti-hero,¹¹ the foiled Intended and African mistress) that are superimposed onto the story by Marlow? For we, of course, are also implicated in “the elevation of Kurtz to the dubious position of all-purpose anti-hero” (Greaney, Conrad, Language, and Narrative, 71).

At least one narratee, the unnamed frame narrator, does not fall asleep while listening to Marlow’s harrowing tale.

It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another. For a long time already [Marlow], sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice. There was not a word from anybody. The others might have been asleep, but I was awake. I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river. (130, emphasis mine)

The unnamed narrator here lays out that what he expects from the narrative, ultimately, is that it will offer up “the sentence, the word” that will provide him the means to explain his own affective state of uneasiness. Marlow, of course, has set up these expectations. He draws a parallel between “the farthest point of navigation” and “the culminating point of [his]
experience” at the beginning, and when we find out soon after that Mr. Kurtz is chief of the Inner Station, we as readers, along with the frame narrator as he listens, begin to suspect that Mr. Kurtz will provide us with the hermeneutic clue we need. Many epithets are used in these early pages to describe Kurtz, “remarkable,” “a prodigy,” “a special being,” and these all start to throw some kind of light on why it is that Marlow repeatedly lies for him or, as he puts it, “bec[omes] in an instant as much of a pretense as the rest of the bewitched pilgrims” (129).

In fact, it is at just this point in the story, when Marlow first reveals that he has lied because of Kurtz—even though he “hate[s], detest[s], can’t bear a lie” “because it appals [him],” as “[t]here is a taint of death, a flavor of mortality in lies” even though telling lies “makes [him] miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do”—that he becomes silent for a while as if to invite the listener and reader to speculate about why these particular lies of Marlow’s have been necessary or how they can be justified (129). Since Marlow has just alluded to his own part in this affair, has, moreover, insisted upon it, the frame narrator’s claim that he listens for a clue to explain his affective response must refer at least in part to his uneasiness about Marlow’s bold admission about his lie, notwithstanding his protests about his typical aversion.

At this point in the story, we are still a long way from Kurtz, yet we know, as does the frame narrator, what we are searching for; we need “the sentence, the word” that will explain Marlow’s lie and provide the “culminating point” of Marlow’s experience. We are, not surprisingly, reading this narrative according to what Peter Brooks calls the “master trope” of narrative’s “strange logic”—we read in the “anticipation of retrospection” (23). It is only at the next break in Marlow’s narrative—he breaks off to respond to someone’s sigh and voiced protest “Absurd!” with an extended direct address and to ask for some tobacco—that we return to the repetitive marker of Marlow’s long silence and its relation to his eventual statement, “I laid the
ghost of his gifts at last with a lie”’ (153). (In the earlier break, Marlow had been “silent for a while” after first bringing up his lie [129]). By this point, at least one of his listeners has been discerning or lucky enough to guess that Marlow’s throwaway mention of “the girl” might provide a clue to Marlow’s lie. In the intervening passages between the two breaks lies another development as well, the first mention of Marlow’s particular obsession with hearing Kurtz “discourse.” Marlow’s being so singularly affected by believing he has missed hearing Kurtz speak, in fact, is what precipitates the listener’s outburst (the beastly sigh along with “Absurd!”)

From the span of the first break I refer to above to the second, we have in addition to the first piece of the puzzle (Marlow lies for Kurtz), two more pieces (Marlow lies for Kurtz to “the girl” and that this is somehow related to what Kurtz has said). Now, seemingly, all we need to know is the specific telling situation in which Marlow lied to “the girl” and what Kurtz has said in order to resolve the problem of why Marlow has lied. Of course, these future moments are the two climaxes of the narrative. (I would add a third, the moment I discussed during the opening of this section, when Marlow believes he may have lost the opportunity to hear “the final word” from Kurtz and so wrestles with him in order to eventually “possess” it.)

Readers are set up, both by Marlow and by the master trope of narrative’s logic—that some future disclosure, occurring in “what remains to be read[,] will restructure the provisional meaning of the already read”—to anticipate the explanatory power of Kurtz’s discourse (Brooks 23). Soon, another piece is added, as we realize after the second break I refer to above that Kurtz’s fatal flaw is that he “lack[s] restraint” but that Marlow “think[s] the knowledge came to him at last—only at the very last” (164). Here, yet again, is another twist of the screw—we are not patiently awaiting what Kurtz has said in a broad sense but what he has said specifically after the knowledge came to him—knowledge that only comes at the very end. We are told a few
pages before “the sentence, the word,” which we now recognize as “the last sentence, the last word,” that these words are his “final burst of sincerity” and that unlike his previous speech, these words are not eloquent (174).

Critics, like Marlow’s frame narrator, in anticipation of Kurtz’s final words, have missed the turning of the tide. Many assume, as does Omri Moses, that Conrad unproblematically “privileges last words and final acts” that provide a “‘total’ account of character” (132). These readings can, in part, be attributed to the influence of Walter Benjamin’s landmark essay, “The Storyteller” (1936) on Conradian scholarship. Paul Wake, for example, reads Marlow through the theoretical lens of Benjamin’s storyteller and uses Benjamin’s claim “that the authority of the storyteller is derived from a certain privileged relation to death” to assert that “we can read Heart of Darkness as Marlow’s journey to this deathbed scene and his retrieval, and repetition of, the truths that he discovers there,” though he ultimately concludes that the final cry “does not guarantee access to truth” because “Kurtz’s death, spoken, witnessed, and repeated cannot be distinguished from the mass of silent, absent, and ignored deaths that litter the pages of Heart of Darkness” (37, 60). As Wake points out, critics such as J. Hillis Miller, Peter Brooks, and Thomas Moser, in “making connection[s] between death, narrative, and meaning,” “express similar concerns and ideas to those set out by Benjamin” in “Storyteller,” namely, that Kurtz’s final words are important precisely because they “come at the moment of his death”; they depend for their power, according to a Benjaminian reading, upon Kurtz’s “proximity to death” because the “‘meaning’ of [a man’s] life is revealed only in his death” (37; Miller, Poets, 31; Benjamin 101). Peter J. Rabinowitz argues that what he calls the “rule of abstract displacement” also shapes critical readings of texts such as Heart of Darkness, such that “the specifics of the text, the surface details” must always be read as “‘indicat[ing]’ something both more general and
more important” (142). When taken together, Rabinowitz’s interpretative “rule of abstract displacement” and another one, the prioritization of endings, can explain why Kurtz’s last words are not usually interpreted according to a contextualized reading of his recorded speech (in which his references are mostly specific and concrete) but according to readings which privilege an abstract referent for “horror,” such as death, the human condition, or the evils of imperialism. Kurtz’s last words, as they are final, abstract in nature, and form the crux of interpretation for the twin climaxes, are indeed overdetermined. The critical impetus is to read this final encounter as a recognition scene, Marlow’s anagnorisis.13

Most readers and critics, then, in patient anticipation of Kurtz’s last words, miss what he actually says in the meantime;14 these statements are mostly sadsack, whining complaints beginning with “I,” “my,” or “me” and ending on the frustrated, threatening note of a petulant two-year-old who has not gotten his way: “‘My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my— ’”; “‘You with your peddling little notions—you are interfering with me. I will return. I’”; “‘I was on the threshold of great things’ […] ‘And now for this stupid scoundrel’”; “‘I can’t bear to look at this.’ ‘Oh, but I will wring your heart yet!’”; “‘Keep this for me.’ ‘This noxious fool is capable of prying into my boxes when I am not looking’” (153, 169, 173, 177). Even the more abstract statement “‘I am lying here in the dark waiting for death’” that so transfixes Marlow smacks of the Russian harlequin’s earlier complaint that Kurtz has been “shamefully abandoned” (177, 165).

What this predictable speech pattern portends for Kurtz’s final statement, the one we have been so long awaiting—“The horror! The horror!”—is that, when read in the context of his other utterances, it actually reads something like, “Oh, the horror that has been done to me!” (178) “[P]ure selfishness” and greed and not the anti-heroism of a Faustian “hero of the spirit” is
surely the note Kurtz should have struck (L 2 139; Trilling 108). “When Kurtz says, ‘The horror!’ twice, it’s narcissism: even in his most ‘curt’ moment, he can’t stop the histrionic self-chiming. At the moment of last resort, he falls into selfishly penitential repetition. It is, probably, a final joke about his egoism” (Fogel 62). This histrionic, self-chiming note, however, is not the one that Marlow or his audience is attuned to pick up, and so it largely goes unnoticed. (Marlow does, once, acknowledge this pattern but prefices this remark with the qualifier “sometimes”: “Sometimes he was contemptibly childish. He desired to have kings meet him at railway-stations on his return from some ghastly Nowhere, where he intended to accomplish great things” [176].)

We are reminded of this predictable note, though, when Marlow calls on the Intended. Before she answers the door, we are given another one of Kurtz’s characteristic statements, “‘This lot of ivory now is really mine. The Company did not pay for it. I collected it myself at a very great personal risk. I am afraid they will try to claim it as theirs though. H’m. It is a difficult case. What do you think I ought to do—resist? Eh? I want no more than justice” (182). The Intended, too, wants no more than confirmation—the justice she believes is her due for believing in and becoming engaged to a poor man when no one else (and certainly not her relations, who “disapproved” of the engagement) dared to—that she understood Kurtz best, that she “had all his noble confidence,” that she was the person in whom he could have confided at the end (184).

Of course, she would probably have understood his gripe for what it was, a lament that he was not allowed full reign to carry out his mission and to fulfill his potential and both their desires that he become a great trader, an ivory hoarder. My interpretation of the Intended’s possible understanding of Kurtz’s final words is based on the almost hidden textual evidence, almost never attended to in the criticism, that directly relates to Kurtz’s relationship and his motives for going to Africa in the first place: Marlow has “heard that [the Intended’s]
engagement with Kurtz had been disapproved by her people. He wasn’t rich enough or something. And indeed I don’t know whether he had not been a pauper all his life. He had given me some reason to infer that it was his impatience of comparative poverty that drove him out there” (184). Kurtz, it is implied, desired wealth, and there is no reason not to infer from the textual evidence that the Intended, both because she is a hypocrite\textsuperscript{16} and because she is textually conflated with Kurtz, also despairs, with Kurtz, that “nothing” material “remains” of “his promise, his greatness” (185).

Critical consensus holds that the Intended is disallowed intention, or agency, as a function of her “role of white lady in the tower”: Nina Pelikan Straus, in the most influential feminist reading\textsuperscript{17} of the text, “The Exclusion of the Intended from Secret Sharing in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness,*” asks, for instance, “How can an INTENDED have INTENTIONS?,” and Gail Houston posits that “[i]n Conrad’s stereotypical view, because women are self-less it is not necessary to consider the existential question of how to contain the female self’s extravagant intentions, for she has none” (129, 41). Even some of those critics who maintain that the Intended “colludes with global evil” do not claim that she does so intentionally (Kaplan 100). Yet a resisting reader (Fetterley) may suspect, as does Kayla Walker Edin, that the Intended actually “intervenes as co-author” and “colludes with Marlow to construct a Victorian narrative about Kurtz that serves her agenda just as conveniently as his own” (48, 46). By “disrupting Marlow’s narrative and forcing him to tell a different version altogether,” the Intended authors a narrative by which she can justify her own possible complicity in Kurtz’s death (Edin 48).

But it is Marlow’s function as storyteller to provide the ending on which she insists—like the frame narrator, who “listen[s] on the watch for the sentence, for the word,” we are told she stares fixedly at Marlow, “watch[ing] for more words on [his] lips”—to anticipate the ending
which will most satisfy her desire to be put at rest (130, 184). Of course, after this revelation, she announces, “I knew it—I was sure!,” just as Marlow had earlier announced that he “was strangely cocksure of everything th[e] night” he captured Kurtz attempting to escape and just as he confidently acclaims Kurtz’s cry a “moral victory” (179). The resisting reader, of course, knows by this point that all these incongruities (the Intended’s “purity” and her hypocrisy; Marlow’s supposed “devotion to efficiency” [107] and the scenes of idleness, especially the framed telling situation and Marlow’s “loitering in the shade” where the “helpers” “became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest,” or more accurately, to die [118–9]) do not add up.

And so Marlow’s tale of his encounter with Kurtz becomes ultimately a tale of the seduction of narrativization, about how Marlow shapes a life according to the desires of tellers and listeners under the “heavy, mute spell” of narrative form (173). There are “four sorts of endings” of Heart of Darkness, Anthony Fothergill claims: “crying, dying, lying, and story-telling” (86). “[O]ne climactic moment,” he emphasizes, “somehow generates the need for the next—indeed, in a broad sense, generates the need to tell another story” (87). This spell will once again charm Marlow as the narrator of Lord Jim and Chance; although he will narrowly avoid being seduced into a “final reading” in Lord Jim, Flora’s gender precludes Marlow the misogynist’s attempts at convincingly narrativizing her.

Marlow’s encounter with Jim—the desperate need to redeem “one of us” in narrative form

When the reader first encounters Jim after his infamous jump, she is not the only one, for Jim “stood elevated in the witness-box, with burning cheeks in a cool lofty room” and “from below many eyes were looking at him out of dark faces, out of white faces, out of red faces, out
of faces attentive, spellbound, as if all these people sitting in orderly rows upon narrow benches had been enslaved by the fascination of his voice” (21). These words could have been used to describe Kurtz, but Marlow’s response to Jim is not the same as his response to Kurtz, despite the spell Jim casts over his fascinated audience. Our first introduction to Marlow in *Lord Jim* occurs as “he s[its] apart from the others, with his face worn and clouded, but with quiet eyes that glanced straight, interested and clear” (24, emphasis mine). This description calls to mind Marlow’s sitting apart from the others after he spins his yarn aboard the *Nellie* (“Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha” [186]), but the glance Marlow directs at Jim is not “the fascinated stare of the others,” coming from what is earlier described as “the attentive eyes whose glance stabbed” (21, emphasis mine). Rather, Marlow’s glance is “an act of intelligent volition”; the thought runs through Jim’s head that “[t]his fellow” “looks at [him] as though he could see somebody or something past [his] shoulder” (24). (Jim “had come across that man [Marlow] before—in the street perhaps,” but “[h]e was positive he had never spoken to him” [24].)

If Marlow is not fascinated, held captive by Jim’s voice, this does not mean he is uninterested in the younger man. Marlow is interested, not fascinated, the omniscient narrator reveals, but his interest is enough to propel *Lord Jim*’s lengthy narrative, for “[l]ater on, many times, in distant parts of the world, Marlow showed himself willing to remember Jim, to remember him at length, in detail and audibly” (24). In his “Author’s Note,” Conrad claims, “One sunny morning, in the commonplace surroundings of an Eastern roadstead, [he] saw [Jim’s] form pass by—appealing—significant—under a cloud—perfectly silent,” and Cedric Watts glosses this to mean that Jim is “a fellow human being whom one could ‘pass by’ in the street” (Explanatory Notes 329). Indeed, Marlow’s interest in Jim initially stems from the
incongruity of his appearance and the reality of what took place on the *Patna*: here was Jim, “standing there with his “don’t-care-hang air,” “clean-limbed, clean-faced, firm on his feet, as promising a boy as the sun ever shone on,” and Marlow admits he “liked his appearance; [he] knew his appearance; [Jim] came from the right place; [Jim] was one of us” (34, 30, 32).

This incongruity, though, is most significant because of the way in which it affects Marlow. When Marlow first encounters Jim on the street, “gaz[ing] across the grass plots of the Esplanade at the yellow portico of the Malabar Hotel with the air of a man about to go for a walk as soon as his friend is ready,” he remembers: “I was as angry as though I had detected him trying to get something out of me by false pretenses” (32, 30). Indeed, Marlow’s juxtaposition of sunlight (“as promising a boy as the sun ever shone on” [30]) and false pretenses recalls his commentary on the Intended’s portrait: “I know that the sunlight can be made to lie too, yet one felt that no manipulation of light and pose could have conveyed the delicate shade of truthfulness upon [the Intended’s] features” (181). In both cases, it seems that appearances can lie, and this fact, or rather the fact that Marlow “ought to know the right kind of looks,” makes him “f[eel] as though [he] could fling down [his] hat and dance on it from sheer mortification” (34, 30).

This inner mortification of Marlow’s is then directed outward: he “want[s] to see [Jim] squirm for the honour of the craft” (34). But Marlow has another motive to follow Jim’s case, for as well as desiring to see him duly shamed, Marlow has another desire:

“You may call it an unhealthy curiosity if you like; but I have a distinct notion I wished to find something. Perhaps, unconsciously, I hoped I would find that something, some profound and redeeming cause, some merciful explanation, some convincing shadow of an excuse. [. . . ] Did I believe in a miracle? and why did I desire it so ardently? Was it for my own sake that I wished to find some
shadow of an excuse for that young fellow whom I had never seen before, but whose appearance alone added a touch of personal concern to the thoughts suggested by the knowledge of his weakness—made it a thing of mystery and terror—like a hint of a destructive fate ready for us all whose youth—in its day—had resembled his youth? I fear that such was the secret motive of my prying. I was, and no mistake, looking for a miracle.” (37–8, emphasis mine)

In the above passage, Marlow refers to his secret motive in prying into the chief engineer of the Patna’s (one of the four deserter’s) affairs upon his realization that he is holed up at the hospital when he espies him there “tossing on his back, with his arm in splints, and quite light-headed” (36). Marlow explains that he “must have been pretty desperate,” because he very quickly proceeds to ask about what he longs to ask about: the Patna incident (38). Marlow, however, is not affected by the chief engineer as he was by Jim; he explains, “I was not furious with [the chief engineer] and sorry for him: his experience was of no importance, his redemption would have had no point for me” (38). The person Marlow is desperate to redeem or see redeemed, of course, is not the chief engineer but Jim.

Marlow, then, desperately needs to redeem this young fellow who is “one of us” and, as in Heart of Darkness, he will ultimately act as confessor—“Didn’t I tell you he confessed himself before me as though I had the power to bind and to loose” (70)—though this confession will not resolve anything for Marlow as Kurtz’s last words had. Yet, Marlow opens Chapter V, the section in which he takes over from the omniscient narrator, by exclaiming that he is “not particularly fit to be a receptacle of confessions”; what Marlow calls his “familiar devil”—he claims “each of us has a guardian angel” and a “familiar devil”—“lets [him] in for that kind of thing”: 
“What kind of thing, you ask? Why, the inquiry thing, the yellow-dog thing—you wouldn’t think a mangy, native tyke would be allowed to trip up people in the verandah of a magistrate’s court, would you?—the kind of thing that by devious, unexpected, truly diabolical ways causes me to run up against men with soft spots, with hard spots, with hidden plague spots, by Jove! And loosens their tongues at the sight of me for their infernal confidences; as though, forsooth, I had no confidences to make to myself, as though—God help me!—I didn’t have enough confidential information about myself to harrow my own soul till the end of my appointed time. And what have I done to be thus favoured I want to know.”

(27)

Marlow, here, is protesting too much, and it is abundantly clear from his actions, seeking out the chief engineer for questioning later in this same chapter, soliciting Jim, and even plying him with alcohol,¹⁹ that he needs Jim to confess just as desperately as Jim needs a confessor. But Marlow’s encounter with Jim, as I mentioned above, does not yield the same results as his earlier encounter with Kurtz²⁰ and to understand why, we first need to unpack Marlow’s claim about his “weakness”:

“My weakness consists in not having a discriminating eye for the incidental—for the externals,—no eye for the hod of the rag-picker or the fine linen of the next man. Next man—that’s it. I have met so many men,” he pursued, with momentary sadness—“met them too with a certain—certain—impact, let us say; like this fellow, for instance—and in each case all I could see was merely the human being. A confounded democratic quality of vision which may be better than total blindness, but has been of no advantage to me—I can assure you. Men expect one
to take into account their fine linen. But I never could get up any enthusiasm about these things. Oh! It’s a failing; it’s a failing; and then comes a soft evening; a lot of men too indolent for whist—and a story . . .” (68, emphasis mine)

In the above passage, Marlow refers again to the telling situations in which he often finds himself as designated yarn-spinner. As aboard the Nellie, where the men “exchange a few words lazily” and lounge in silence before Marlow begins his tale with the famous interjection, “And this also” “has been one of the dark places of the earth,” both the listeners and Marlow himself exist in states of suspension during his repeated tellings “in distant parts of the world” (103, 105):

Perhaps it would be after dinner, on a verandah draped in motionless foliage and crowned with flowers, in the deep dusk speckled by fiery cigar-ends. The elongated bulk of each cane-chair harbor[s] a silent listener. Now and then a small red glow move[s] abruptly, and expanding light[s] up the fingers of a languid hand, part of a face in profound repose, or flash[es] a crimson gleam into a pair of pensive eyes overshadowed by a fragment of an unruffled forehead: and with the very first word uttered Marlow’s body, extended at rest in the seat, would become very still, as though his spirit had winged its way back into the lapse of time and w[as] speaking through his lips from the past. (25, emphasis mine)

Conrad had discussed this particular artist-audience relation in the Preface, in regards to the artist’s relation to members of the working class (he had earlier addressed the artist’s relation to the leisure class): the artist, Conrad claims, must
arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and color, of sunshine and shadows; to make them pause for a look, for a sigh, for a smile—such is the aim, difficult and evanescent, and reserved only for a few to achieve. But sometimes, by the deserving and the fortunate, even that task is accomplished. And when it is accomplished—behold! all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile—and the return to an eternal rest.” (P 148).

During the space of the artist’s telling, he “arrest[s]” working hands, but the listener (or reader) should be compelled (“ma[de]”) to act: he should “pause for a look, for a sigh, for a smile” before he inevitably “return[s] to an eternal rest” (P 148). The listener, that is, should pause, but if his hand appears “languid” and his forehead “unruffled,” these appearances should belie an inner “profound repose,” a pensiveness. When Marlow takes over as narrator in Chapter V, however, he describes some members of his audience disparagingly: “there are men here and there to whom the whole of life is like an after-dinner hour with a cigar; easy, pleasant, empty, perhaps enlivened by some fable of strife to be forgotten before the end is told—even if there happens to be any end to it” (27). Thus, Marlow wonders aloud whether his appointed task as storyteller is “to make time pass away after dinner,” to obey the men’s unspoken command, “‘Hang exertion. Let that Marlow talk’” (26).

Of course, as we know as readers of the Preface, Marlow’s task as an artist is decidedly not to pass away the time while men “wallow in good chairs” after an “extremely good” dinner (26). Marlow’s task as an artist is to “make [these men] see,” even if certain members of his audience are always at rest and are unresponsive to the presentation of an “unrestful episode” (P
As previously mentioned, this audience is not the receptive one of “Youth”: at the close of that tale, all four narratees nod in agreement and “look still, look always, look anxiously for something out of life”; these working-class hands, it can be assumed, have been arrested, and these men have been made to see (99).

The problematic audience reception in *Lord Jim* is not the only interesting aspect of Marlow’s storytelling that emerges in this passage, however, for Marlow refers to “the end” of “some fable,” standing in for all stories, as if stories with endings—“even if there happens to be any end to [the fable]”—were the exception and not the rule (27). This storytelling Marlow, it seems, has come a long way from his earlier practice of spinning yarns aboard the *Nellie*. There, he had caved to the overwhelming pressures to dramatically “end” his stories (the double climax of Kurtz’s last words and the encounter with the Intended) in order to respond to both his and his audience’s need for closure and an ending’s supposed disclosure or reframing of the tale that has preceded it.

The mythologization of protagonists as superhuman and the dramatization of finalizing encounters now ring hollow for Marlow: he now sees Kurtz as an ordinary human being—despite the fact that he more than “take[s] into account [his] fine linen” aboard the *Nellie* by spinning a tale in which he features prominently as a metaphysical anti-hero (68). Though Marlow admits that he “ought to be delighted,” for Jim’s end in Patusan could be seen as “a victory in which [Marlow] had taken [his] part,” redemption in the narrative form of colonial romance which both he and Jim had so longed for, he is ultimately not “quite satisfied”: “but I am not so pleased as I would have expected to be. [. . .] And besides, the last word is not said,—probably shall never be said. [. . .] I have given up expecting those last words” (162, 237, 162–3). Though Jim addresses Doramin before he shoots him through the chest with the
statements “I am come in sorrow” and “I am come ready and unarmed,” he falls forward dead “with his hand over his lips,” having never uttered “final words” (302, 303).

Jim’s death scene and the events leading up to it comprise the written section of the narrative; addressed to the privileged reader and delivered orally secondhand to Marlow through Gentleman Brown, this section “leav[es] a gap that both invites interpretation and denies complete knowledge of [Jim]” to anyone (Hannah 56). “Like Marlow, who consistently looks for some better spot from which to orient himself, we strain for a better view. We do not get that better view” (Shires 23). Why does Jim pass away under a cloud, his hand over his lips, without a final heroic act, a moral “victory”? As Marlow has explained earlier, he has met too many men. Now, “all [he can] see [is] merely the human being” (68). And “unrestful episodes” in “merely” human lives do not “properly” end; when “an episode in life ends,” Conrad writes in “Henry James: An Appreciation” (1905), “[y]ou remain with the sense of the life still going on; and even the subtle presence of the dead is felt in that silence that comes upon the artist-creation when the last word has been read” (19). “The aim of art” “is not in the clear logic of a triumphant conclusion; it is not in the unveiling of one of those heartless secrets which are called the Laws of Nature. It is not less great, but only more difficult” (P 148).

This indeterminate conclusion is the one to which Marlow finally accedes, despite the pressures or inadequacies of his audience and despite the fact that the men to whom he desperately turns for interpretations of Jim—namely the French lieutenant and Stein—inevitably fall into the hermeneutic trap of offering up conclusive statements about him. Jim himself, whose “susceptibility to the charm of narration is his Achilles’ heel,” would surely have narrativized his end in a heroic and definitive way, complete with unambiguous final words and acts to fit his “romantic master-narrative” (Baxter 104; 114). Marlow, however, “can never come to rest in any
one view of Jim’s case” (Paris 153). “[T]he ethics of [Marlow’s] own telling, an ethics he invites us to share, involve a commitment to a kind of negative capability: he unequivocally makes the case that Jim’s life is worthy of Marlow’s and of the authorial audience’s quest for its meaning without allowing Marlow or us to complete that quest by arriving at any definite formulation” (Phelan 57). Rather, we are pulled in different directions by our desires to become Jim-readers and –writers and by our knowledge that we must give up anticipating final words in our narrativizations of other minds. We are, then, in the wake of this ending’s “profoundly disturbed and disturbing ambivalence,” like Marlow’s narrative left continually “in search of a form” for Jim (Raval 387; 401).

Marlow’s encounter with Flora—the desperate need to see the “damsel”’s “soul without its veils” in order to “save” her

Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1939) opens as private detective Phillip Marlowe “calls on four million dollars,” new client General Sternwood:

The main hallway of the Sternwood place was two stories high. Over the entrance doors, which would have let in a troop of Indian elephants, there was a broad stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armor rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree and didn’t have any clothes on but some very long and convenient hair. The knight had pushed the vizor of his helmet back to be sociable, and he was fiddling with the knots on the ropes that tied the lady to the tree and not getting anywhere. I [Marlowe] stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him. He didn’t seem to be really trying. (3–4)
Conrad’s Marlow in *Chance*, like Chandler’s Marlowe in *Big Sleep*, immediately calls attention to the question of the motives that underlie seemingly purely altruistic acts. When young Powell relates how he gained his berth on the *Ferndale* (by coincidence he and the shipping master share the same last name), there is a general consensus among young Powell’s listeners that Mr. Powell has done “something uncommonly kind” (22). Marlow, however, reads Mr. Powell’s intentions differently: “I cannot help thinking that there was some malice in the way he seized the opportunity to serve you” (22). Thus, from the beginning, we are taught how to read against all the “blameless” “knights” of *Chance*—Mr. and Mrs. Fyne, Roderick Anthony, young Powell, and Marlow himself—who claim that they only intervene in Flora’s life in order to save her.24

Even as Chandler’s Marlowe throughout *Big Sleep* attempts to draw a sharp distinction between his “disinterested” motives and those of the other players, implying that he, at least, would actually save the damsel, Conrad’s Marlow also attempts such rhetorical moves, implying not only that he repeatedly saves Flora but also that he is the proverbial disinterested looker-on who “see[s] most of the game”: while the pressmen write up “readable accounts” of the de Barral trial, for instance, Marlow’s detachment from “mere visual impressions” is “reward[ed]” with a “disclosure” that gives him a “thrill very much approaching a shudder” (*LJ* 162; *C* 68).

In *Chance*, Conrad foregrounds the question of motives of this “network of voyeurs” with Marlow at the center; thus, the text “might represent [his] separation from Marlow in a final form” (Jones 118; Nadelhaft 112). 25 This separation, however, is uneasy. The Marlow of “Youth,” *Heart of Darkness*, and *Lord Jim* had not only *narrated*, or recounted the sequence of events of his own, Kurtz’s, and Jim’s lives but had also *narratived* those events, imposing the *form* of a story onto his narration in order to create a coherent narrative. As we have seen, the seduction of storytelling, of giving a shape to a life’s “story,” has been what *motivated* Marlow
to tease out the various “case”’s psychological histories in order to lay bare the “soul[s] without [their] veils” in the myriad telling situations. Marlow, of course, has always been most interested in the “only truth worth knowing,” “the fundamental why,” the hidden motives that underlie human behavior, and he has always been presented as a narrator with uncommon insight into psychological motive, as when, for instance, he listens to Jones’s recounting of Captain Brierly’s suicide and expounds at length upon Brierly’s case, offering a resolution to the mystery of his motives (LJ 41; 43–7).

But it is in Chance that Marlow becomes most explicit about the speculative nature of his narrativizations and most dogged in his assertions that he is a privileged reader of other minds. In one sense, Marlow’s emphasis on the speculative nature of his narrativizations invites readerly collaboration; as one contemporary reviewer of Chance put it: “And you are worked up, while you read, to a heat of sensibility and curiosity like [the novel’s characters]. Among all these people so intensely aware of one another, so infectiously intent on making one another out, you too put out your feelers” (Montague 275). In another sense, however, Marlow’s admission that he has used his “ghastly imagination” to create some of the scenes he narrates leads to the narratee’s suspicion that Marlow is a gossip who amuses himself with others’ life-stories (91). Marlow himself even freely admits he feels like an emotional blackmailer when he questions Flora about her suicide attempt during their chance meeting outside the Eastern Hotel (173).

A dramatization of the full arc of Marlow’s character throughout the tetralogy reveals how Conrad’s break with Marlow anticipates Woolf’s critique of her supreme figure of the artist, Bernard in The Waves. If Marlow “believes firmly in his own authority as interpreter of all he sees and hears,” Bernard likewise “sums up” by telling the story of his own life and the lives of his friends, Susan, Rhoda, Jinny, Louis, Neville, and Percival, even as he confesses his “distrust
[of] neat designs of life that are drawn upon half-sheets of note-paper” (Jones 118; W 199).

Conrad and Woolf, in *Personal Record* and “Character,” respectively, as I discussed earlier, intimate in their creation myths of themselves as writers that their character-writing is not only a result of their singular encounters but also an ethical enterprise—Conrad asserts that “[t]he appeal” of Almayer “seems now to have had a moral character” while Mrs. Brown’s appeal for Woolf is clearly motivated by her feminist ethics (*PR* 23–4).

Yet, intriguingly, later in their careers, both Conrad and Woolf create figures for the artist, Marlow in *Chance* and Bernard in *Waves*, whose ethics of character-telling and –writing are deliberately rendered problematic. Marlow and Bernard, by calling attention to their life-stories as constructions, “divest [their narratives] of authority, deliberately undercut[ting] any claim for authenticity and the possession of an objective truth as they constantly remind the reader of the fictionality of the[ir] account[s]” (Erdinast-Vulcan 158). The texts, that is, continually deconstruct themselves, even as Marlow and Bernard seek to plot out and maintain control over their master-narratives. This turn, a preoccupation with the ethical implications of story-telling or narrativization, of desiring to “penetrate a little farther” into others’ interiorities as a result of haunting encounters, is one I will discuss at length in chapter five, and is also one which should give pause to the prevailing critical impetus to associate Conrad and Woolf with their narrativizing figures, Marlow and Bernard (*CSF* 224).

Chapter Seven of *Chance*, “On the Pavement,” opens as Marlow awaits the reappearance of his friend Fyne outside the entrance of the Eastern Hotel, where Mrs. Fyne’s new brother-in-law Captain Anthony is staying. When Marlow espies Flora de Barral, he stops her “just as she [is] turning off the pavement into the hotel doorway” to prevent her from an awkward encounter with Fyne and Anthony, who are conversing inside (150). This is Marlow’s second encounter
with Flora; much earlier, in Chapter Two, he had seen her at a distance when she “walk[ed] about on the edge of a high quarry, which rose a sheer hundred feet, at least, from the road winding up the hill out of which it had been excavated” (35). Marlow shouts warningly from down below and “[a]t the sound of his voice she start[s] back and retreat[s] out of his sight amongst some young Scotch firs growing near the very brink of the precipice” (36). After this first sighting, Flora had come into view again “walking down the steep curve of the road,” and she and Marlow exchange a few words as they walk back before she “bolt[s] violently” into the cottage, leaving Marlow astounded on the road (36). Later, she abruptly abandons the Fynes without notice (38).

Marlow imagines he had “saved” her on that occasion, but the setting of this second meeting is not nearly so romantic:

The broad interminable perspective of the East India Dock Road, the great perspective of drab brick walls, of grey pavement, of muddy roadway rambling dismally with loaded carts and vans lost itself in the distance, imposing and shabby in its spacious meanness of aspect, in its immeasurable poverty of forms, of colouring, of life—under a harsh, unconcerned sky dried by the wind to a clear blue. It had been raining during the night. The sunshine itself seemed poor. From time to time a few bits of paper, a little dust and straw whirled past us on the broad flat promontory of the pavement before the rounded front of the hotel. (153)

Marlow had earlier chastened Flora that if she had fallen off the cliff the coroner’s inquest would have indicated suicide, “with the implication of unhappy love,” but, though Marlow could have earlier detected signs of Flora’s suicidal tendencies, he only begins to admit their possibility at
this second meeting (37). On this street-scene, Marlow and Flora wait on the broad pavement at a corner public-house and Marlow recalls:

> every moment people were passing close by us, singly, in two and threes; the inhabitants of that end of the town where life goes on unadorned by grace or splendor; they passed us in their shabby garments, with sallow faces, haggard, anxious or weary, or simply without expression, in an unsmiling somber stream not made up of lives but of mere *unconsidered existences* whose joys, struggles, thoughts, sorrows and their very hopes were miserable, glamourless, and of no account in the world. And when one thought of their reality to themselves one’s heart became oppressed. (157, emphasis mine)

As he views this streaming crowd, however, Marlow considers that no individual who appears fleetingly before him “appear[s] for the moment so pathetic in unconscious patience as the girl [who stands] before [him]”; furthermore, “none [is] more difficult to understand” (157). Though Marlow admits that he and Flora are strangers, he avers that the subject of death had “created a sort of bond between us” and continues: “I ought to have left her there and then; but, as I think I’ve told you before, the fact of having shouted her away from the edge of a precipice seemed somehow to have engaged my responsibility as to *this other leap* [her elopement with Anthony]” (157, emphasis mine).

By now, the striking similarities between the “case” of Jim and that of Flora should be apparent to even the most casual reader of the two narratives. In both instances, Marlow is affronted by and passes judgment on a suicidal young protagonist who is already under the gaze of a public scrutiny (he desires Jim with his “don’t-care-hang air” to “squirm for the honour of the craft” and is “nettled by [Flora’s] brusque manner” and her “rudeness” [37]). The young
protagonists, too, are initially characterized as if they were Byronic heroes, a Cathy or Heathcliff—Flora, an attractive victim, wanders perilously close to the precipice and Jim, a “sulky brute,” “com[es] out of his place of sepulture only at meal-times or late at night, when he wander[s] on the quays all by himself, detached from his surroundings, irresolute and silent, like a ghost without a home to haunt” (60). Soon after the initial encounter, however, Marlow becomes less certain about his initial judgments. After the yellow-dog incident, one of Jim’s statements—“All these staring people in court seemed such fools that—that it might have been as I supposed”—“opened suddenly a new view of him to [Marlow’s] wonder” and the recurring motif of Marlow catching glimpses of Jim “through the shifting rents in a thick fog” is introduced (55). And after his second encounter with Flora, Marlow reports that for the first time, he “wondered” about her, declaring that “[s]he [is] not so much unreadable as blank” (156). Now, “[l]ooking back at the occasion when [they] first got on speaking terms by the quarry, [Marlow] has to admit that she presented some points of a problematic appearance” (156).

Marlow’s newfound epistemological uncertainty, moreover, becomes an ethical problem—what should be done with Jim or Flora? Marlow, characteristically, takes a decided interest in these cases and desires to see them through to some resolution. Jim’s resolution, of course, becomes enmeshed in second- and third-hand accounts, the meanings of which are never satisfactorily resolved, even at his death. Flora, on the other hand, will soon be married to young Powell after her near-disastrous marriage to Anthony and the deaths of her father and Anthony. Marlow, addressing the frame narrator at the close of Chance, “loll[s] in his arm-chair lazily,” patiently awaiting the wedding he believes he’s arranged between Flora and Powell. Surprisingly, despite these structural similarities, critics have neglected to discuss the implications of these similarities as well as the marked differences between these texts. Feminist
readings of Chance stand the most to gain, as the differences in the protagonists’ ends, especially, are inflected by the possibilities Marlow is able to imagine for men’s and women’s lives. Further, Marlow’s relation to Flora is inflected by his gendered position as a male narrator who repeatedly remarks upon his desire for Flora throughout the narrative.

Closer analysis of Marlow’s relations to Jim and Flora with a difference, then, can open up ways of reading a Chance that deconstructs the text as a satisfying romance, revealing Chance as Conrad’s most masterly critique of Marlow’s narrativizations. (These have been pointed up as problematic since Heart of Darkness, though they are least visible in Lord Jim.) I am not alone, however, in reading Chance as the most radical critique of Marlow’s misogynistic narrativizations. Andrew Michael Roberts, in his Conrad and Masculinity (2000), also asserts that “[i]t is in Chance that the presence of narrative chains implicates the male reader and critic most challengingly.” Wake concurs: “[t]he sense that Chance is a self-reflexive text comprised of its own critique is heightened by the fact that it is a novel populated by writers and narrators” (161, 108).

Marlow, during the course of Chance, takes great liberties as narrator, narrativizing scenes about which he only has second or third-hand information. Indeed, Marlow draws attention to the speculative nature of his “accountings to himself” before the frame narrator accuses him of possessing a “ghastly imagination”:

[The maid] heard the two voices in dispute before she knocked, and then being sent away retreated at once—the only person in the house convinced at that time that there was ‘something up.’ Dark and, so to speak, inscrutable spaces being met with in life there must be such places in any statement dealing with life. In what I am telling you of now—an episode of one of my humdrum holidays in the green
country, recalled quite naturally after all the years by our meeting a man who has been a blue-water sailor—this evening confabulation is a dark, inscrutable spot. And we may conjecture what we like. *I have no difficulty in imagining* that the woman—of forty, and the chief of the enterprise—must have raged at large. (79–80, emphasis mine)

It is not difficult for Marlow to imagine that a forty-year-old governess might harbor “ungovernable passions” for a younger man (whom she presents as her nephew), but it is difficult for him to imagine what a woman’s ultimate fate, or chance in life, might be. Marlow reasons with Fyne that Mrs. Fyne, in refusing to forgive Flora for eloping with her brother, is blaming her “for being a woman and behaving like a woman. And yet this is not only reasonable and natural, but it is her only chance. A woman against the world has no resources but in herself. Her only means of action is to be what *she is*. You understand what I mean” (142). Later, Marlow reiterates that this is

> the pathos of being a woman. A man can struggle to get a place for himself or perish. But a woman’s part is passive, say what you like, and shuffle the facts of the world as you may, hinting at lack of energy, of wisdom, of courage. As a matter of fact, almost all women have all that—of their own kind. But they are not made for attack. Wait they must. I am speaking here of women who are really women. And it’s no use talking of opportunities, either. I know that some of them do talk of it. But not the genuine women. Those know better. (210, emphasis mine)

Marlow claims that Flora’s case “presented itself to [him] as a tragi-comical adventure, the saddest thing on earth, slipping between frank laughter and unabashed tears” (231). Because
Flora is a woman, Marlow is convinced “that she at least must have been passive; for that is of necessity the part of women” (231).

At this juncture in the story, Marlow pauses to ask the frame narrator whether he is following him so far. At first deliberately refusing to give Marlow an affirmative sign, the narrator, when directly confronted, eventually answers that he understands “perfectly”: “You,” he continues,

“are the expert in the psychological wilderness. This is like one of those Redskin stories where the noble savages carry off a girl and the honest backwoodsman with his incomparable knowledge follows the track and reads the signs of her fate in a footprint here, a broken twig there, a trinket dropped by the way. I have always liked such stories. Go on.” (231–2, emphasis mine)

Despite the narratee’s damning critique of Marlow’s alleged expertise in Flora’s, or any woman’s, case, Marlow goes on to couch his privileged position as the writer of what he calls her tragicomedy30 in even more abstract and grandiose terms than he had used heretofore:

A young girl, you know, is something like a temple. You pass by and wonder what mysterious rites are going on in there, what prayers, what visions? The privileged men, the lover, the husband, who are given the key of the sanctuary, do not always know how to use it. For myself, without claim, without merit, simply by chance I had been allowed to look through the half-opened door and I had seen the saddest possible desecration, the withered brightness of youth, a spirit neither made cringing nor yet dulled but as if bewildered in quivering hopelessness by gratuitous cruelty; self-confidence destroyed and, instead, a resigned
ter

recklessness, a mournful callousness (and all this simple, almost naïve)—before
the material and moral difficulties of the situation. The *passive anguish* of the luckless! (232, emphasis mine)

Marlow, here, obviously spins his tale around the controlling idea of chance, though we readers know that he has not been so much allowed to look in as he has eavesdropped behind and kicked open doors in the pursuit of the solution to the “vanishing girl trick” in the affair of the purloined brother (41). Marlow as storyteller has “always already [been] a spy, a hunter, a voyeur with an eye for exposing secrets” (Levin, “Moral Ambiguity,” 211–2).

Marlow’s narrativizations of Flora, which are the reader’s and the narrator’s only access points to her in this tale, Conrad’s “most technical *tour de force,*” are indeed rendered highly suspect (Ray xv). The frame-within-a-frame’s inevitable pointing up of Marlow’s motives is exactly the effect such a meticulously constructed work produces. As a reviewer to whom Conrad referred in his 1920 “Author’s Note” maintained: “if Mr. Conrad had chosen to introduce us to his characters in the ordinary way, he could have told us their story in about 200 pages instead of the 406 pages of the present book” (271). Henry James, the most famous objector to *Chance*’s method of construction, which he claimed was “without precedent,” fears Conrad is in “danger of steeping his matter in perfect eventual obscurcation as [James] recall[s] no other artist’s consenting to with an equal grace” (265, 267). James here objects to Conrad’s focalization strategies, to the ways in which he “multipl[ies] his creators” instead of authorizing inside views—or at least more direct outside views—of his heroine Flora, as James himself had done in his portrait of Isabel Archer, for instance (266).

This famous objection has been echoed since; many critics conclude that the “novel fails because it is told from the wrong vantage point” and “some of the early critical dissatisfaction with *Chance* obviously sprang from a sense of disappointment with this new
version of Marlow” (Johnson 91; Hampson 142). “Recent criticism,” however, “has accepted this irresponsible Marlow not as a mistake but as a deliberate narrative strategy” (Hampson 142). Susan Jones adopts this stance in her *Conrad and Women* (1999). Conrad “gives a deliberately oblique presentation of the central female protagonist, one in which he distances himself from a complex narratorial web of definitions and assumptions about women,” she asserts (18). Because “Flora is seen from a number of different perspectives,” the method “draw[s] attention to the inaccessibility of the woman and her indeterminate identity” (Jones 105). Martin Ray observes in his introduction to the Oxford World’s Classics edition that “many of the narrator Marlow’s observations on women may strike the modern reader as arch and misogynist, however much they may be dramatically justified as expressions of his attempt to retain some detachment from the plight of Flora and avoid any merely sentimental engagement with his subject” (xi). Critical consensus, *contra* Ray, deems the Marlow of *Chance* a thoroughgoing misogynist; Marlow’s misogyny has of course been the subject of much critical commentary, especially in regards to *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow’s misogyny, though, is also apparent in *Lord Jim*: in one description of the hotel’s guests, Marlow relays, “now and then a girl’s laugh would be heard, as innocent and empty as her mind [. . . ] Two nomadic old maids, dressed up to kill, worked acrimoniously through the bill of fare, whispering to each other with faded lips, wooden-faced and bizarre, like two sumptuous scarecrows” (56). Marlow’s misogyny, however, is most marked in *Chance*.

Though Ray characterizes the Marlow of *Chance*’s “aim [as] perceiv[ing] Flora with a disinterested sympathy and a full understanding of her position,” his admitted relation to her, *contra* Ray, is not that of a passive, disinterested observer, in the tradition of the ratiocinative detective (*xix*). Marlow does style himself this way and owns that for a time—before he had seen young Powell “under the most favourable conditions” and “came upon a most unexpected source
of information”—he remained “puzzled” about the “psychological cabin mystery of discomfort”: “I’ll admit that for some time the old-maiden-lady-like occupation of putting two and two together failed to procure a coherent theory. I am speaking now as an investigator—a man of deductions” (242).

At the first indication that the frame narrator’s, Marlow’s narratee’s, view does not align with Marlow’s—he “smile[s] incredulously at Marlow’s ferocity”—Marlow has just revealed that as he and Fyne searched for the “vanished girl-friend” he was “infinitely vexed with that minx. Because dead or alive I thought of her as a minx...” (43). Though Marlow “never flinche[s],” he intuits that his listener is shocked at these statements and continues,

You see, you are such a chivalrous masculine beggar. But there is enough of the woman in my nature to free my judgment of women from glamorous reticency. And then, why should I upset myself? A woman is not necessarily either a doll or an angel to me. She is a human being, very much like myself. I have come across too many dead souls lying so to speak at the foot of high unscaleable places for a merely possible dead body at the bottom of a quarry to strike my sincerity dumb.

(43)

Marlow, in these instances, is not only avoiding “sentimental engagement” with Flora in order to “retain some detachment from her plight,” for he is also allowing his characterizations of women as seductresses to influence his speculations about the motivations underlying her various actions. In narrativizing her running off with Roderick Anthony, he writes her story in this way: she is a “fugitive carrying off spoils. It was the flight of a raider—or a traitor? This affair of the purloined brother, as I had named it to myself, had a very puzzling physiognomy” (113). (Later, Marlow playfully teases Mrs. Fyne by intimating that Flora’s case may not be one
of love, referring to the physiognomic marker of shrewdness and craft, a pointed chin: “I must confess however that in this case when I think of that poor girl’s sharp chin I wonder if . . .” [114].) To flesh out his “psychological cabin mystery of discomfort,” he creates an extended metaphor in which Flora is like a force of nature conquered by Anthony:

“Why yes. He had dealt with her masterfully. But man has captured electricity too. It lights him on his way, it warms his home, it will even cook his dinner for him—very much like a woman. But what sort of conquest would you call it? He knows nothing of it. He has got to be mighty careful what he is about with his captive. And the greater the demand he makes on it in the exultation of his pride the more likely it is to turn on him and burn him to a cinder . . .” (243)

Marlow’s repeated insistence that he refuses to narrativize Flora’s various life events, or “stories,” as romantic ones—“the bucolic mind” would have styled her wandering on the edge of a high quarry a tale of “unhappy love”; a romantic might have styled Anthony an “inflammable lover of the Romeo and Juliet type” and surmised he fell in love as the result of a “coup-de-foudre, the lightning strike”—only functions to screen the very obvious ways in which he casts Flora in the roles of both “the most forlorn damsel of modern times” and the femme fatale (37, 163, 178). The evidence we obtain through Marlow despite his narrativizations points almost certainly to the interpretation that Flora does not seduce or encourage Anthony in any way; it is her position as victim, not dark seductress, that attracts Anthony and causes him to create a self-narrative of heroic masculinity. What is ironic about this self-styling is that Marlow also styles himself Flora’s “rescuer” and presses the point, despite Flora’s protestations, that both he and Anthony have “saved” her on two separate occasions.
But it is in the resolution of his tale of Flora that Marlow most reveals that his is not a disinterested sympathy and that he is indeed no mere assembler of the facts of the case. Marlow’s last view of Jim is as he “passes away under a cloud” “like a disembodied spirit astray amongst the passions of this earth, ready to surrender himself faithfully to the claim of his own world of shades,” and early on in Part Two of Chance, he had claimed that Flora was fated to remain “under a cloud” even at sea (LJ 304; 210). Yet Marlow’s last view of Flora—as she “c[omes] down to the garden gate to meet [Marlow],” she is “no longer the perversely tempting, sorrowful, wisp of white mist drifting in the complicated, bad dream of existence” (327)—should be read against his earlier oracular statement that

[p]airing off is the fate of mankind. And if two being thrown together, mutually attracted, resist the necessity, fall in understanding and voluntarily stop short of the—the embrace, in the noblest meaning of the word, then they are committing a sin against life, the call of which is simple. Perhaps sacred. And the punishment of it is an invasion of complexity, a tormenting, forcibly tortuous involution of feelings, the deepest form of suffering from which indeed something significant may come at last, which may be criminal or heroic, may be madness or wisdom—or even a straight if despairing decision. (316)

Flora, as a woman, is disallowed this “invasion of complexity,” which may have forced her life to a definite but ambiguous conclusion like Jim’s; though she has been till now under a cloud, “she [is] her true self” at the close; “she [is] like a fine tranquil afternoon” (327, emphasis mine).

It is no accident that Marlow meets Flora again not at day-break, under the “thin, equivocal” “light of the dawn,” but rather as she is set against the blue sky of “a fine day in its decline” (327, 326). When Flora’s companion brings in a lamp, Marlow has “heard all the details
which really matter in this story” (327). “The lamp,” Marlow recalls, “had a rosy shade; and its
glow wreathed [Flora] in perpetual blushes, [and] made her appear wonderfully young as she sat
before me in a deep, high-back arm-chair” (327). (When Marlow last espies Flora, she is one of
two indistinct figures silhouetted by the dusklight. Jim’s last “proud and unflinching glance,” by
contrast, is seen by the light of onlookers’ torches [303].) During their last conversation, then,
Marlow sees Flora by the rosy light of a lamp, and this marks her not as a player in a tragedy or a
farce (both generic possibilities Marlow had earlier considered) but as one in a romance.34
Marlow has, in fact, earlier commented on the ways in which the light by which we view others
can affect our narrativizations of them:

Coming up to the cottage we had a view of Mrs. Fyne inside still sitting in the
strong light at the round table with folded arms. [ . . . ] She was amazing in a sort
of unsubtle way; crudely amazing—I thought. Why crudely? I don’t know.
Perhaps because I saw her then in a crude light. I mean this materially—in the
light of an unshaded lamp. Our mental conclusions depend so much on
momentary physical sensations—don’t they? (45)

If Tuan Jim remains under a cloud because that is the way Marlow narrativizes him, Flora
de Barral becomes a conventional romantic heroine because that is the way Marlow narrativizes
her at the close of his tale. Conrad, in all his Marlovian tales, has given us clues as to how we
should read against Marlow’s endings as pointing to and critiquing his own and his audiences’
desperate need for redemptive last words and dying glances. In this last Marlovian narrative,
however, we are taught to read against specifically gendered endings (witness the ironized
section titles “The Damsel” and “The Knight”) as Conrad effects a radical break with a Marlow
whose desire to know in Chance has not been on the balance ethically productive, as in Lord
Jim, but increasingly ethically problematic as he attempts to “form” Flora into a heroine of the romance genre just as he had formed Kurtz into a Faustian anti-hero.
CHAPTER 2 NOTES

1. Levin concurs and also argues that “[i]n the latter narratives,” “it is possible to discern a certain straying away from the Benjaminitian tradition” (Tracing 3).

2. Nelles concurs and argues that reading Conrad’s trilogy (“Youth,” Heart of Darkness, Lord Jim) allows us to “experience and assess the progressively widening distance between Marlow and his multiple sets of narratees, from the solidarity of the ‘fellowship’ in Youth to the interruptions and sarcastic asides of Heart of Darkness to the antagonism attributed to the ‘privileged reader’ at the end of Lord Jim” (69).

3. For ethical criticism of the Marlow tales, see Brudney, “Marlow’s Morality” and “Lord Jim and Moral Judgment” Cooper; Gasiorek; Gekowski; Gibson, “Ethics and Unrepresentability” and Postmodernity, Ethics, and the Novel; Gordon; Junyk; Leavis; Levin, “Moral Ambiguity”; Moses; Panichas; and Roberts, “Conrad and the Territory of Ethics” and “Conrad, Theory, and Value.”

4. See Fogel for another line of argument about the role of storytelling in Conrad: “[s]torytelling itself is apprehended as a forced, disproportionate reuse of the person represented” (3).

5. For other readings of this scene, see Guerard (“Hence the shock Marlow experiences when he discovers that Kurtz’s cabin is empty and his secret sharer gone; a part of himself has vanished” 41); Parry (“It is the atavistic regression of a cultivated European which alone elicits ‘moral shock’ in Marlow” 30); and Meisel (Marlow realizes that “presence itself is a fiction”).

6. For more on the scene of recognition and the suspicion always generated by the recognition plot, see Cave.

7. Watts points out that “Marlow’s tone when describing Kurtz’s last hours is more insistently rhetorical and less observantly acute than at other times,” which leads the reader to question his reliability (“Heart” 55).

8. Marlow’s report that the Intended resides “between the tall houses of a street as still and decorous as a well-kept alley in a cemetery” and owns a grand piano which resembles a sarcophagus—descriptions containing echoes of earlier characterizations of Brussels, Belgium as the “sepulchral city”—point to the fact that she herself is a “whited sepulchre,” a hypocrite, one who “appear[s] beautiful outward[ly], but [is] within full of dead men’s bones, and all uncleanness”(110; Mark 23.27–8).

9. For an extensive discussion of the role of unemployment in Heart of Darkness, see Sayeau.

10. See Watts.

11. Marlow presents the “ordinary” manager as a foil to the “remarkable” Kurtz, but, according to Lara, Arendt’s theory, as outlined in her The Origins of Totalitarianism, gives us a way to read
actions as radically evil, but humans as ordinary: according to this reading, Kurtz is “transformed into an ordinary criminal—a butcher” (Lara 145). Arendt, Lara claims, has deconstructed earlier conceptions (i.e., the Faust myth) that “evildoing [is] the product of strong passions” (150).

12. For a characteristic reading of Heart of Darkness through a Benjaminian lens, see Conroy, 88–92.

13. See, for instance, Norris (123).

14. For a notable exception, see Fothergill.

15. For a notable exception, see Ross.

16. See note 8 above.

17. For other feminist readings of Heart of Darkness, see McIntire and Smith.

18. For more on Heart of Darkness as a “survey of varieties of failed and failing work,” see Greaney, “Stories of Work” (87).

19. Levin (“Moral Ambiguity”) also notes the “very uncomplimentary role” Marlow here undertakes; she also notes that Marlow protests too much about his role as confessor (215, 214).

20. For a reconstruction of Marlow’s biography, see Johnson: “At twenty, [Marlow] shipped off on the Judea and wound up after a mock-heroic voyage in the Orient, where he got ‘a regular dose of the East—six years or so.’ He then returned to London and, through the kind offices of his aunt, got a job with the Brussels firm that carried on an export trade in the Congo. His age at this time was probably near thirty. When he talked on board the Nellie in the London dusk, he still followed the sea but had begun to cultivate his ties with the shipping officers on the shore. Since his Congo venture preyed on his mind strongly, he probably was not more than five or six years away from it. In any case, the trial of Jim found Marlow a world traveler but more a man of business and affairs than an adventurer. The Marlow of the Jim story, which covers a period of perhaps five years, may be placed in his late thirties. In Youth, Marlow is forty-two, and has stopped shipping out; he is beginning to be affluent, like the other professional men he spends a drinking evening with. And it is after his retirement from the sea that he commences the country holidays that lead him to the acquaintance of the Fynes and Flora de Barral. The period of time covered by the events in Chance is fourteen years. So Marlow is about fifty-six years old [. . . ] when he meets Powell in the restaurant and begins to piece together the saga of the Damsel and the Knight that is Chance” (93–4).

21. See Fogel (48) for a discussion of Conrad’s working class and leisure class audiences in Preface.

22. See Fogel (49) for a discussion of the meaning of Conrad’s use of the verb “make” in Preface.
23. See page 173.

24. See also Nadelhaft (110). Hampson also argues that Conrad’s critique of chivalric masculinity points up the fact that “chivalric psychology actually finds erotic stimulation in the distress of the woman it presents itself as rescuing. The woman is thus ambiguously positioned as victim in the script of chivalric desire” (144).

25. For opposing views, see Greaney, *Conrad, Language, and Narrative* (Marlow’s “anti-feminist repartee is never convincingly challenged or dialogized in the text” [98]) and Armstrong, “Misogyny” (“*Chance* is not an effective reciprocating partner in urging the reader to explore the ambiguities of power suggested by Marlow’s prejudices” [155]).

26. For another reading of both Kurtz and Marlow as figures for the novelist, whose lying and fiction-making parallel Conrad’s own, see Brantlinger.

27. See Jones, “Modernism”: Later “additions contribute to the greater sense in the final version of Marlow’s possessiveness over the story” (111).

28. Jones (‘Modernism’) also characterizes *Chance* as a “critique of the romance form itself,” and adds that Marlow’s inability to tell Zoe Fyne’s girl friends apart “hints at the homogeneity of all those ubiquitous images of women to be found in contemporary serial publications,” noting that “[this] moment initiates an overall shaping of the critique of female representation throughout the book, where the text constantly refers us to the limited nature of existing representations of women (including Marlow’s)” (107, 113).

29. See also Hawthorn, chapter 4, “*Chance*: Conrad’s Anti-feminine Feminist Novel.”

30. See Johnson for an argument about Marlow’s developing perspective throughout the tales as, by turns, heroic, tragic, and, in *Chance*, comic and pathetic; *Chance*, which he terms a comedy of manners, is an “admixture of tragedy, comedy, adventure, and pathos” presented from the view of a sympathetic realism (94–5, 98).

31. *Chance* is “Conrad’s most ambitious and technical work, for Marlow is called upon to collect and collate the reports of six or more observers in the chain of narration and to trace his way through seven different temporal levels in the course of the story, whose time-span covers some seventeen years, concluding in the dramatic present” (Ray xii).

32. Conrad claimed in a letter to John Quinn, dated 24 May 1916 that reading James’s review was “the only time a criticism affected me painfully” (*L 5*:595).

33. See also Nadelhaft.

34. See also Jones 121.
CHAPTER 3

RACHEL VINRACE AMONG THE FACES: THE CRISIS IN READING OTHER MINDS IN
THE VOYAGE OUT (1915)

The Ambroses on the embankment, or Rachel’s miseducation

*The Voyage Out* opens on a London street-scene. “One afternoon in the beginning of October when the traffic was becoming brisk a tall man strode along the edge of the pavement with a lady on his arm.” These yet-unnamed figures are not nondescript actors immersed into the London cityscape, “people of the crowd,” for they are “creating a scene.” We know that this is so because the narrator is attuned to the goings-on of this particular stretch of the streets leading from the Strand to the Victoria Embankment around Waterloo Bridge. “These streets are very narrow,” the narrator informs us; “it is better not to walk down them arm-in-arm” (3). But, “[i]f you persist, lawyers’ clerks will have to make flying leaps into the mud; young lady typists will have to fidget behind you” (3). Having just been told it is “better not to be very tall, to wear a long blue cloak, or to beat the air with your left hand,” we are not surprised when this man and woman—tall Ridley Ambrose and cloak-wearing Helen Ambrose—draw angry glances from this crowd. These pedestrians are described as “small, agitated figures—for in comparison with this couple most people looked small” and as striking angry glances upon the backs of the Ambroses. The reader’s view, then, is the same as one of these small figures behind the Ambroses, and because these figures have appointments to keep and draw weekly salaries, it is no wonder that there exists a collective “unfriendly stare.” We, as well as the city-walkers, are being impeded by
the disorder wrought by the Ambroses, their refusal to subsume themselves to the pattern of the Strand.

After all, is this not the setting of what Marshall Berman calls Baudelaire’s “primal modern scene”? Is not each small figure, the reader included, “[t]he archetypal modern man,” “a pedestrian thrown into the maelstrom of modern city traffic, a man alone contending against an agglomeration of mass and energy that is heavy, fast, and lethal” (193)? For each small figure is no flanêur, no man taking a tortoise for a stroll down the Paris Arcades circa 1840, but a man of the crowd. In *The Condition of the Working Classes in England* (1845) Engels wrote of such a London crowd that:

> they rush past one another as if they had nothing in common or were in no way associated with one another. Their only agreement is a tacit one: that everyone should keep to the right of the pavement, so as not to impede the stream of people moving in the opposite direction. No one even bothers to spare a glance for the others. The greater the number of people that are packed into a tiny space, the more repulsive and offensive becomes the brutal indifference, the unfeeling concentration of each person on his private affairs. (qtd. in Benjamin *Illuminations* 167, emphasis mine)

In this London street-scene, the narrator admits that “there was some reason” for the collective “unfriendly stare”—stare is singular and not plural though the figures are “decorated with fountain pens, and burdened with dispatch-boxes” (3)—*but.* “But *some enchantment* had put both man and woman beyond the reach of malice and unpopularity. In his case one might guess from the moving lips that it was thought; and in hers from the eyes fixed stonily straight in front of her at a level above the eyes of most that it was sorrow” (3, emphasis mine). But the narrator,
though she has been allied with the small figures who know very well that “eccentricity must pay the penalty,” is not the only “woman of the crowd” to observe the Ambroses and guess at the cause of a scene where the “friction of people brushing past [Helen] [is] evidently painful,” for Helen “shield[s] her face from the curious” (3).

Now aligning herself with the small boys who “occupy the Embankment [where it] juts out in angles here and there, like pulpits,” who “dangl[e] string, drop pebbles, or launch wads of paper for a cruise,” the narrator informs us that these boys have a “sharp eye” (again singular) for eccentricity, and so decide first that Mr. Ambrose is “awful,” and then that he is “grotesque merely” (4). But, “[a]lthough Mrs. Ambrose stood quite still, much longer than is natural, the little boys let her be” (4). The narrator, after announcing this new, unexpected, and perhaps even unprecedented event, proceeds to inform us how an observer would expect a couple like the Ambroses, set against this scene—note that the expectation has changed now to a typical couple walking for pleasure—to behave:

Someone is always looking into the river near Waterloo Bridge; a couple will stand there talking for half an hour on a fine afternoon; most people, walking for pleasure, contemplate for three minutes; when, having compared the occasion with other occasions, or made some sentence, they pass on. Sometimes the flats and churches and hotels of Westminster are like the outlines of Constantinople in a mist; sometimes the river is an opulent purple, sometimes mud-coloured, sometimes sparkling blue like the sea. It is always worth while to look down and see what is happening. *But this lady* looked neither up nor down; the only thing she had seen, since she had stood there, was a circular iridescent patch slowly floating past with a straw in the middle of it. The straw and the patch swam again
and again behind the tremulous medium of a great welling tear, and the tear rose
and fell and dropped into the river. (4, emphasis mine)

Here the reader views Helen Ambrose first as an anomaly, a woman wearing a cloak
walking arm-in-arm with a tall man, and then as someone who, even more shockingly, keeps
herself from bursting into tears until she has “crossed between the swift discharge of motor-cars”
and on to the other side; she then “lean[s] her elbows on the balustrade” and shields her face
from onlookers. We are taught by what information the narrator supplies us not only to view
Helen as deviating from normative behavior—we even view what Helen might have seen had she
been typical—but also to view what she did see. Just as we have been placed in the position of
the smaller figures who cast angry glances upon the Ambroses’ backs, we now see the patch and
straw through a great, welling tear; moreover, we see the tear rise, then fall, then drop into the
river below us.

What we do not know, however, is why Helen cries. Even after she is well out of our way
as a purposeful street-walker with appointments to keep and off one of the narrow streets that
lead from the Strand to the Embankment, she impedes us once again as we take up the
perspective of a practiced observer of that particular locale near the Waterloo Bridge. Though we
see “her shoulders ris[e] and fall with great regularity,” though we see Ridley lay “his hand on
her shoulder” and Helen “shut her face away from him,” though we have been taught by the
narrator to search Helen’s face and her actions for what has marked her out as anomalous in this
scene, we look to see Helen looking at carts moving along the arches of Waterloo Bridge and at
little black broughams and at industry vans and at flower women and at “vast plate-glass
windows all shining yellow,” but we do not know anything of Helen’s interiority until later when
we are given the information that Helen’s “mind [is] like a wound exposed to dry in the air”
because of her “misery for her children, the poor, and the rain” (7). Even this brief explanation, followed by the equally brief statement that Helen “[m]ournfully regard[s] [the boatman] who was putting water between her and her children,” does not adequately satisfy the implied reader’s desire to know why Helen weeps (8).

We do know that Woolf “cancelled [earlier] passages in blue pencil and substituted material which does not present Helen’s thoughts about her children at all, so that her grief is not explained” (DeSalvo, First Voyage 76). Yet this desire on the part of the reader has been especially elicited by this narration of events, even though Helen’s relations to her children do not play a significant role in the plot and are only very briefly referenced, for instance just after Clarissa Dalloway boards the Euphrosyne and she and Helen bond over the fact that they are both mothers. In fact, Helen’s feelings and affect are never again a central preoccupation in the novel: even in the closing scenes when she looks after Rachel as she lies dying, her affective responses to Rachel are overshadowed in large part by Hewet’s (during the deathbed scenes in Chapter XXV), then by Evelyn Murgatroyd’s (Chapter XXVI), and lastly by Hirst’s (Chapter XXVII, the last chapter). At the close of the novel, as Helen cares for her dying niece, when we most expect her affect to again become the focus as it was in the opening, we only witness one emotional outpouring, which is quickly subsumed:

Owing perhaps to the change of doctor, Rachel appeared to be rather better next day. Terribly pale and worn though Helen looked, there was a slight lifting of the cloud which had hung all these days in her eyes. “She talked to me,” she said voluntarily. “She asked me what day of the week it was, like herself.” Then suddenly, without any warning or any apparent reason, the tears formed in her eyes and rolled steadily down her cheeks. She cried with scarcely any attempt to
stop herself, as if she did not know that she was crying. [...] [Hewet] took her in his arms, and she clung to him like a child, crying softly and quietly upon his shoulder. Then she roused herself and wiped her tears away; it was silly to behave like that, she said; very silly, she repeated, when there could be no doubt that Rachel was better. (403)

Why begin the novel with a woman exhibiting unexamined—if not wholly unexplained—grief only to shift emphasis to the twenty-four-year-old heroine Rachel’s experience? Louise DeSalvo argues that the redrafted figure of Helen in the 1915 version “has been rarefied, purified and purged of her negative—and human—qualities” (First Voyage 76). DeSalvo interprets these revisions as evidence of what Helen “doesn’t say and what [s]he can’t think about”; in this later draft, “the suppression of emotions and the repression of thoughts are more important than their expression” (First Voyage 81). And James M. Haule concludes that “the result of these deletions [in the 1915 version there is less revealed about the natures and personal histories of Hewet, Rachel, Helen, and Hirst] is an artistic shift in emphasis. We see now not the effect of a series of characters on an intelligent woman but the effect of a particular woman on the lives of the other characters” (318). But if Woolf intended for Helen’s grief and hence the figure of Helen in this later draft to remain elusive, and if we are directed toward theorizing about not Helen’s effect on Rachel but Rachel’s effect on the other characters, why begin with Helen and her grief, especially if the novel does not return substantively to that grief’s causes?  

Woolf, in this opening passage, is breaking with narrative convention by purposefully outlining a scene that is never filled in; the reader’s training in attributing meaning and coherence is held in abeyance. This peculiar suspension foregrounds two things. The first is that
“everyday minds” are or can be made visible but are not transparent. Second, “the problem of other minds is not simply an epistemological problem, a problem of evidence and certainty, but, above all, an ethical problem, a problem produced by the motives and desires with which we approach beings who are both separate from us and vital to our projects” (Nussbaum 732). Although this opening violates E.M. Forster’s dictum in Aspects of the Novel (1927) that “in the novel we can know people perfectly, and, apart from the general pleasure of reading, we can find here a compensation for their dimness in life” (69) and therefore breaks a certain contract with the reader by presenting a mind that is not “perfectly knowable” like those we meet in real life, the far more important break Woolf effects consists in her giving us no authorial cues as to how we should respond in such a seemingly ethically demanding situation as this. Because we remain unsure of Helen’s motives, we are not only ignorant about why Helen acts and how this relates to the work as a whole but, more importantly, about how we should respond.

In Louise DeSalvo’s reading of the 1913 Melymbrosia, Helen is “an irresponsible and infantile parent” whose “remem[brance of] her own physical embrace [is what] initially causes her sorrow, rather than the children themselves” (37). Thus, Helen’s motives for sorrow as interpreted by DeSalvo direct how we are to respond, with critical distance and condescension. But Woolf’s erasure of these motives from the 1915 text of Voyage creates a new imperative for the reader: instead of judging motives, we as readers must now create them by what Woolf terms “opening out” the vignette with narrativizations of our own. I will return to this critical movement of the reader’s—to whom another mind is made visible but not transparent—“opening out” the text when I discuss Woolf’s use of this new method in her 1920 “An Unwritten Novel” as the “trial” for its extended use in the 1922 Jacob’s Room. The opening of Voyage is so critical, then, because it marks Woolf’s break with the conventions of an author presenting characters
who can be perfectly known—whose motives are explicable if not explained (Forster, *Aspects*, 69–70)—and because its demand that the reader create a narrative for an accessible (but not transparent) mind will become even more explicitly how characters both relate to one another and how readers, in turn, are taught, when given evidence of other minds, to relate to those minds in Woolf’s later *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Waves* (1931).

In *Voyage*, however, Rachel Vinrace has not been exposed to the problem of other minds—the centrality of this question for Woolf, then, begins as her novelistic career begins, and as chapter five will show, extends even to her 1931 *The Waves*, which has been read as a “vision of human solitude” (Zwerdling 10). Though both *Voyage* and *The Waves* have been interpreted in this way, I will attempt to show how Rachel’s voyage out is a voyage out—not a voyage in—to other minds and how this voyage is not only a central preoccupation throughout Woolf’s *oeuvre* but also one with highly significant feminist and sociopolitical implications. “*The Voyage Out* warrants close scrutiny because it is still too frequently undervalued and because it is the novel in which the ethical strain of Woolf’s fiction is perhaps most ‘bald[ly]’ exposed” (Bradshaw “Socio-political Vision,” 196). David Bradshaw, in his “The Socio-political Vision of the Novels” (2000), closely examines how the “Ambroses’ journey from the Embankment to the benighted quayside of Wapping in London’s East End calls to mind the previous transits of numerous social investigators, missionaries, and philanthropists, not least because Helen stops to register some of the key sites of ‘Outcast London’” (192). I would argue that Woolf begins her novelistic career in the Embankment not primarily to show us her own or Helen’s sociopolitical vision but to create in her reader an affective response to such a vision and that this method employed in *Voyage* will be the foundation upon which Woolf will open out later sociopolitical visions. Thus, an analysis of how *Voyage* works to influence the reading experience is necessary.
not only to detect the ethical strain running throughout Woolf’s writing but also to characterize how it functions as part of a larger feminist narratological project.

Woolf opens her débùt novel ostensibly about Rachel’s voyage out with this London scene in order to engage the reader in an exercise in theory of mind; the reader, in other words, here attempts to attribute causation to Helen’s affect. Other characters, namely Helen and Hewet, will later attempt to read and reread aloud other minds in order to educate Rachel on the practice. Theory of mind, as Lisa Zunshine points out in her Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel (2006), or “our ability to explain people’s behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires,” is the very thing that “allows Woolf to assume that we will automatically read a character’s body language as indicative of his thoughts and feelings” (6, 3). Woolf assumes that a reader will theorize about the causes of Helen’s grief, will attribute states of mind to Helen, even if those attributions are incorrect, because “[a]ttributing states of mind is the default way by which we construct and navigate our social environment” (Zunshine 6). Woolf, indeed, recognized the impossibility of not routinely practicing theory of mind, what she termed “character-reading,” in our everyday lives when she addressed her audience in “Character in Fiction”—“every one in this room is a judge of character. Indeed it would be impossible to live for a year without disaster unless one practiced character-reading and had some skill in the art” (SE 38).

Rachel, throughout her voyage, learns to desire something, “she kn[ows] not what,” that can only be obtained by the “physical movement” of going “in and out of rooms,” “in and out of people’s minds” (301)—but this desire is only later transformed into a desire to observe other people on London streets when Hewet teaches her that “there [is] an order, a pattern which ma[kes] life reasonable, or, if that word was foolish, made it of deep interest anyhow, for
sometimes it seemed possible to understand why things happened as they did. Nor were people so solitary and uncommunicative as she believed” (348). Hewet goes on to teach Rachel about a common motive—vanity—that, according to Hewet, underlies many human actions and as such is an easily identifiable marker for behavioral attribution. Hewet is teaching Rachel how to look for second-order intentionality only—theory of mind is “formally defined as a second-order intentionality,” for instance, “I believe that she is vain because she admires herself in a shop-window”—even though we as social beings do not demonstrate “marked difficulties processing stories [until] mind-reading above the fourth level” is demanded of us (Zunshine 28; Dunbar, “On the Origin of the Human Mind,” qtd. in Zunshine 29). Rachel’s difficulty with second-order intentionality is even more suggestive given that Zunshine randomly selects a passage from Mrs. Dalloway in order to demonstrate that reading Woolf “‘demands’ that [readers] process a string of fifth- and sixth-level intentionalities” (33).

Why begin a novel with a scene demanding the reader attribute causation only to take away any satisfactory explanations? I would argue that Woolf is constructing this particular narrative frame in order to elicit an ambivalent affective response from the reader. Woolf defamiliarizes our typical response to a major character’s sorrow by purposefully concealing whatever has caused that sorrow in the first place. And because we do not know why Helen is so upset, only that this misery is vaguely about her children and her leaving them, we must supply the thoughts and feelings that we have learned to assume underlie such outpourings of emotion. By never showing the reader Helen’s mental processes and by never fully explaining the causes of her sorrow, Woolf is breaking with convention, with what we have come to expect as readers when placed in such a scene. But Woolf, if we continue reading, does something even more
unsetting—she completely drops the matter of Helen’s sorrow altogether save for a few brief mentions of her children back home in England.39

As a result, we feel unbalanced—an aberrant display of grief raises inevitable questions about the mind producing that behavior. Because that analysis is never forthcoming, we continue to desire to know long after the incident has passed. We continue, throughout the novel, to feel as if Helen is impeding us, as if she is continually creating dissatisfaction by cutting us off from our need for narrative cause and effect. This protracted desire means we realize we may never resolve the problem of Helen’s interiority. We are not privy to much more information than those present at that street scene possess. Being present for and reading such scenes, with epistemological desire but no certain resolution for the problem of other minds, is presented as a normative, and later, in the context of Rachel’s miseducation, as a formative experience. And yet by presenting a typical scene of reading in this way, Woolf points out that when we pursue the minds of others we are pursuing shadows. Our desire to know is inextricably bound up with our sense of loss as we realize that others are always already not perfectly knowable.

By presenting us with this first devastating encounter, Woolf is creating in us an affective response that Rachel will reenact much later in the novel. Jonathan Flatley, in his 2008 Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism, makes a similar claim for Henry James’s authorial intentions in The Turn of the Screw (1898). “[T]he moment of affective mapping,” he argues, occurs when “the reader has an affective experience within the space of the text, one that repeats or recalls earlier, other experiences, and then is estranged from that experience, and by way of that estrangement told or taught something about it” (7). According to Flatley, Turn works by
solicit[ing] a kind of epistemological interest [on the part of the] reader by leaving the reality of the ghosts and the sanity of the governess textually indeterminable. [. . .] At the same time, the story narrates just such an epistemological interest on the part of the governess herself, who is reading into the behavior of the children to try to get at the truth of their intercourse with the ghosts. This will to knowledge on the part of the governess rhymes with the reader’s own. (7)

Flatley continues by reading the text as commenting on both the reader’s and the governess’s will to knowledge as dangerous as the reader is drawn into a circle of complicity with the governess that ends in Miles’s death. I would argue that Woolf’s framing of Helen’s and our own affective response at the opening of *Voyage* leads to our realization not only that Rachel has not been engaging in this normative experience but also that much has been taken from her as a result of her society’s strictures for an entire class of young women. We know where to affix blame, and when Rachel *does* come to be affectively responsive to those around her and *does* come to desire seeking out causes and attributing beliefs to behaviors, we feel again with her the loss of the Dalloways, of people never seen again, just before we experience the loss of her newly affected mind. We mourn her loss of *feeling the loss* inherent in pursuing the shadows of other minds.

In fact, in creating a character like Rachel, who is explicitly *not adept* at desiring to know other minds and narrativizing those minds, Woolf is foregrounding the experience of someone who *learns to reread* those “aimless masses of matter, without aim except to impede her” as people who know where they are going and into whose lives can be read a kind of meaning (301, 366). This opening scene, then, recalls in the reader experiences she has had in which she has been impeded by another mind whose behavior was not causally explained. The reader, however,
is also estranged from this affective response for, even though she has often been barred from attributing beliefs or affects to other minds which impede her efforts to create causative links, she has always still desired those explanations, and she has always continued to believe that such explanations exist. Thus, after the reader’s own affective response to such a scene, Rachel’s restless physical movements in Chapter XIX—she cries aloud, “It’s intolerable!” after having been “tantalized and put off” all day and is physically impeded by Mrs. Paley on the hotel stairway—themselves become part of a greater pattern (300). Rachel is dissatisfied because she cannot find a meaning, cannot theorize why people act as they do. But instead of acting as the reader had in response to the novel’s opening, by continuing to desire and continuing to seek out causes due to the assumption that there has to be a cause, Rachel simply becomes immobilized.

At Santa Marina, however, this weight of aimlessness begins to lift as Rachel is allowed to walk the streets at night. For it is just those scenes of reading, such as the novel’s opening scene itself, to which Rachel has not been allowed access. Hewet “has known many more people, and [is] far more highly skilled in the art of narrative than Rachel” (348). Thus, he is able to model for her, as does Helen in earlier scenes, how to read minds, an exercise which Rachel becomes very anxious to practice herself: “[Hewet] told her not only what had happened, but what he had thought and felt, and sketched for her portraits which fascinated her of what other men and women might be supposed to be thinking and feeling, so that she became very anxious to go back to England, which was full of people, where she could merely stand in the streets and look at them” (348, emphasis mine).

The function of Woolf’s opening now becomes apparent—we as readers have already practiced our own theory of mind on a scene of reading in London streets, and so we can now contrast our own experiences with those of this twenty-four-year-old woman, who has neither
had access to such scenes nor understood that such an exercise was even possible. Yet had Hewet been present at the opening scene, he would not have been, for all his novelistic ambitions, an exceptional reader of the Ambroses, for the narrator’s speculations about any London spectator were that he “might guess”—even though Helen’s eyes were fixed at a level above the eye-level of most in the crowd—that Ridley was too deep in thought and Helen too deep in sorrow to notice the angry glances of the passersby. And though both Helen and Hewet are marked as especially practiced readers of street-scenes, this novel’s readers, and as many of the characters who are present, are those spectators on the scene who look to Helen’s face, which she must “shield” from the curious (2–3). Like the elder Helen and the young Cambridge men Hewet and Hirst, readers do know “[w]hat really goes on, what people feel, although they generally try to hide it” (183). As a society, then, we are complicit in Rachel’s miseducation, with this something bothering Rachel—what Mitchell Leaska calls an “ambiguous oppression [that] makes itself felt in [her] isolation”—that surfaces just after her engagement as she realizes that rather than “see[ing] England there—London there—all sorts of people,” she may only be destined to be “shut up all by [her]self in a room” (Passionate Apprentice 395; 352).

“Seeing life”: Helen and Rachel walk the streets of Santa Marina

At the very beginning of Voyage, Helen had pronounced her preference for walking though Ridley has already hailed a cab. Helen and Rachel’s walks in Santa Marina provide an access to other people that both women, but most definitely Rachel, have sometimes been denied. Indeed, in the opening scene, we learn that thirty of Helen’s forty years have been spent in a street, and it is doubtless her varied experiences in a street that have allowed her to learn “how to read the people who were passing her” and so to know that the talk of the flower
women, “a contented company, is always worth hearing” (6). But it is Helen’s experience too that allows her to imagine life as a prostitute, “pacing a circle all the days of her life round Piccadilly Circus” (7). Picking up on the extensive use of “figures of circulation” which describe “the circuits which [Rachel], Clarissa Dalloway, the ladies of the hotel, and the prostitutes of Piccadilly Square tread within the novel,” Bradshaw argues that “the lives of Clarissa, Helen, Rachel, and the prostitutes are no more than ‘circumscribed mound[s],’ vicious circles of self-abnegation, self-effacement, and self-abuse” (189). Yet, as if to signal a way out of the circular paths Bradshaw points to as “inscrib[ing] women [in the novel] [within] servile, restricted, and unfulfilling roles”—the circular garden of the Ambroses’ villa, the vague circling of the women in the hall of the hotel following breakfast, and “Helen’s picture of Rachel in England spending her days ‘in interminable walks round sheltered gardens’” (189, 188)—Woolf does allow Helen and Rachel to “see life,” a “phrase they used for their habit of strolling through the town after dark,” for “[t]he two Englishwomen excited some friendly curiosity, but no one molested them” (107). This same phrase, “seeing life,” appears in Woolf’s diary entry of 4 November 1918: “I keep thinking of different ways to manage my scenes; conceiving endless possibilities; seeing life, as I walk about the streets, an immense opaque block of material to be conveyed by me into its equivalent of language” (D II: 214). The appearance of “seeing life” in the context of the diaries here is also highly suggestive, for Woolf, as we will see later, prescribes walking the streets as an education for her fictional novelist Mary Carmichael in A Room of One’s Own.

Although Rachel is of course unable to relate this experience not only of seeing “streets full of people, men for the most part, who interchanged their views of the world as they walked, or gathered round the wine-tables at the street corner, where an old cripple was twanging his guitar strings, while a poor girl cried her passionate song in the gutter” (108) but also of looking
in “a row of long windows” at the hotel, “[e]ach reveal[ing] a different section of [its] life,” to other experiences of scenes of reading such as this one, Helen does easily relate this kind of experience to others she has had and uses this occasion to return in her mind to the Mall on, say, the fifteenth of March:

‘Perhaps there’s a Court.’ She thought of the crowd waiting in the cold spring air to see the grand carriages go by. ‘It’s very cold, if it’s not raining,’ she said. ‘First there are men selling picture postcards; then there are wretched little shop-girls with round bandboxes; then there are bank-clerks in tail coats; and then—any number of dressmakers. People from South Kensington drive up in a hired fly; officials have a pair of bays; earls, on the other hand, are allowed one footman to stand up behind; dukes have two, royal dukes—so I was told—have three; the king, I suppose, can have as many as he likes. And the people believe in it!’ (108)

Helen’s description of individualized characters who nonetheless collectively believe in such royal spectacles could have been lifted out of Mrs. Dalloway’s narrated walk along Bond Street in the middle of June 1923. Helen is, like a novelist, not only recreating characters but also attributing beliefs to these imagined London spectators.

But Rachel is barred from devastating encounters like readers’ with Helen in the opening scene and Helen’s encounters there with the flower-women and the prostitutes pacing circles in Piccadilly Circus and so has not had the opportunity to be haunted by them. This disjunction is pointed up by Rachel’s reaction to Hewet when he asks “How many people in London d’you think have [a thousand a year and perfect freedom]?” after he imagines what he would most like to be doing if he were in England—looking over Waterloo Bridge and taking a walk down the Strand. ‘And now you’ve spoilt it,’ [Rachel] complained. ‘Now we’ve got to think of the
horrors.’ She looked grudgingly at the novel which had once caused her perhaps an hour’s discomfort, so that she had never opened it again, but kept it on her table, and looked at it occasionally, as some medieval monk kept a skull, or a crucifix to remind him of the frailty of the body” (351).

Rachel has, then, experienced brief encounters through her reading in which she has been bodily affected—her hour’s discomfort. This might have exposed her to the bald fact that Helen confronts in the opening, that “after all it is the ordinary thing to be poor, and London is the city of innumerable poor people” (7). However, Rachel’s lack of experiential knowledge that it probably is true that “women die with bugs crawling across their faces” does not allow her to, having faced the “skeleton beneath,” then see herself as one of those women, as Helen had “see[n] herself pacing a circle all the days of her life round Picadilly Circus” (351, 7). Earlier, when she and Helen had walked the Santa Marina streets to “see life,” we do not know how Rachel reacted to seeing the “old cripple twanging his guitar strings, while a poor girl cried her passionate song in the gutter” (7), but we can guess that Rachel had not seen herself as this poor girl either and was not haunted enough by this encounter to recall it later in the context of her reading.

Rachel has been denied direct access to what is most unthinkable to her and therefore the possibility of an affective response to the unthinkable—such as Helen’s disgust and despair—that would allow her to enter the minds of others so that she might, in the terms Woolf uses in “Street-Haunting,” “penetrate,” at least a little way, into their lives. Having such encounters is only the starting point for our responsibilities as “fellow travellers with Mrs. Brown,” and Rachel, having been denied access to the normative experience of Woolf’s audience in “Character in Fiction,” cannot measure what she reads in life against what she reads in novels

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(SE 53). She, “[i]n the course of her daily life” in Richmond with her aunts, has not “had far stranger and more interesting experiences than [Woolf’s encounter with the woman in the railway carriage].” She has not “overheard scraps of talk that filled [her] with amazement.” She has not “gone to bed at night bewildered by the complexity of [her] feelings” (53). Yet she has begun, at twenty-four, to finally have bewildering encounters, such as the one featuring Dalloway’s kiss. Though she has begun the process of experiencing the modern world, however, she has not begun to narrativize herself and others, not begun to penetrate at least a little way into the lives of others. Rachel proclaims that “this country” is “like a curtain—all the things one wants are on the other side of that. I want to know what’s going on behind it. [ . . . ] I want to see England there—London there—all sorts of people—why shouldn’t one? Why should one be shut up all by oneself in a room?” (351–2). Rachel is vaguely dissatisfied, but she is still not certain just how it is she can “know what’s going on behind” in the minds of those she encounters. Though Helen and especially Hewet have modeled reading other minds, Rachel’s education ends abruptly when her fever begins.

**Rachel Vinrace among the faces**

In a paper presented at a Woolf conference in 2003, Frances Spalding characterized the Smith College *Virginia Woolf*, painted by Vanessa Bell in 1911–12 and donated by Ann Safford Mandel in 2003, as one of the most attractive portraits of Woolf; while also being one of the most radical. In other paintings at this time, Vanessa Bell had begun to cut out detail in order to enhance the architecture or design of the picture. It is evident here, for instance, that Bell is not concerned with creating an illusion and makes no attempt
to disguise the brush strokes, which in many places remain separated from each other, thereby insisting on their reality as paint. In the face, these parallel brush strokes, as they fall down over the face, seem to create a veil, *which obscures rather than defines the facial features*. More usually in a portrait our interest gathers to *a climax* when the eye engages with the face, with that which is usually regarded as an index to human character. But in this case, it is just at this point that we experience *the greatest tension*: For though the information we seek appears to have been *withheld*, *the portrait remains powerfully haunting and even characterful*. It can be argued that by denying us access to what Virginia Woolf looked like at a specific age and at a certain moment in time, Vanessa Bell opens up the portrait to *a larger narration*, a greater duration. This “trap for the gaze,” as Jacques Lacan once referred to painting, invites us, as spectators, *to bring to the face our knowledge and imagination*. We are offered not the fixity of a precise likeness, but an empty space through which can flow thought, fantasy, feeling, knowledge, and metonymical associations. In this way Bell opens up the formation of identity to both past and future, something that Woolf herself later tried to do in *Orlando*, writing on the title page of the manuscript: “the theory being that character goes on underground before we were born; and leaves something afterwards also.” Of course, the picture works as a likeness partly because the near-blank face sits within the recognizable syntax of a portrait, for we can see that Woolf is seated elegantly in a wing-backed armchair.

Nevertheless, in that empty face *the expected narrative has been suspended*. It is possible that Bell wanted to acknowledge the inchoate, the fact
that Woolf as a writer had scarcely begun, her novels remaining as yet unwritten.

With the advantage of hindsight, today we can interpret this portrait as an eloquent symbol of the interiority that Woolf pursued in her writing. It evokes her *unknowableness* (“We do not know our own souls, let alone the souls of others,” Woolf wrote in “On Being Ill” 1); it evokes anonymity (“I must be private, secret, as anonymous and submerged as possible in order to write” 2); it also is suggestive of hidden strata in the mind, something similar to the state for which Mrs. Ramsay yearns in *To the Lighthouse*: “To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated” (62). So this portrait, though painted in England at a certain moment in time, by an artist belonging to a particular social class, and which now hangs in Smith College Museum of Art, is not easily captured. Instead, *it belongs to all those who engage with that obscured face*, in the search for meanings that rest not on the surface but are discoverable over time and in dialogue, as memory, history, and association become inextricably woven into the act of looking. (130–1, emphasis mine)

As Spalding’s analysis points up, it may well be that Bell’s experimental paintings in the period just after the 1910 Post-Impressionist Exhibition provided an impetus to Woolf’s modernist experimentation in her own portraits of character. Diane Gillespie argues for the mutual artistic influence of each sister’s work upon the other’s, speculating that a little-known 1920 painting by Vanessa now called “Mrs. Dalloway’s Party” (probably so titled after the novel’s publication) may have been a “visual impetus for the party scene that closes the novel” (129). I will return to this intriguing theory and its implications in chapter four, but for now I
would like to focus on those other “haunting” faceless portraits and their possible influence upon Woolf’s modernist aesthetics as she begins her career as a novelist.

In a famous diary entry of 26 January 1920, Woolf proclaims she has “arrived at some idea of a new form for a new novel. Suppose one thing should open out of another—as in An Unwritten Novel—only not for 10 pages but 200 or so—doesn’t that give the looseness & lightness I want: doesn’t that get closer & yet keep form & speed, & enclose everything, everything?” (D II: 13) In a letter to Ethyl Smith on 16 October 1930, Woolf reiterates that “Unwritten Novel was the great discovery”: it “showed me how I could embody all my deposit of experience in a shape that fitted it,” and through it I “saw, branching out of the tunnel I made, when I discovered that method of approach, Jacobs Room [1922], Mrs Dalloway [1925] etc—” (Congenial Spirits 274). Because “Unwritten” ’s form influences the forms of the later novels, I will return to this “opening out” method in chapter four, where I analyze Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse.

In “An Unwritten Novel,” the first thing that opens out from another is the narrator’s affective response to her observations of a woman’s face as she looks directly at life, unlike the other passengers and the narrator herself. The next thing originating from this response is the narrator’s storying of this woman’s life, but this narrative stops abruptly when the woman opens her eyes and looks out. At this point, the narrator muses:

Have I read you right? But the human face—the human face at the top of the fullest sheet of print holds more, withholds more. Now, eyes open, she looks out; and in the human eye—how d’you define it?—there’s a break—a division—so that when you’ve grasped the stem the butterfly’s off—the moth that hangs in the evening over the yellow flower—move, raise your hand, off, high, away. I won’t
raise my hand. *Hang still, then, quiver, life, soul, spirit, whatever you are of Minnie Marsh* [the fictitious name the narrator has given the woman]. (117, my emphasis)

The narrator’s portrait of the other woman, like Vanessa Bell’s portrait of Woolf, evokes both the woman’s unknowableness and our desire to know her. Woolf has her reader right where she wants her, caught in the tension between looking to the face as the expected site of reading and not quite seeing what she seeks to find there. Instead, for one moment, the narrator conjures the soul, spirit, essence of the woman to “hang still” and “quiver.” This same compulsion to narrate a character’s life arising from a desire to “embrace,” the “opening out” of a narrative from the desire to capture a shadow through viewing the contents of a room or overhearing scraps of a dialogue is what motivates the narrator of *Jacob’s Room*: “But something is always compelling one to *hum vibrating*, like the hawk moth, at the mouth of the cavern of mystery, endowing Jacob Flanders with all sorts of qualities he had not at all—for though, certainly, he sat talking to Bonamy, half of what he said was too dull to repeat; much unintelligible (about unknown people and Parliament); what remains is mostly a matter of guess work. *Yet over him we hang vibrating*” (60, 61, my emphasis).

The desire to know and narrativize, then, is both made manifest in bodily vibrations and preceded by affective responses. These somatic responses *are* the adventure, for “[i]t is always an adventure to enter a new room, for the lives and characters of its owners have distilled their atmosphere into it, and directly we enter it we breast some new wave of emotion” (*SE* 186). This “attack” of emotion, though it can lead to our minds being exposed to dry in the air like wounds, is precisely what Rachel has not been allowed to endure in Richmond, and has only momentarily experienced on the voyage—during and after Dalloway’s kiss—and in Santa Marina, for
instance, while watching the women cutting off hen’s heads during her venture to the “wrong side of hotel life” (293).

In Chapter XIX, Rachel’s “unformed restless desire” is mirrored in her movements, as her discomfort from listening to Mr. Bax’s sermon is followed by luncheon and her unsatisfactory conversations with Evelyn and Miss Allan and the blood and “ugly wriggling” of the women cutting off the heads and her obstruction in the hallway by Mrs. Paley. “All day long she had been tantalized and put off” (300). She concludes that everyone is “asleep and dreaming”; “the force of her rage” dims as she shifts from thinking about all those impeding her to the admission that she doesn’t know what all those other people in the world are up to. Her agony reaches its climax after the tea-party when she attacks Helen for being “only half-alive” and declares that “[o]ne never gets what one wants out of any of [these people]” (306). At the end of Chapter XIX, we see a Rachel finally on her way to understanding the people and the world around her, even if this developing conscious desire—that manifests itself as movement in and out of rooms and other minds—is half-formed and causes Rachel great pain. Just as Evelyn is tormented by that “little spark of life in her which was always trying to work through to other people,” Rachel has the “uncomfortable sensation” in Miss Allan’s room that she wants to “whirl high and strike a spark out of [Miss Allan’s] cool pink flesh” before she abandons this project, conceding that there is “nothing to be done but to drift past other[s] in silence” (292, 297).

In The Voyage Out, faces are sought, for it is faces which reveal the hidden character beneath: in the midst of Rachel’s restless wanderings in Chapter XIX, Evelyn Murgatroyd, a young woman “who never gave up the pursuit of people she wanted to know,” “slip[s] off the bed and s[its] on the floor, looking up at Rachel” (285, 290). Evelyn “searche[s] up into [Rachel’s] face as if she [is] trying to read what kind of character [is] concealed behind the face.
She put[s] her hand on Rachel’s knee” (290). This physical closeness, the manifestation of an intense epistemological longing on the part of Evelyn, provokes Rachel to feel both excited and ill at ease, and she breaks away from Evelyn’s gaze by touching “different objects, the books on the table, the photographs, the fleshly leaved plant with the stiff bristles, which stood in a large earthenware pot in the window” (290).

Evelyn seeks to make the voyage out to Rachel as another mind, even as Rachel refuses to be “read” by Evelyn. Rachel “rebuff[s]” the “little spark of life in [Evelyn] which was always trying to work through to other people,” and still Evelyn persists: though Rachel’s back is turned to her, Evelyn “look[s] at her visitor, her shoes, her stockings, the combs in her hair, all the details of her dress in short, as though by seizing every detail she might get closer to the life within” (292). As Susan Stanford Friedman points out in her 1992 “Virginia Woolf’s Pedagogical Scenes of Reading: The Voyage Out, The Common Reader, and Her ‘Common Readers’” (1992), The Voyage Out not only contains numerous scenes of the reading of both people and literature, but it is also itself fundamentally about reading. Friedman argues that Voyage is a “parable about reading,” that Rachel’s death enacts Woolf’s need to “kill off” a bad female reader, “the kind of female reader of books and people who is most likely to be victimized” (105, 116).

Friedman departs from Louise de Salvo’s self-censorship thesis by arguing that “self-censorship does not fully explain the changes in Rachel as reader from Melymbrosia to The Voyage Out” (115). Focusing on the shifts in Rachel’s characterization from Melymbrosia to Voyage—Rachel is less well-read and is less of a resisting, independent reader—Friedman argues that Rachel is closer in the later version to Woolf herself during the period of her courtship and engagement to Leonard Woolf. Reading Woolf’s intermittent illness from 1911
through 1913 as symptomatic of Woolf’s ambivalence about her own marriage, Friedman also reads Rachel’s illness and subsequent death as symptomatic of her unconscious reading of her recent courtship and engagement to Terence Hewet.

Though Friedman presents a very convincing case, her psychoanalytic treatment of Woolf’s pedagogical scenes of reading does not fully account for the transformation of Rachel as reader that she so astutely points out. For the Rachel of Melymbrosia is not only more well-read and draws up her own reading lists but, more importantly, actively reads other minds and responds affectively to those minds, as the Rachel of Voyage pointedly does not do. Soon after the Euphrosyne sets sail and a group—Rachel, Helen, Ridley, Pepper—gathers on the deck after dinner, the Ambroses “move away; it could be seen that they kissed each other; and then Ridley had something private to communicate. Rachel guessed that it had to do with her father. An emotion stirred within her. How beautiful the sight of a couple arm in arm is!” (M 24, emphasis mine). And the Rachel of Melymbrosia responds affectively not only to other minds with whom she does come into direct contact but also to those she encounters indirectly. While reading Cowper’s Letters, Rachel both attributes causation to his behavior—“[d]ipping here and there, she gave him qualities; what an egoist he was; how vain of his poetry, how lonely, owing to the state of the roads and people’s view of madness” (M 37, emphasis mine)—and responds affectively to his words—“[s]he put her hand up, and fancied she felt the faint shock of the things he had thought over a century ago, tingling, like wireless messages upon her palm” (M 37).

This Rachel of course still views Helen only as a type for maternity, and her sense of self is only confirmed and not disoriented by what she reads in Cowper. Still, Voyage’s Rachel’s almost completely flattened-out affect before Dalloway’s kiss and meeting Hewet stands in
starker contrast to the Rachel who finally, “for the first time in her life, instead of slipping at once into some curious pleasant cloud of emotion, too familiar to be considered, listen[s] critically to what is said” during Mr. Bax’s sermon (V 264). Her affective response of “acute discomfort” to the sermon becomes “an expression of keen horror” as she ceases to listen to Mr. Bax and “fixe[s] her eyes on the [slavishly acquiescent] face of a woman near her” (264, 265). Rachel’s affective response of accumulated horror and disgust reaches a climax in Chapter XIX, having been set in motion by the Sunday sermon. Yet, curiously, her typically muted affective responses return after this climactic chapter, when she and Hewet profess their love to one another and become engaged:

‘We love each other,’ Terence repeated, searching into her face. Their faces were both very pale and quiet, and they said nothing. [. . .] ‘Terrible—terrible,’ [Rachel] murmured after another pause, but in saying this she was thinking as much of the persistent churning of the water as of her own feeling. On and on it went in the distance, the senseless and cruel churning of the water. She observed that the tears were running down Terence’s cheeks. (317)

Rachel’s disengagement from others and especially her lack of response to others’ affect evidenced here reaches its climax in the chapter preceding the one in which she falls ill, and hence her detachment is more strongly correlated with her illness and death in Voyage than in Melymbrosia, in which the death is much more disconnected from the preceding events in the novel.

Before turning to the question of Rachel’s death, I would like to examine Rachel’s brief affective responses and then her return to a typically flattened affect and heightened sense of “independence, calm, certainty” in the context of some of Woolf’s other novels, short fiction,
and essays (V 368). This juxtaposition, I hope, will point up Rachel’s responses as almost anomalous in the Woolfian canon—though they are closely aligned with those of Septimus Warren Smith in Mrs. Dalloway and Rhoda in The Waves—and will allow greater insight into why Rachel dies and, more importantly, how Rachel responds to the fact of her dying.

**Pursuing infinite shadows**

In “Walking, Writing, and Women,” Rachel Bowlby traces the figures of the flâneur and the passante in the writings of Louis Huart, Baudelaire, and Proust to conclude that Woolf’s use of such figures—Peter Walsh practicing flânerie on the streets of London in Mrs. Dalloway, for instance—is almost a send-up of these traditional constructions of the masculine flanêur and the female passante. “[I]t is sometimes as if the figure of the masculine flâneur had been pushed off satirically down a cul-de-sac, as someone from whom the adventuring woman had nothing at all to fear (still less to desire), on the streets or on the page” (204). Bowlby continues her discussion with an analysis of Woolf’s essay “Street Haunting: A London Adventure,” first published in the Yale Review in October 1927. In this essay, Bowlby claims, the passante has become the flanêur, although there is something, namely the specter of the city’s poor, she adds, that haunts the female flâneur’s window-shopping.

What most haunts the narrator of “Street Haunting” is the knowledge that there are innumerable men and women—and not just the poor—who remain unknown to us. Woolf, then, appropriates the dominant narrative of the flâneur to “enable the urban spaces of modernity to become places of relationships rather than sites of a dominating male gaze” (Humm 27). In a 1906 short story, “The Mysterious Case of Miss V.,” the narrator relates a story about a woman, Mary V., who moves wraith-like at the edges of the narrator’s society: “A tie of blood—or
whatever the fluid was that ran in Miss V.’s veins—made it my particular fate to run against her—or pass through her or dissipate her, whatever the phrase may be—more constantly perhaps than any other person, until this little performance became almost a habit” (31). The narrator becomes so used to the “familiar grey shadow” of Mary V., however, that when she “ cease[s] to haunt her path,” the narrator knows something is awry (31). Early one morning, the narrator wakes and cries out “Mary V. Mary V!!,” and only later realizes that Mary V. had died that same morning (31). This double cry recalls both Hewet’s cry for Rachel at the close of *Voyage* and Bonamy’s call for Jacob at the close of *Jacob’s Room*, and the simple story of Miss V., too, upon closer inspection, seems itself to elegize a whole host of such ghost-women as *Voyage* had elegized miseducated women and *Jacob’s Room* had elegized the fallen youth of the Great War. For one thing, the narrator tells us at the beginning of “Mysterious Case” that “[s]uch a story as hers and her sister’s” “is scarcely possible except in London” (30). But the collapsing of the two identities (Mary V. and her sister Janet V.) into one name (Miss V.) further represents an even greater collapse, for “one might mention a dozen such sisters in one breath” (30). “Miss V.,” then, names a whole swathe of ghost-women unknown to the narrator whose death, nonetheless, represents a great loss even if that loss cannot be articulated.

This loss, for the narrator of “The Mark on the Wall,” is visceral; she was torn asunder from the man who had previously owned her house, “as one is torn from the old lady about to pour out tea and the young man about to hit the tennis ball in the back garden of the suburban villa as one rushes past in the train” (83). These narrators are not the typical “urban personalities” of Simmel, “retreat[ing] to a distanced, private space; psychologically into mental detachment, and, increasingly, literally into the bourgeois interior” (Parsons 30). Though Deborah Parsons is correct in identifying the prospect of *flânerie* in Woolf as “an attempt to
identify and place the self in the uncertain environment of modernity,” she characterizes Woolf’s street-haunting as an “ethereal [activity] in which the spectre floats above the ground and is detached and immune from the dangers of the cityscape” (41). But Woolf’s street-walking, omnibus-, and railway-riding narrators (from “Street-Haunting,” “Mysterious Case,” “Mark,” “Unwritten Novel,” *Jacob’s Room, Room*) are not fleeing or detached; they are instead actively pursuing the infinite shadows of their fellow ghost-men and –women. They are moths battering their own brittle selves against the flames of an infinite number of inaccessible lanterns.

“[I]mpeding [her] passage down the smooth stream by catching at some branch or root,” the narrator looks in at the window of a drawing-room and sees “the figure of a woman, accurately measuring out the precise number of spoons of tea which—She looks at the door as if she heard a ring downstairs and somebody asking, is she in?” (179) “But here,” the narrator continues, “we must stop,” for “[a]t any moment, the sleeping army may stir itself and wake in us a thousand violins and trumpets in response; the army of human beings may rouse itself and assert all its oddities and sufferings and sordidities” (179). This figure of the woman in the drawing-room, a seemingly easily dismissable figure—which I will relate to the figures of Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay in chapter four—is later replaced by two men “consulting under the lamp-post,” “spelling out the latest wire from Newmarket in the stop press news” (184, 185). What connects these figures is only the happenstance that the narrator glimpses them all as she strolls by, catching a passing phrase and desiring to—if not always permitting herself to—“fabricate a lifetime” from those “chance phrase[s]” (184).

Although it is the encounter with the little woman in the shoe-store on which the narrator most dwells and by which she seems to be most intrigued and although she later sees two bearded blind men and other outcasts of society, she is interested in the lives of all the people she
encounters, and not just the dejected or the differently abled—she has, she says, been seeking ghosts on this sortie ostensibly to buy a lead pencil. And the purpose of seeking these ghosts, according to the narrator of “Haunting,” is so that she can become any one of an innumerable many she may see by narrativizing these lives, excavating behind these caverns of self and em-bodying and intellectually inhabiting them: “Walking home one could tell oneself the story of the dwarf, of the blind men, of the party in the Mayfair mansion, of the quarrel in the stationer’s shop. Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others. One could become a washer-woman, a publican, a street singer” (187).

Even as the narrator of “Haunting” admits it is comforting to have her self again “shelter[ed] and enclose[d]” as she enters her own home, she declares that street haunting is the “greatest of adventures” precisely because that “shell-like covering” over the self has been shattered, has been “battered like a moth at the flame of so many inaccessible lanterns, sheltered and enclosed” (178, 187). Despite this narrator’s purposeful “battering” at so many city souls, Susan Squier argues that “the stroll through London leaves [the narrator] neither morally, spiritually, nor politically changed, but merely entertained” (47). Yet this narrator has not been content simply to voyeuristically “enter” these lives; she has, after all, intentionally intervened to end the quarrel of the couple in the bookshop: “In order to keep them there, standing side by side in forced neutrality, one had to be particular in one’s choice of pencils; this was too soft, that too hard. They stood silently looking on. The longer they stood there, the calmer they grew; their heat was going down, their anger disappearing. Now, without a word said on either side, the quarrel was made up” (186).
Indeed, though the narrator comes to no sweeping conclusions about what she has seen, and though she “never sees [the poor of London’s] situation as relevant to her own as a woman in patriarchal society”—or at least never explicitly comes to this conclusion—Woolf writes elsewhere about how this public gaze at the surfaces of store-fronts and faces might be punctuated by the “accumulation of unrecorded life” going on behind all these surfaces (Squier 48; R 89). Indeed, the narrator of A Room of One’s Own desires Mary Carmichael—the figure of the female modernist novelist—to have a look at both a shop’s display complete with colored ribbons and the girl behind the counter. One does not by any means exclude the other. In her July 1917 short story “The Mark on the Wall,” the narrator claims that a world where we ourselves are only “that shell of a person which is seen by other people” is “[a] world not to be lived in” (CSF 85). Further, Woolf pronounces that the “depths [novelists in future] will explore” are precisely all those depths that we may create “[a]s we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways” “for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number” (85). Though “life is but a procession of shadows,” pursuing these shadows, battering the flame of all the inaccessible lanterns, is what will occupy the modernist novelist, according to Woolf, and it is to the streets she sends young women who would write—in the pursuit of such shadows (JR 60).

After divining that Mary Carmichael will go into rooms “where sit the courtesan, the harlot and the lady with the pug dog” and “cut out” their characters more closely than her male counterparts had done, the narrator of Room remembers that “the majority of women are neither harlots nor courtesans; nor do they sit clasping pug dogs to dusty velvet all through the summer afternoon” (88). And, by asking herself what it is that most women actually do, “there c[omes] to [her] mind’s eye one of those long streets somewhere south of the river whose infinite rows are
innumerably populated” (89). But it is not, most importantly, the illumination of the shadows of these “infinitely obscure lives” that Mary Carmichael will pursue, “torch firm in hand,” but the illumination of her own: “Above all, you must illumine your own soul with its profundities and its shallows, and its vanities and its generosities, and say what your beauty means to you or your plainness, and what is your relation to the everchanging and turning world of gloves and shoes and stuffs swaying up and down among the faint scents that come through chemists’ bottles down arcades of dress material over a floor of pseudo-marble” (90). And this, Mary Carmichael’s imagined next novelistic record of her own soul’s encounter with “the women at the street corners with their arms akimbo,” “the violet-sellers and match-sellers and old crones stationed under doorways” and the “drifting girls,” may well also be titled Life’s Adventure, as is the fictional book Room’s narrator now holds, for the sight of a shop hung with ribbons “w[ill] lend itself to the pen as fittingly as any snowy peak or rocky gorge in the Andes” and the life of the girl behind the counter will be of even greater interest than that of Napoleon or Keats (89, 90).

**Rachel among the critics: reading the heroine’s death**

In an 8 April 1915 review for the Daily News and Leader, E.M. Forster writes of Woolf’s newly-published The Voyage Out:

She believes in adventure—here is the main point—believes in it passionately, and knows that it can only be undertaken alone. Human relations are no substitute for adventure, because when real they are uncomfortable, and when comfortable they must be unreal. It is for a voyage into solitude that man was created, and Rachel, Helen, Hewet, Hirst, all learn this lesson, which is exquisitely reinforced
by the setting of tropical scenery—the soul, like the body, voyages at her own risk. ‘There must be a reason,’ sighs nice old Mrs Thornbury, after the catastrophe. ‘It can’t only be an accident. For if it was an accident—it need never have happened.’ Primaeval thunderstorms answer Mrs Thornbury. There is no reason. Why should an adventure terminate that way rather than this, since its essence is fearless motion? ‘It’s life that matters,’ writes a novelist of a very different type; ‘the process of discovering, the everlasting and perpetual process, not the discovery itself at all.’ Mrs Woolf’s vision may be inferior to Dostoieffsky’s—but she sees as clearly as he where efficiency ends and creation begins, and even more clearly that our supreme choice lies not between body and soul, but between immobility and motion. In her pages, body v. soul—that dreary medieval tug-of-war—does not find any place. It is as if the rope has broken, leaving pagans sprawling on one side and clergymen on the other, while overhead ‘long-tailed birds chattered and screamed and crossed from wood to wood, with golden eyes in their plumage.’ (54)

Forster’s review proffers an answer to the most crucial question for a critic of *Voyage*: why does Rachel have to die? Rachel dies, according to Forster, because “[i]t is for a voyage into solitude that man was created.” Life in *Voyage* is an adventure, Forster attests and, further, “human relations are no substitute for adventure.” Yet the adventure of human relations and not the necessity of their absence for adventure is foregrounded in this passage from *Melymbrosia*, in which an old fairy tale runs through Rachel’s head as she “pursu[es] the odd-number[ed] [doors of the hotel] which remained obstinately shut”:
a traveller walked all a summer’s day along a high road, and first he met a rich man in a coach with golden wheels, and asked him a question; but the rich man whipped up his horses and disappeared; next he met a merchant carrying a sack of rice; next there came a goose girl with her geese, and next a convict from the salt mines of Siberia. To all of them he put the same question but they were all too busy with their own affairs to answer him; “and that,” said Rachel, “is exactly what has happened to me.” She was the traveller, and she went not only from person to person, but from country to country and from age to age, asked her question: in the streets of Baghdad she asked it of men sitting by the roadside, and now in the city of London; she asked it of the Greeks and of the Italians, of poems and of music. But whereas the traveller in the fairy tale fell asleep and had a vision, she travelled on and on, still asking. (269)

As for the cause of Rachel’s death, Forster maintains that the soul “voyages at her own risk”—life is absurd and the soul must move rather than remain immobile.

Forster’s claim that Rachel’s death is absurd, causeless has become less and less tenable for Woolf scholars as archival research into the two extant drafts of *Melymbrosia* has revealed that Woolf’s extensive revisions to the novel tie earlier events in the 1915 *Voyage* directly to the initial headache that causes Rachel’s illness, psychological breakdown, and eventual death. As Mitchell Leaska argues, “that Woolf chose to introduce the *Comus* material in the finished text obliquely enlarges the meaning of the illness” (336–7). That a scene of reading precipitates such a breakdown only further heightens critical speculation about why Rachel has to die. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis puts it, “[t]he largest question in *The Voyage Out* is asked by its largest narrative fact: the death of Rachel” (50).
Though Forster’s interpretation of Rachel’s death intrigues me, it is his interpretation of her “voyage” that most provokes my own reaction against this early reading of *Voyage*. Especially given the evidence of Woolf’s extensive revisions, it becomes apparent that rather than “human relations being no substitute for adventure,” human relations in *Voyage* are the adventure and that by voyaging away from meaningful relations to others toward solitude Rachel does not enact that “voyage into solitude [for which] man was created” according to Forster but instead becomes a victim of that miseducation which has precluded her from making the “voyage out” to meaningful relations with other minds.

In Forster’s reading, Rachel’s “adventure” only intensifies as her illness “isolate[s] [her] alone with her body,” for this “voyage,” for which “human relations are no substitute,” “can only be undertaken alone” (*V* 384; “Review,” 54). But Rachel’s education after such a prolonged isolated miseducation, the real “voyage out” to other minds, which has only just begun, is cut short when her fever restricts her to her own body. And her death does seem almost accidental, even absurd, for the weight of the narrative has been placed onto Rachel’s development, as in any *Bildungsroman* or *Künstlerroman*, and so her education comes too late. But of course our desire to know and narrativize Rachel does not end with her death and we, along with Hewet, wonder what “the hard thing” would have been for Rachel in twenty years’ time (349). We have penetrated at least some way into “the great space of [Rachel’s] life into which no one had ever penetrated,” for we have entered into her mind during the course of the narrative and have wondered what it must be like to never have walked alone in London, to have no knowledge of prostitutes or of men’s desire (247).

Beverly Ann Schlack reads the inclusion of Milton’s *Comus*, “glaringly placed” at the climactic scene of reading and of crisis, as a lens through which to read Rachel’s illness as “at
least partially psychosomatic” (20, 26). According to Schlack’s reading, Rachel harbors a death-wish and her death is ultimately her “solution” to the dilemma of her impending marriage. Schlack convincingly argues that Rachel’s death is “invested with an ambiguous dimension that allows readers to propose more inclusive interpretations” of the death than the narrowly diagnostic symptoms of typhoid (26). As Schlack puts it, “[i]f that death is not self-inflicted in the strictest sense, it is nevertheless quite consciously unresisted, for there is a clear absence of any will to recover in Rachel Vinrace at the end” (26). Rachel does lose the will, not necessarily to live but to desire relations with other minds as she “merely lie[s] conscious of her body floating on the top of the bed” in the Voyage deathbed scenes: “All sights were something of an effort, but the sight of Terence was the greatest effort, because he forced her to join mind to body in the desire to remember something. She did not wish to remember; it troubled her when people tried to disturb her loneliness; she wished to be alone. She wished for nothing else in the world” (404, 405).

Scholarly interpretations of the nature of Rachel’s or Woolf’s voyage often inform how the death is read. DeSalvo reads Rachel’s voyage as Woolf’s questioning “whether or not it would ever be possible for a young English woman, traveling abroad, given the kind of education she had received, given the kind of attitudes that she had grown up with, to establish a view of her own” (“Introduction” xxxix). For DeSalvo, that answer is a resounding no. Molly Hite also reads Rachel’s death as “necessary. Rachel cannot become an adult and a wife without ceasing to be Rachel. Woolf’s first novel implies the unsettling conclusion that for a young woman a ‘real’ or ‘visionary’ mode of being cannot survive social incarnation” (“Public Woman” 541). DuPlessis reads the death as “the aggressive act of the author against the hegemonic power of those narrative conventions interrupting the plot ‘tyranny,’ that avalanche
of events moving to ‘satisfactory solutions’” (50). Friedman also reads Rachel’s failed Bildung as a successful one for its author, insofar as the later text “reveals the textual and political unconscious,” Rachel’s “terror of heterosexuality,” that the earlier text, Melymbrosia, represses (“Spatialization” 131).

Most critics, like DeSalvo, Hite, DuPlessis, and Friedman, interpret Rachel’s courtship as implicated in her death, citing the fact that many of the text’s allusions—“to 88 different historical figures and 40 figures from mythology and literature; the titles of 50 creative works; and 30 quotations from external works”—“link love and marriage with death and that Woolf reshapes allusions as she composes the text” (Davis-Clapper 225). Critics often read the novel as an anti-courtship one, and Mark Hussey reads Woolf’s first novel as an “answer” to Leonard Woolf’s 1913 The Village in the Jungle and 1914 The Wise Virgins, which “oppose an unembodied dreamworld against the embodied world of heterosexual relations” (133). In readings like this one, Rachel cannot tolerate the physicality of heterosexual relation and so vacates the traditional courtship plot by surrendering her life.

What these readings fail to account for is the shift from a Rachel in Melymbrosia who fights for her survival, figured as a fight to continue her social relations, to a Rachel in Voyage who has relinquished the desire to enter others’ minds. In Melymbrosia, “[s]hadows came round [Rachel]. Every now and then after seeing nothing but black a face would become perfectly distinct, and when this happened she was tormented by a desire to know all about that person, and for a time after she had seen each face she remembered that she ought to fight for something” (331, my emphasis). In Voyage, “the faces,—Helen’s face, the nurse’s, Terence’s, the doctor’s,—which occasionally forced themselves very close to her, were worrying because
they distracted her attention [from the hot, red, quick sights]”; “it troubled her when people tried to disturb her loneliness; she wished to be alone. She wished for nothing else in the world” (397, 405).

But Voyage does not close off the possibility that Rachel’s unformed restless desire to know others may have been gratified in future, for in Chapter XXIV, occurring just before Rachel’s death in Chapter XXV, Rachel proclaims that “she had been turning in a fog for a long time, and could now see exactly where she had turned” (366). This turn to “reach at last this calm, this quiet, this certainty,” which leads to her discovering a meaning in the lives of her aunts and the Dalloways and her father, is precipitated by the movement of people she doesn’t know down the hotel’s hallway while she observes (366). Her realization that “although the figures passing through the hall became vaguer and vaguer, she believed that they all knew exactly where they were going” is also directly tied to her speculations about her future with Hewet, living in the same house, catching trains together, and quarreling (367). Furthermore, this scene is not present in Melymbrosia, and the remainder of this chapter focuses on the advantages of Rachel and Hewet’s courtship over that of Mrs. Thornbury, who wasn’t even allowed to go on walks with her then-fiancé alone. The chapter closes as Rachel and Hewet walk back to the Ambroses’ villa, and the tone is one of promise just before the appearance of Rachel’s debilitating illness in Chapter XXV.

Rachel’s calm acceptance of the movements of all the unknown people, especially as contrasted to her rage at Mrs. Paley’s blocking the hotel hallway in Chapter XIX and of her future life just before her illness seems to belie the critical consensus that Rachel is either “a victim of her nineteenth-century socialization” or chooses to die as a “protest against marriage and sexuality” (DuPlessis 53, 52). In fact, if anything, Rachel has been waging a “great war”
against her miseducation and has achieved some measure of certainty just before her illness that other people, even those who are unknown to her, have “their reason[s] for following each other through the hall” (367). And Rachel’s forming has been made possible by what David Herman terms new “affordances,” or new possibilities for acting and interacting in a given physical and sociocultural environment, most notably by her exposure to new people to talk to and by her new ability to street- and hotel-walk (257). Yet Rachel has also become complacent in this certainty that other people have aims and know exactly where they are going; she has ceased to be affected by the movements of other people; she is detached and yet secure and this constitutes, for Woolf, both a deadly and deadening response to life, much like the nameless worshipper’s smug, satisfied expression that had so horrified Rachel during the earlier church service.

Indeed, Rachel’s certainty about the new hotel members’ movements seems to be due to her drawing circles around the different social formations she sees—“[s]ome were dressed in white flannels and were carrying racquets under their arms, some were short, some tall, some were only children, and some perhaps were servants, but they all had their standing, their reason for following each other through the hall, their money, their position, whatever it might be” (365). This process of “drawing circles” is first practiced by Hirst and denounced by Hewet and will be termed “character-mongering” in Jacob’s Room. Rachel, it seems, has finally come to understand the hotel community as a “knowable” one, in the terms of Raymond Williams’s The Country and the City (1973). The “knowable community” of the English hotel guests is a very precisely selected one that here functions for Rachel as definitive of her experiences in Santa Marina. That she accepts this highly selective community as definitive of human experience can only implicate Rachel in the British imperial machine and point up just how limited her voyage out to other minds has been.
Rachel’s refusal, in her illness, to continue to fight this war of being allowed access to and attributing causes to other minds is, then, not a refusal of heterosexual relations but one of any relations, and by refusing to act and interact with others, Rachel is refusing to live not just in the material world but in any world, for the human mind “emerges through humans’ dynamic interdependencies with the social and material environments they seek to navigate” (Herman 254). Rather than read Rachel’s illness as a positive means for her to achieve Hite’s “purely physical body” or Laurence’s “silences infused with new psychic life,” we must instead read Rachel’s expanding subjectivity just before her illness as marking a turning-point in Rachel’s “coming into being in fluctuating relation to a small group of affiliated yet singular others,” for Woolf “never advised withdrawal” (Hite, “Public Woman,” 542; Laurence 167; Berman 121; Heilbrun 179).

As Lorraine Sim argues, pain “destroys [Rachel’s] relations with others” (103). But pain also destroys Rachel’s ability to read. That the first symptoms of Rachel’s illness should coincide with Hewet’s reading of Comus has been much noted. Rachel’s crisis in relating to others, then, is mapped coterminously onto her crisis in reading: “Rachel’s refusal of literature anticipates the death that ends her education and foils the expectations traditionally associated with a Bildungsroman” (Wittman 163). I, too, read Rachel’s death as bound up with her failure to read or to develop into a resisting reader, and I would argue also that Voyage purposefully opens out spaces for theorizing about others’ motives as a result of texts that are read but that Rachel pointedly does not theorize about. In Chapter XXIII, St. John reads a letter from his mother informing him that a parlour-maid, Susan Jane, has killed herself by taking poison the same afternoon after handing over twenty pounds in gold to the cook for safe-keeping. A couple of
pages later, St. John and Helen discuss the fate of the hotel prostitute, Signora Lola Mendoza, who has been “hoofed out” by Mr. Thornbury (358).

Rachel is in the room and presumably overhears both St. John reading this letter aloud and St. John and Helen “reading” the incident of the prostitute, but she is probably not “reading” these stories for the motives of these women or wondering about their fates. She has, after all, just the chapter before, begrudgingly remembered her hours’ discomfort reading a novel that had made her think of “horrors,” such as the fate of women “who die with bugs crawling about their faces” (351). And these missed scenes of reading occur just before Rachel’s sense of certainty about others and their actions before she falls ill. What this suggests is that Rachel’s reading of others has only just begun from the starting-point of attributing causes to other minds and that all her “unread books indicate a larger unwillingness on her part to acknowledge her class position, the plotted character of her behavior, and the complexities of resistance and identification” (Wittman 164).

The Rachel we see at the end of the novel has become much more politically disengaged—and the Rachel of Voyage can never be said to have been very politically engaged—than the one who shared her private vision of the old widow in her room in, say, the suburbs of Leeds with Richard Dalloway. Rachel instructs Dalloway that “[i]n London you’re spending your life, talking, writing things, getting bills through, missing what seems natural. The result of it all is that [the widow] goes to her cupboard and finds a little more tea, a few lumps of sugar, or a little less tea and a newspaper. [. . . ] Still there’s the mind of the widow—the affections; those you leave untouched” (68). After he has laid out a vision of the state as a complicated machine in response, Rachel finds it “impossible to combine the image of a lean black widow, gazing out of her window, and longing for someone to talk to, with the image of a
vast machine, such as one sees at South Kensington, thumping, thumping, thumping” (69). The impossibility for Rachel of juxtaposing two images is also found in the deleted extended scene describing the unnamed novel referred to in Chapter XV, in which Rachel cannot “set one picture”—that of the bugs crawling across the face of a dying woman—“against another”—a typical luncheon with her aunt and uncle. Rachel’s initial promise as someone who might use theory of mind as a way to become more aware of and involved in sociopolitical issues—much like Helen, whom we first see as she sees herself pacing a circle all the days of her life around Piccadilly and later as she laments the treatment of the Santa Marina hotel prostitute—fades away, and so it is not only Rachel and her growing consciousness that we mourn but also the vision of that lean black widow, the unrecorded life that Rachel will not live to narrativize.

Rachel, then, has come a long way, but she has a long way yet to voyage out—and then she dies. She is not present at the very last scene at the hotel, when Miss Allan announces that it is “surely not natural to leave your wife because she happens to be in love with you,” an action taken by a character in the contemporary novel she is reading (432). This scene recalls a Rachel who might have theorized motives for the husband in Miss Allan’s novel and wondered about her imaginary uncle, one who might have continued her voyage out; instead, Rachel’s counterpart, St. John, as he mourns Rachel’s loss, is “content to sit silently watching the pattern build[d] itself up,” as she had done earlier (436). And the last things which we read about and St. John sees are a “procession of objects, black and indistinct”—a procession of shadows—“the figures of people picking up their books, their cards, their balls of wool, their work-baskets, and passing him one after another on their way to bed” as the novel ends (437).

In the final analysis, what readers most mourn the loss of on Rachel’s behalf is the return voyage to England and the opportunity she had so looked forward to of “seeing life,” of being in
the streets, of actively reading scenes in the railway. Rachel misses the opportunity, for instance, afforded the narrator of “An Unwritten Novel,” who occupies a carriage with six people, five of whom are “play[ing] the game”: the narrator reads *The Times*, “one smokes; another reads; a third checks entries in a pocket-book; a fourth stares at the map of the line framed opposite” (112). The fifth, however, refuses to play the game, and the narrator soon finds the “The Times was no protection against such sorrow as hers” (112). The narrator observes the woman twitch “as though the skin on her back were as a plucked fowl’s in a poulterer’s shop window,” twice shudder and twice, afterwards, “make the awkward angular movement” of “twitch[ing] her arm queerly to the middle of her back” as if “some spot between the shoulders burnt or itched” (113, 112). The woman proceeds to “take her glove and rub hard at a spot on the window-pane” (113). After observing this behavior, the narrator also attempts to rub out a speck on the glass, with no success, and then she too has a spasm go through her and reacts by “crook[ing] [her] arm and pluck[ing] at the middle of [her] back.” “[Her] skin, too, fe[els] like the damp chicken’s skin in the poulterer’s shop-window; one spot between the shoulders itche[s] and [is] irritated, fe[els] clammy, fe[els] raw” (114). The narrator’s affective response and the other woman’s “smile of infinite irony, infinite sorrow” in response to this mimicry lead the narrator to actively read the woman’s “message, decipher her secret” “beneath her gaze” (114).

And yet the narrator’s storying of the other woman is revealed as false when “Minnie” walks off with her son. The narrator’s response is at first one of despair; she wonders who she is and concludes that “[l]ife’s bare as bone,” paralleling Helen’s response “to the skeleton beneath” the city of London at the opening of *Voyage* when her mind was “like a wound exposed to dry in the air” (7). Yet the narrator’s last look at mother and son only provokes another affective response, this one even more powerful, as she is “flood[ed] anew” (121):
Mysterious figures! Mother and son. Who are you? Why do you walk down the street? Where tonight will you sleep, and then, tomorrow? Oh, how it whirls and surges—floats me afresh! I start after them. People drive this way and that. The white light sputters and pours. Plate-glass windows. Carnations; chrysanthemums. Ivy in dark gardens. Milk carts at the door. Wherever I go, mysterious figures, I see you, turning the corner, mothers and sons; you, you, you. I hasten, I follow. This, I fancy, must be the sea. Grey is the landscape; dim as ashes; the water murmurs and moves. If I fall on my knees, if I go through the ritual, the ancient antics, it’s you, unknown figures, you I adore; if I open my arms, it’s you I embrace, you I draw to me—adorable world! (111)

Rachel, however, will not pursue the shadow of other minds, will not be flooded anew, and that is the profoundest loss of Woolf’s first novel.
CHAPTER 3 NOTES

35. I will refer to the 1915 British edition—which represents Woolf’s final major revisions to the work probably begun as early as 1907 and definitely underway in 1908—and not the 1920 American edition—for which Woolf emended the text further by “cutting more than three thousand words, mainly from Chapter 16”—because for the 1929 Hogarth Press Uniform Edition, Woolf returned to the 1915 text (Briggs and McKenzie 155). This was Woolf’s final word on her novel, as demonstrated by Elizabeth Heine in the Hogarth Press’s Definitive Collected Edition of The Voyage Out (1990). We must keep in mind, however, as Julia Briggs and D.F. McKenzie point out in “Between the Texts: Virginia Woolf’s Acts of Revision,” that however we interpret Woolf’s decision for Hogarth Press to reissue The Voyage Out in the Uniform Edition, this time reprinting the original, uncut British edition of 1915, “the publication of the novel in two different versions within eight months of one another further compromises any notion of a ‘final intention’” (155). For much more detailed accounts of Woolf’s revisions, see DeSalvo, First Voyage, “A View of One’s Own,” “Recovery of the Text,” “Revisions for the 1920 American and English Editions,” “Sorting, Sequencing, and Dating,” “Wound”; Heine, “Earlier Voyage Out,” “Revisions”; Millers’ “Introduction”; and Schlack’s Continuing Presences, “Revisions of Literary Allusions.”

36. I will be using the term “affect” here and throughout to indicate “something relational and transformative,” as in when one is affected by other people or things (Flatley 12).

37. In Melymbrosia, there is a brief return to the cause of Helen’s pain in Chapter 25: “Helen had now had time to revise her opinion. She was not certain whether [Rachel and Hewet] were engaged or on the brink of it. But all kinds of sensations, partly physical, partly mental, assured her that something of great importance was in the air. When, driven from scrutiny of their faces she looked on shore, her old distrust returned. The beauty was as great as she had said, but mixed with something sultry and cruel. Oddly enough, the pain which she had felt as the Euphrosyne moved up the Thames returned; as the steamer slipt steadily down the water she felt as if her children were drawn from her” (297).

38. Herman, in his introduction to The Emergence of Mind (2010), argues contra what he terms the “Exceptionality thesis” of Dorrit Cohn and Käte Hamburger—“the claim that reader’s experiences of fictional minds are different in kind from their experiences of the minds they encounter outside the domain of narrative fiction”—that “[e]veryday minds are not transparent, but they are accessible” (8, 11).

39. Helen’s motherhood and her children are only briefly mentioned throughout Voyage—when Clarissa Dalloway first boards and suspects Helen to be a mother, the two bond over this; Helen receives word that her children are well just after the Euphrosyne has docked in South America; and Helen muses, at the opening of Chapter XVII, whether the letter from home she holds in her hand and contains good news, might not just as well have contained bad and remarks to Rachel
that she has no way of knowing if “at this very moment both her children were lying dead, crushed by motor omnibuses” (256).

40. It is interesting to note how Woolf upends the convention of Simmel’s urban personality shielding itself from the various shocks of modernity here, for in this urban scene there are onlookers who seek out a connection with one of the “sheer volume of human faces [they] see in a given day” in the London streets (Flatley 30).

41. Interestingly, the only scene she can produce as an exercise in reading is one, paradoxically, that Hewet has desired to have access to himself, for he tells Rachel, “I’ve often walked along the streets where people live all in a row, and one house is exactly like another house, and wondered what on earth the women were doing inside” (245).

42. The text in The Complete Shorter Fiction, 2nd ed., edited by Dick, is taken from an undated holograph. As Dick writes in the “Notes,” “[t]he story is written with the same sort of pen and ink and on the same type of paper as [Phyllis and Rosamond] and [The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn] and probably also dates from the summer of 1906” (295).

43. For a discussion of the illusory nature of the self in Woolf and how the self emerges via the act of attention, see Lehrer.

44. A long passage in which Rachel and Hewet talk, according to Heine “sounding very much more like Leonard and Virginia,” that was deleted from the later typescript of XXIV has Rachel exclaim “Heavens, Terence, the prostitute! We’ve forgotten [to make enquiries at the hotel about] the prostitute! (442, 444).

45. Interestingly, as Elizabeth Heine notes in her “Virginia Woolf’s Revisions of The Voyage Out” in the 1990 Hogarth Press Definitive Collected Edition, in Chapter 15 of the later typescript, the novel kept on Rachel’s table as if it were a memento mori is “described at length, on the surface as much for its social as its sexual impact. There is no holograph and all the typescript is later, overwritten, and edited here”:

Rachel began to read again. This time she took up a novel which she had half finished. It was a very clever novel, now nine or ten years old, which described the life of a girl who was a clerk in a great house of business. She was miserably underpaid, and one week when the landlord came for the rent, she could not pay him. After blustering and threatening he intimated that there was a certain way out of paying the rent if she chose to take it. For two weeks, for three weeks, for four weeks she managed to resist; on the fifth week she gave in and left him a ruined woman. By degrees she gave up her efforts to live honestly on eighteen shillings a week, and became the mistress first of her landlord, then of another man who kept her in a room with red plush furniture off the Tottenham Court Road. By him she had a child; fell ill and lost her looks, and dropped from one man to another.

It was a novel with a purpose and the descriptions first of life in the great house of business, next of the flat with the red plush furniture, and next of the rooms and inhabitants of rooms in a street off the Euston road were very full and realistic. The
woman herself was not especially well done, but the horror of her surroundings was such that it was easy to put one’s own body in her position. Rachel could not stop reading, although she could hardly read on. She implored the writer to stop saying these things, or to look at others. She kept saying to herself, as if she were telling him, “There’s Richmond Park. She could have taken a tram out there for threepence and been alone anyhow.” A page or two later the writer counted the money in the woman’s purse on a certain foggy Sunday in December. She had three coppers exactly. If she wanted to earn more—The way she earned it on Sunday night was described next.

“Anyhow she could have gone straight to Helen, anybody, rung the bell and told them.” This was met by a description of the girl’s experience when she told her story to the committee of a philanthropic society, composed mainly of women. They insulted her. No; there was no help for her anywhere. The author’s purpose demanded that the girl should end her days in a common lodging house somewhere in Whitechapel, the victim of disease and a kick in the ribs which brought her child into the world before its time. Even her death was prolonged so that she might suffer tortures in a backroom up three pair of stairs lying on a rug with the bugs crawling over her face. The last sentence of the book gave a report of the coroner’s inquest, in which the neighbours said that she was known as Slopers Sal, and the coroner remarked, “A loose woman I suppose,” and after a few contemptuous and indifferent words passed on wearily to the next.

After she had finished the book Rachel went downstairs to lunch. Everything was exactly the same as it had been for three months; but she sat noticing as if for the first time the size of the rooms, the cleanness of the china, the air blowing from window to window. As usual her uncle, who had been employed all the morning in repairing fragments of Greek poetry, exclaimed that the draught froze the marrow of his bones, and Helen who had been sewing at her tapestry as usual coaxed him into good humour while she pulled the flowers in the middle of the table out of their jar and rearranged them. She could not bear the way servants treat flowers. It might have been a scene introduced by the writer of the novel by way of contrast; he had introduced one or two such scenes savagely enough. But as she sat at the table and heard the knives clatter and saw their queer stern faces she could not set one picture against another, confidently, as the writer had done. He had left out something which she saw as shesat there. It must be possible to understand, to put it all together—but the strangeness—[Ll/7–11] (436–7, my emphasis)

I would add that the placement of Rachel in this scene of reading contrasts markedly with her placement in such scenes in the 1915 edition, for though she identifies with the heroines and acts out the parts of Ibsen’s plays and Meredith’s Diana of the Crossways (see Chapter X), no affective response and hence no discomfort, is suggested. Friedman also claims she is not the ideal Woolfian common reader because she overidentifies with the heroines and is not a “resilient, resisting, and dialogic reader” (116).

46. Heine notes “An idea of pattern recurs, usually in Rachel’s thoughts about religion or in Terence’s efforts to describe what he wants to do in his novels; St. John’s final observation of “pattern” at the hotel was a very late addition, part of a holograph revision in the final typescript (“Revisions” 433). C. Ruth Miller and Lawrence Miller also note in their introduction to the 1995 Shakespeare Head Press edition that “[l]ike The Voyage Out, The Years concludes (or
evades conclusion) by asserting the existence of other lives, other rooms, other worlds that persist outside the control of the principal characters or even the boundaries of the novel” (xvii).
CHAPTER 4

“FOR THERE SHE WAS”: THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE ORDINARY WOMAN IN MRS. DALLOWAY (1925) AND TO THE LIGHTHOUSE (1927)

Encountering Mrs. Dalloway

“Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself” (3). As famous as this opening line of Mrs. Dalloway is, much remains unexplained. Does Mrs. Dalloway speak these words, whether silently or aloud, to herself or to another present on the scene, most likely Lucy? Or is this instance of free indirect discourse an “unspeakable sentence,” one that does not imply that an original speaker uttered these words, whether silently or aloud (Banfield 108)? These questions also open up an ambiguity often foreclosed by the current critical consensus, which views Woolf as the most “inward” of all modern British writers and Mrs. Dalloway as a character whose “soul has gone underground” (Zwerdling 140): how “public” is Mrs. Dalloway’s inner life?

It would at first seem obvious that Mrs. Dalloway, as Alex Zwerdling puts it, “deliberately looks at its object from the inside” (120). After encountering the famous opening line, the implied reader is immediately plunged into the innermost recesses of Mrs. Dalloway’s mind—gaining access not only to what she is thinking and feeling on this June day in 1923 but also to what she thought and felt (or at least to how she now constructs what she thought and felt) thirty-three years earlier, as an eighteen-year-old standing at the open French windows at Bourton, her family’s country house. Only after this reverie does the narrative definitively place Mrs. Dalloway in a public space, waiting on the curb for Durtnell’s van to pass before she crosses the street. Suddenly, focalization shifts, and we view Clarissa from the perspective of her
neighbor, Scrope Purvis, who has lived next door to Clarissa in Westminster for over twenty years, views her as “perched” “very upright” (3). And before the narrative shifts again to her meditations—this time on why it is we love life and this moment of June—we learn that “one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes” (3–4, emphasis mine).

This description follows an assessment of Purvis’s. He thinks Mrs. Dalloway is a “charming woman,” “knowing her as one does know people who live next door to one in Westminster” (3). This could be interpreted as ironically undercutting his knowledge: how well does he know his neighbor, even after an acquaintance of all those years? Yet, later, in a moment of very private intensity, when Clarissa withdraws like a nun to an attic room after discovering that Millicent Bruton has neglected to invite her to a lunch party, we learn that she “felt often, as she stood hesitating one moment on the threshold of her drawing-room, an exquisite suspense” (26, emphasis mine). Purvis cannot fully account for why one feels, in encountering Clarissa, that she was an indescribable pause, a suspense, wondering if this might be due to a past illness. Yet he uses the same language to describe his affective response to her as she does to describe her own recurring feeling upon entering her drawing-room. This repetition again raises the question: is Mrs. Dalloway’s inner life “private”—only available to herself, an implied author, and an implied reader? If so, why is Mrs. Dalloway’s subjective response to seeing her sister killed by a falling tree—a major, traumatic event in her past—conspicuously absent from the text? If the “depths” Woolf seeks to illuminate through her self-described “tunnelling process” (D II: 272) are times past erupting into the present of a private consciousness, then why is this access point to Clarissa’s past narrativized by Peter Walsh and not by Clarissa herself?
Peter, as we will see, performs in this passage not the act of narration, the recounting of an event or a sequence of events, but the act of narrativization, the imposition of the form of a story onto a recounting of events. Peter does not simply narrate the events of Clarissa’s past but interprets many pieces of evidence, such as her favorite reading and a turn of phrase she often repeated (that her sister Sylvia was “the most gifted of them” [66]), in order to tunnel back into a highly interconnected if not shared past and create a theory about what she must have thought and felt upon witnessing her sister’s death and how that might account for her past and current beliefs and desires. Peter is here practicing “theory of mind”; he theorizes about Clarissa’s mental states based on evidence necessarily obtained from an external perspective, including what Clarissa says and does. Critics often distinguish Mrs. Dalloway’s “soliloquies in solitude” from the machinations of her “public self,” and as Alan Palmer points out, most narrative theorists have “tend[ed] to give the impression that characters’ minds really only consist of a private, passive flow of thought” (“Construction” 32). I want to question this sharp division between “public” and “private” selves and argue that Woolf’s text evinces a privileging of intersubjectivity—the consciousness of other consciousnesses—over subjectivity—an individual’s “private” world as defined apart from any other subjects.

Of course, critics have long recognized that Woolf’s narrative technique in Mrs. Dalloway—a “shifting,” “collective free-indirect discourse” (Goldman 54)—“emphasizes the connections” between separate consciousnesses (Marcus 2). Michael North reads these points of connection as emerging from “the coincidences of public life,” claiming that “these threads of commonalty are often made up out of public materials, even commercial ones, so that even the most blatant advertising scheme can provide the point of contact for disparate individuals” (84). What is missing from these accounts, however, is a discussion of how major characters in
Mrs. Dalloway, namely Clarissa and Peter Walsh, actually experience intersubjectivity. Though these characters are connected by “the coincidences of public life,” what marks them as so highly intersubjective are the ways in which their consciousnesses register the other consciousnesses they encounter in the metropolis.

In order to examine Mrs. Dalloway’s characters’ experiences of intersubjectivity, I will use a cognitive narratological framework, focusing more narrowly on the representation of consciousness, in order to illuminate “the central mystery of the novel, the occult sympathy of Smith and Dalloway” (North 84). Attending not only to how Woolf’s characters are narrativized, or to how their consciousnesses are represented in the novel, I will also analyze how these characters are represented representing other consciousnesses. My argument about what drives the narrative, Peter’s and the reader’s responses to Mrs. Dalloway, will also be informed by narrative theory as it intersects with affect studies. For it is often affective responses that motivate characters in Mrs. Dalloway to practice theory of mind in the first place.

In order to examine both how Woolf narrativizes intersubjectivities and how these intersubjectivities, in turn, narrativize other characters in the novel, I will first flesh out the passage I mentioned above as an instance of Woolf’s formal method—her “tunnelling process” (D II: 272)—and then trace how Woolf rewrites Mrs. Dalloway from short story to novel in order to foreground the highly intersubjective nature of her central character, creating other characters for whom she must account (Septimus Warren Smith) and who attempt to account for her (Peter). Then, I will analyze how Mrs. Dalloway narrativizes the other minds she encounters—in the context of London street-scenes filled with “social minds in action” (Palmer)—to illustrate how she is affectively provoked to create narratives and yet refuses to “say of anyone in the world now that they were this or were that” (7).
Before I turn to Peter’s narrativization of Clarissa’s response to her sister’s death in the following section, however, I want to first contextualize Woolf’s novelistic practices and make explicit how I see her method as a departure from that of most novelists. By deliberately “making strange” the implied reader’s expectation of direct access to a character’s thoughts and feelings from an internal perspective, Woolf’s text foregrounds the strangeness of literary minds, which are often “transparent” (Cohn). Woolf’s “resolve to represent the world from the point of view of incertitude” (DiBattista, Imagining, 84)—the point of view from which we necessarily read real minds as opposed to literary, transparent minds—represented what she believed was a necessary renegotiation of writer-character and writer-reader relations.

Woolf’s method was not only anomalous but also a radical challenge to the assumptions about typical narrative practice made by her contemporary E.M. Forster in Aspects of the Novel, which appeared in 1927, two years after Mrs. Dalloway. Forster sets up a contradistinction between the people we encounter during the course of our daily lives and the “people,” or characters, we encounter in fiction. In real life, Forster maintains, “we cannot understand each other” and “perfect knowledge is an illusion.” “But in the novel [readers] can know people perfectly” because the author “knows everything about [her characters]” and thus passes on this “illusion of perspicacity and power” (69). That Mrs. Dalloway’s implied reader only knows about a crucial aspect of Clarissa’s interiority (her response to her sister’s death) via the thoughts of another character who presumably does not “perfectly know” her raises a further question: does Woolf herself “perfectly know” Clarissa? If she does, why is she intentionally refusing the reader a complete inside view of Clarissa?

In his classic 1946 study Mimesis, Erich Auerbach asks himself these same questions—this time about Mrs. Ramsay’s interiority as portrayed in To the Lighthouse:
the author certainly does not speak like one who has a knowledge of his characters—in this case, of Mrs. Ramsay—and who, out of his knowledge, can describe their personality and momentary state of mind objectively and with certainty. Virginia Woolf wrote this paragraph. She did not identify it through grammatical and typographical devices as the speech or thought of a third person. One is obliged to assume that it contains direct statements of her own. But she does not seem to bear in mind that she is the author and hence ought to know how matters stand with her characters. (531, emphasis mine)

We can never know whether Woolf the novelist “perfectly knows” Clarissa, but we can determine that she refuses herself authority over her character and deliberately refuses the reader a complete knowledge of her character’s interiority because she is ultimately more interested in the question of how people attempt to account for other minds as they exist in reality—other minds which are not transparent—than in providing her reader with one individual’s fully realized interiority and the “illusion of perspicacity” (Forster 70). This formalist innovation on Woolf’s part, moreover, was an answer to the ethical dilemma she perceived as inherent in normative narrative procedures. To avoid establishing a hierarchy empowering writer over reader or writer or reader over character, Woolf’s narration instead privileges “those who possess the greatest degree of sympathy with the interior lives and thoughts of others, even when those lives are not easily accessible and are therefore sometimes incompletely understood,” namely, Mrs. Dalloway (Wilson 33). By thematizing her character’s “narrative empathy” in this way, Woolf provides her reader with a model for ethico-affective narrativization.
Woolf’s “tunneling process”; or, narrativizing Clarissa

Rather than read about the tragic incident of Sylvia’s death from an inside perspective, which might have led the implied reader to a complete knowledge of Clarissa’s inner life—how she became, for instance, “a thorough-going skeptic” (66)—we instead only read Mrs. Dalloway’s musings about what Peter calls her “atheist’s religion” and its relation to her sister’s sudden death as they are constructed by Peter. According to a “theory” Peter claims he “used to make up to account for her,”

   possibly [Clarissa] said to herself; As we are a doomed race, chained to a sinking ship, (her favourite reading as a girl was Huxley and Tyndall, and they were fond of these nautical metaphors), as the whole thing is a bad joke, let us, at any rate, do our part; mitigate the sufferings of our fellow-prisoners (Huxley again); decorate the dungeon with flowers and air-cushions; be as decent as we possibly can. (66, emphasis mine)

Intriguingly, not only does Peter here engage in what Woolf called “character-reading” (SE 39) and what cognitive theorists today would call theory of mind (“explain[ing] people’s behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires” [Zunshine 6]), but he also creates a version of Mrs. Dalloway’s mind in his own through the use of inflected third-person, past-tense narration—in other words, by imagining her inner life as if he were writing free indirect discourse.

Peter, of course, does not know what Mrs. Dalloway really does say to herself to affirm her “atheist’s religion of doing good for the sake of goodness,” or even if she herself would characterize her philosophy in this way (66). But he does know that she “always said” her sister Sylvia was “the most gifted of them,” that seeing your sister die because of a tree felled by your
father was “enough to turn one bitter,” and that “her favourite reading as a girl was Huxley and Tyndall” (66). Peter, then, takes what he does know and constructs a theory, even writes dialogue for Clarissa’s “soliloquies in solitude” by predicting that she might use “nautical metaphors” as a result of her reading.

Woolf deliberately disallows the reader a complete inside view of Mrs. Dalloway, as we have seen, because “everyday minds” are not transparent, though they are accessible.55 Moreover, Woolf creates her title character from both internal and external perspectives because she is more preoccupied with questions about what George Butte refers to as complex intersubjectivity56—how do networks of gesturing bodies and consciousnesses account for one another?—than she is with questions of subjectivity—who is the “real” Mrs. Dalloway, whose “soul” has, in Zwerdling’s words, “gone underground” (140)? “Clarissa,” at least in the world of the novel, exists as much in the minds of others, especially Peter’s, as she does in her own, “private” existence.

Woolf’s construction of complex intersubjectivities in Mrs. Dalloway is the result of a formal method she alighted upon after writing the short story “An Unwritten Novel,” as earlier discussed in chapter three. She later termed this formal method her “tunnelling process”: “I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment” (D II: 263, emphasis mine).

These caves must connect and must surface, then, because Woolf is fundamentally interested less in presenting us with “complete” internal views of Mrs. Dalloway’s and Septimus Warren Smith’s minds than in the process of how minds account for other minds based on external, behavioral evidence—based, that is, on what these other minds say and do. In fact,
when Woolf writes in her third notebook in the Berg collection “All inner feelings to be lit up. The two minds. Mrs. D. & Septimus” on 9 November 1922, this follows a 16 October 1922 entry that reads: “The Question is whether the inside of the mind i[n] both Mrs. D. & S.S. can be made luminous—that is to say the stuff of the book—lights on it coming from external sources” (414, 412, emphasis mine). Because the raison d’être of Woolf’s “tunnelling process” is to foreground the deeply intersubjective nature of her characters’ minds—the ways in which they are continually interpreting each others’ behaviors and causally attributing thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires to each other—both Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus must each be seen from the outside; “Peter provides that ‘tunnel’ to Clarissa, and the introduction of Lucretia as Septimus’s wife provides it for Septimus, as is evident in the British Museum notebooks” (Hoffmann, “From Short Story to Novel,” 175): “Septimus (?) must be seen by some one. His wife?”; “Mrs. D. must be seen by other people. As she sits in her drawing room” (“The Hours” 416, 420, emphasis mine). Indeed, in a key passage I will turn to later, Peter narrativizes Clarissa as she sits at her writing-table, and this scene functions as our only representation of her inner life at that crucial moment.

From “Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street” (1922) to Mrs. Dalloway (1925)

“Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street” (1922), like the later Mrs. Dalloway (1925), opens onto a street-scene, with the title character embarking on a shopping errand. As she makes her way across the “clogged” “river of Bond Street,” “the tears actually r[i]se to her eyes” at the sight of Lady Bexborough—a “raised, regal” figure being “borne past [in a carriage] like a queen at a tournament” (MDR 20). She regains her composure, however, as she enters a shop and speaks “with her exquisite friendliness” in a “charming voice” (20). In fact, any bystander on this scene
would see what Scrope Purvis sees on his way to his office—“[a] charming woman, posed, eager, strangely white-haired for her pink cheeks” (16).

Mrs. Dalloway’s affective response to Lady Bexborough riding past—who “ha[s] nothing to live for and [whose husband] is failing and [who] they say” “is sick of it all” (20)—is clearly one of admiration, an admiration not sanctioned by the satirical nature of the portrait. From the very start, we are given authorial cues that direct us to position ourselves as pedestrians alongside Mrs. Dalloway who are not so well heeled and probably not on “errands of happiness” as is she (15). Though Mrs. Dalloway considers her “unused hour” as Big Ben strikes as “fresh as if issued to children on a beach,” this response is starkly contrasted to “the deliberate swing of the repeated strokes; [the] something stirring in the murmur of wheels and the shuffle of footsteps” (15). This experienced contrast is our own, for “[n]o doubt [we are] not all bound on errands of happiness. There is much more to be said about us than that we walk the streets of Westminster” (15). This Mrs. Dalloway arrives on the London street-scene in order to buy gloves, not flowers, and for her, and “[o]nly for [her],” “the moment was complete; for Mrs. Dalloway June was fresh” (15).

In Mrs. Dalloway criticism, there is perhaps no greater point of contention than the question of how to read the scene in which Clarissa affectively responds to the news of Septimus Warren Smith’s suicide. Yet the question of how to read the Mrs. Dalloway of the short story’s affective responses—to Lady Bexborough, to Hugh and Milly Whitbread, to the shopwoman—is decidedly less problematic. Even as this Mrs. Dalloway contemplates the problem of suicide—why go on after the War?—she does so in such a complacent and condescending manner that our own affective response to her as implied readers is muted. “This kind of woman”—one who has a passion for white gloves and sincerely believes that the working classes will derive comfort
from her continued belief in God—and her motivations perhaps represent case studies in specified types from a bygone era but not studies of those whose actions and motivations, like the later Mrs. Dalloway’s, continue to elude us.

But if Mrs. Dalloway in her later incarnation is still “that sort of woman,” still “ha[s] a passion for gloves” (MD 9), why is it that she so fascinates both Peter, and by extension, the implied reader? The reader’s own affective response is largely the result of the differences between what affects Mrs. Dalloway in the novel and in the short story. In the shorter piece, Mrs. Dalloway is moved by Hugh Whitbread and his wife Milly, Lady Bexborough, and a shopwoman while in the novel, she is most emotionally connected to someone whom she does not even encounter and whose story parallels her own even though the connection between the main story lines is deferred. The implied reader’s interest is provoked because she continues to ask herself, how are these consciousnesses, Mrs. Dalloway’s and Septimus’s, interrelated? How will they account for each other when they are finally brought together? To create this network of complex intersubjectivities, Woolf creates both a character who deeply affects Clarissa (Septimus) and a framing character who is deeply affected by her (Peter).

If it is not so much Mrs. Dalloway as the ways in which she is related to others that shifts from Woolf’s completion of “Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street” (“[r]eferences to this story appear in VW’s letters and diary between 14 April and 28 August 1922” [Dick 302]; it is published in Dial in July 1923) on 4 October 1922 to her announcement on 14 October 1922 that “Mrs Dalloway has branched into a book” (D II: 207), what caused Woolf to decide on such a shift? Woolf’s own affective response to the death of the model for Mrs. Dalloway—Katherine Lushington Maxse, or Kitty Maxse—suggested to her how Mrs. Dalloway might be singularly affected by someone she never even encounters. Though Maxse, “[a]s Kitty Lushington, had
been a protégée of [Woolf’s] mother, an intimate of her half-sister Stella and, for a while, of [her sister] Vanessa” (Briggs 141). Woolf records in a 1922 diary entry: “I hadn’t seen her since, I guess, 1908—save at old Davies’ funeral, & then I cut her” (D II: 206). Even though she had not “kept up” with Maxse (D II: 206), Woolf always suspected that her death was a suicide—“an ambiguous kind of text, whose survivors are obliged to interpret its meaning”—was deeply affected by it, and wanted to know why it happened (Higonnet 230). Any suicide, however, “deeply resists our attempts at knowledge and explanation” (Higonnet 230), and Maxse’s was no exception.

Here, Woolf records in her diary her reactions to Maxse’s death:

Saturday 14 October

I was interrupted in this, & now Kitty is buried & mourned by half the grandees in London; & here I am thinking of my book. Kitty fell, very mysteriously, over some bannisters. Shall I ever walk again? she said to Leo. And to the Dr “I shall never forgive myself for my carelessness”. How did it happen? Some one presumably knows, & in time I shall hear. (D II: 207, emphasis mine)

The 8 October 1922 death, which Woolf suspected was a suicide, occurred just after Woolf’s completion of “Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street” on 4 October 1922.61 The compositional evidence,62 moreover, points to the creation of Septimus’s character after Maxse’s death. The evidence, then, suggests that Woolf decided to create a “double” for Clarissa, whose act of suicide, in place of her own,63 would deeply affect her and also provoke her affective narrativizations. Suicide raises questions—why did it happen? what does it mean?—that can only be answered when survivors attempt to account for another subject’s interiority.
If the shift in Mrs. Dalloway’s character from short story to novel is markedly different because she is now affected by someone who commits suicide, then her character is also different because Woolf creates a new character who frames her. Peter—a focalizer, in a sense, of the central focalizing consciousness, Mrs. Dalloway—was even read by at least two early critics as the work’s major protagonist. Richard Hughes claimed that Peter’s return is the “sole principle event” (159) of the novel and Gerald Bullett maintained that Woolf’s focus is on Peter, not Clarissa. Nathalia Wright corrected this view in her “A Study in Composition” (1944) by citing statistics: Clarissa appears on 153 of the book’s 293 pages, while Peter appears on 123; eleven of the seventeen hours of the day are devoted to Clarissa, while ten are devoted to Peter. Of course, as Wright also points out, Mrs. Dalloway appears at the beginning and end of the novel, whose title bears her name. Hughes’s and Bullett’s critical misreadings are, I would argue, ones that can be easily explained. We as readers are analyzing Peter mostly as his mind is trained on the thoughts and experiences of another mind: Mrs. Dalloway’s. As the central impasse of the novel, Clarissa continually provokes Peter to reinterpret her thoughts and feelings, and he does so by tunneling into their interconnected past and by attributing underlying states of mind to her actions. “He only felt [. . . ] unable to get away from the thought of her; she kept coming back and back like a sleeper jolting against him in a railway carriage; which was not being in love, of course; it was thinking of her, criticizing her, starting again, after thirty years, trying to explain her” (65).

Social minds in action in Mrs. Dalloway

When Woolf describes her experience of being “left alone together” with a “very clean, very small, rather queer” woman who “sat in [the] corner opposite” in her railway carriage in
“Character in Fiction” (1924), she posits that “[m]yriads of irrelevant and incongruous ideas crowd into one’s head on such occasions” (SE 41). What strikes me upon reading this account, however, is the way in which these innumerable ideas are set in motion by the “impression” of the “intensely” “suffering” woman, an “overwhelming” one that “c[omes] pouring out like a draught, like a smell of burning” (41). This physiological response provokes what Woolf variously calls “character-reading” (when referring to the everyday use of theory of mind) and the study of “character in itself” (when referring to the further step novelists take when they practice theory of mind outside the realm of practical necessity).

I would characterize Woolf’s process, however, as one of narrativization. One of Mrs. Brown’s utterances (“‘Can you tell me if an oak tree dies when the leaves have been eaten for two years in succession by caterpillars?’” [41]) implies the thought of Mrs. Brown “in a seaside house, among queer ornaments: sea-urchins, models of ships in glass cases”; “[s]he pop[s] in and out of the room, perching on the edges of chairs, picking meals out of saucers, indulging in long, silent stares” (41). Woolf, like Peter in the letter-writing passage to which I will turn later, sees Mrs. Brown “in the centre” of a “scene” she never actually witnesses; what has provoked her to this narrativization is Mrs. Brown’s impression, a physiological one akin to “a smell of burning” (41).

Woolf claims that her common reader has had “far stranger and more interesting experiences” than the narrator’s encounter with Mrs. Brown in the railway during the course of a single week; her reader has “overheard scraps of talk that filled [her] with amazement” and has “gone to bed at night bewildered by the complexity of [her] feelings” after the course of a day in which “thousands of ideas have coursed through [her] brain” and “thousands of emotions have met, collided, and disappeared in astonishing disorder” (53, emphasis mine). Mrs. Brown, that
“surprising apparition” (53), provokes narrative not because knowledge about her is necessary for Woolf’s practical purposes but because she has surprised, or moved, Woolf. In Woolf’s fiction, characters who practice theory of mind (or who create what Alan Palmer calls “double cognitive narratives”) are often first affected by an encounter with another.

Though Clarissa is only one of many minds engaged in the practice of theory of mind on the London streets through which she roams, she is a model of openness to the effects of others and, much like Woolf herself, she freely narrativizes other minds. As a model common reader of all the “thousands of emotions” and “thousands of ideas” that “meet, collide, and disappear” on a Wednesday morning in June, Mrs. Dalloway “would not say of anyone in the world now that they were this or were that” (7). And yet, her gift, she surmises, is “knowing people almost by instinct”; “[i]f you put her in a room with someone, up went her back like a cat’s; or she purred” (7). Though other minds encounter Septimus (Maisie Johnson) and even attempt to account for his strange behavior (Peter), it is Mrs. Dalloway whose affective response leads her to a remarkably accurate assessment of what Septimus must have thought and felt before he flung himself out the window onto Mrs. Filmer’s area railings.

Mrs. Dalloway’s insights are due to her method: she “slice[s] like a knife through everything; at the same time [she stands] outside, looking on” (7). She both desires to know others and creates inner lives by opening out narratives, yet also acknowledges that other minds are not perfectly knowable: to her, “this, here, now, in front of her; the fat lady in the cab” is “absolutely absorbing,” and yet “she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that” (8, 7). This gift for mind- or character-reading is highly attuned; she cuts to the core and yet stands outside, looking on. She seems, in short, to embody the formal properties of free indirect discourse. Indeed, I would argue, the desire to know the other and the limits
intrinsic to an external other’s knowability are precariously held within the tensions of the formal properties of free indirect discourse itself.

Everyday minds, as they are portrayed in *Mrs. Dalloway*, are not transparent, but neither are they inaccessible to the minds of other characters who are, say, out for a walk in Regent’s Park. Many of the minor characters in the opening scenes of the novel speculate about who must have been in the motor-car, which letters emanate from the sky-writing aeroplane, and what the odd couple Septimus and Rezia Warren Smith are up to. They function as focalizers, attempting to interpret events and others’ behaviors. The degree to which these interpretations are inflected by the focalizing consciousness’s own particular experiences is often striking—especially in the case of Septimus—but we are nevertheless instructed as readers of this narrative that other minds *are* accessible. As Richard Dalloway makes his way from Conduit Street to Clarissa in Westminster, we are made aware of what thoughts traverse Richard’s mind and shown that the presence of these thoughts (if not their content) is somehow observable even from the external perspective of another pedestrian on the scene:

But it did make his blood boil to see little creatures of five or six crossing Piccadilly alone. The police ought to have stopped the traffic at once. He had no illusions about the London police. Indeed, he was collecting evidence of their malpractices; and those costermongers, not allowed to stand their barrows in the streets; and prostitutes, good Lord, the fault wasn’t in them, nor in young men either, but in our detestable social system and so forth; all of which he considered, *could be seen considering*, grey, dogged, dapper, clean, as he walked across the Park to tell his wife that he loved her. (98, emphasis mine)
By juxtaposing Richard’s inner stream of thoughts against his environment and, most importantly, by emphasizing that his thought processes—or at the very least the fact that he is thinking—are visible, Woolf depicts a “social mind in action.” Alan Palmer defines “social minds in action” as those that are “public, embodied, and so available to each other without the need for speech” (Social Minds 2). Woolf frames her narrative, moreover, by employing “double cognitive narratives”—the term Palmer uses “to refer to the versions of characters’ minds that exist in the minds of other characters” (12). The first double cognitive narrative is, of course, Clarissa’s working draft of a version of Peter’s mind called up to her by her parallel states of mind this Wednesday morning in June 1923 and a morning at Bourton thirty-three years ago. Later, Maisie Johnson will be deeply affected by her encounter with Septimus, though she does not theorize about his interiority, as will Mrs. Dalloway: “[she] positively felt she must cry Oh! (for that young man on the seat had given her quite a turn. Something was up, she knew). Horror! horror! she wanted to cry. (She had left her people; they had warned her what would happen.) Why hadn’t she stayed at home? she cried, twisting the knob of the iron railing” (23). Maisie will remember this scene and her subsumed cry of “Horror! horror!” fifty years hence. Presumably, she will continue to be haunted by Septimus just as Conrad’s Marlow continues to be haunted by Kurtz, Jim, and to some degree Flora—at a great remove of time and distance.

To contrast Maisie’s affective response to the couple with other (perhaps more typical) external views, the narrator, many pages later, seems to affirm that there is nothing, after all, to draw attention to Septimus and Rezia Warren Smith as they make their way to the offices of Sir William Bradshaw:

Perhaps they walked more slowly than other people, and there was something hesitating, trailing, in the man’s walk, but what more natural for a clerk, who has
not been in the West End on a weekday at this hour for years, than to keep looking at the sky, looking at this, that and the other, as if Portland Place were a room he had come into when the family are away, the chandeliers being hung in holland bags, and the caretaker, as she lets in long shafts of dusty light upon deserted, queer-looking armchairs, lifting one corner of the long blinds, explains to the visitors what a wonderful place it is; how wonderful, but at the same time, he thinks, how strange. (71)

Of course, this pronouncement—that others would not be affected by the couple’s behavior—is called into question, as Molly Hite points out, by this singularly strange and defamiliarizing passage. Mrs. Dalloway, had she been on the scene, would almost surely have known, as does Maisie Johnson, that something is up. That Septimus and Mrs. Dalloway do not meet on the London streets is unexpected, even unprecedented in the long history of the double plot novel. How can Mrs. Dalloway be singularly affected by someone she doesn’t even encounter?

To these accessible minds in the opening episodes of Mrs. Dalloway can be added all those social minds who, by contemplating a question of collective interest—who was in the motorcar? what is being written in the sky?—can be said to be engaged in interpreting events, if not encounters with others. But why open a novel about a central consciousness that is presumably to be studied from what Palmer terms the internalist perspective—one that “stresses those aspects [of the mind] that are inner, introspective, private, solitary, individual, psychological, mysterious, and detached”—by framing such a mind in the London streets among other minds who are viewed both from internalist and externalist perspectives, which “stress those aspects that are outer, active, public, social, behavioral, evident, embodied, and engaged” (Social Minds 39)?
Woolf, by privileging a consciousness like Clarissa’s, which has “[o]dd affinities with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter,” is presenting us with a model for ethico-affective response whom we as readers must in turn create, from the inside and the outside (129). We must both slice like a knife through her and at the same time stand outside, looking on. Peter, the stand-in for the reader here, disagrees with Sally Seton (who thinks we cannot know even the people we live with every day) and instead believes that he at least knows everything. He effectively narrates the scene in which Clarissa sits down to write him a quick note (an event that must have occurred), *a scene which is never given save as it here plays out in Peter’s mind*. This, then, is the way we are to narrativize Mrs. Dalloway, the same way she narrativizes Septimus meeting his doctors—by guessing what she might think and feel, even by imagining what she might have said. Here Peter narrativizes Mrs. Dalloway writing the letter:

To get that letter to him by six o’clock she must have sat down and written it directly he left her; stamped it; sent somebody to the post. It was, as people say, very like her. She was upset by his visit. She had felt a great deal; had for a moment, when she kissed his hand, regretted, envied him even, remembered possibly (for he saw her look it) something he had said—how they would change the world if she married him perhaps; whereas, it was this; it was middle age; it was mediocrity; then forced herself with her indomitable vitality to put all that aside, there being in her a thread of life which for toughness, endurance, power to overcome obstacles and carry her triumphantly through he had never known the like of. Yes; but there would come a reaction directly he left the room. She would be frightfully sorry for him; she would think what in the world she could do to
give him pleasure (short always of the one thing), and he could see her with the
tears running down her cheeks going to her writing-table and dashing off that one
line which he was to find greeting him . . . ‘Heavenly to see you!’ And she meant
it. (132)

Peter narrativizes the scene of Clarissa writing and sending off a letter just after he has left; in
this narrativization he both describes actions, such as her sitting down, her stamping of the letter,
her kissing his hand, her crying, her dashing off the line and interior states which drive those
actions, her being upset, her regret, her envy, her remembering something he has said, her pity.
Of course, we do not know that Clarissa has thought or done everything Peter outlines above but,
like him, we can attribute mental causes (her feelings for Peter) to her actions, writing and
sending off the letter right away. It seems to me that by presenting us with Peter’s extended
narrativization of Clarissa above—as well as with scenes such as the one in which Clarissa
attributes the woman across the way’s actions to the bells striking—without also presenting us
with an original scene that would probably include the narrator’s sanction of what the other mind
is thinking or feeling, Woolf is presenting us with scenes of how minds actually work when they
narrativize other minds and all the attendant risks and ambiguities of such narrativizations.
Woolf tells the story of a self not from the outside in (as in a conventional novel) or from the
inside out (as in stream-of-consciousness) but instead from the vantage of a highly motivated self
who both slices through and stands outside, in other words, from the perspective of an everyday
mind.

“[T]he history of the novel,” Michael Holquist and Walter Reed maintain, “is the story of
a series of narratives which subtend the catalogue of narrative restrictions that successive
cultures have imposed on the way a self might be told” (423). Throughout Mrs. Dalloway, we see
Woolf deliberately reworking narrative restrictions, deliberately re-forming the way a self can be told through the use of a free indirect discourse operating largely apart from recognizable authorial sanctions of what a character is actually thinking or feeling. Since this is the way in which we account for others in everyday life, why not narrativize the self in this new way, as it affects and is affected by other minds, as it is in fact created by other minds? After all, another mind only exists for us insofar as it exists as a version of that mind in our own. Therefore, the climactic scene of the novel, Mrs. Dalloway’s retreat to an empty room after she hears the news of Septimus’s death, is so fraught with meaning because we have come to recognize one mind narrativizing another as what happens in the novel and because we know the act of suicide demands causal attribution. How, we wonder, will Septimus’s interiority be reconstructed by Clarissa, and how will she relate this interiority to her own, in the midst of her party?

**Mrs. Dalloway’s affective narrativizations**

If the text-world of *Mrs. Dalloway* prominently features many social minds in action, as we have seen, it is Clarissa, as Peter affirms, who is exemplary in this regard. She is unusually open to being affected and this provokes her to take action: “She enjoyed practically everything. If you walked with her in Hyde Park, now it was a bed of tulips, now a child in a perambulator, now some absurd little drama she made up on the spur of the moment. (Very likely she would have talked to those lovers, if she had thought them unhappy)” (66–7). In the climactic scene in which death arrives at Clarissa’s party via the news of Septimus’s suicide, she reacts in this way:

[a]lways her body went through it, when she was told, first, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising,
went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and
then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it. But why had he done it?

(156)

First, she is physically affected. Then she theorizes about what Septimus might have thought (Sir
William Bradshaw was “capable of some indescribable outrage—forcing your soul, that was it”
[157]) and might have said (“Life is made intolerable” by “men like that” [157]) before he killed
himself by jumping from a window.

Though Sally remarks ironically that we cannot know other people and for emphasis asks
of the Bradshaws, “what could one know about people like that?” (164), Mrs. Dalloway, as a
result of her typical affective responsiveness, has uncannily approximated both what Septimus
said and thought at least partly because she is able to imagine what feelings might have
motivated his thoughts and statements. And because—unlike the passages discussed earlier in
which the reader cannot compare, for instance, Peter’s version of the letter-writing scene with
what Mrs. Dalloway actually thought and felt when she composed the letter—this scene can be
directly compared to the scene of Septimus’s suicide, what Mrs. Dalloway has intuited merely
from the sight of Sir William Bradshaw (the “obscurely evil” doctor causes her to “curl up” [157,
155]) and from her own prior experience with him is indeed remarkable. Holmes and Bradshaw,
in Septimus’s inflected thought, “were on him! The brute with the red nostrils was snuffling into
every secret place!” (125). Bradshaw, as Clarissa intuits, is capable of forcing someone’s soul, of
committing an indescribable outrage against him. Sally Seton and Peter, however, never come
close to this interpretation: Sally asks of Bradshaw, a “distinguished-looking man,” and his wife,
“what could one know about people like that?” and Peter answers “‘That they’re damnable
humbugs’” (164).
As our model of ethico-affective response throughout the novel, however, Clarissa is fascinated by even those actions that, unlike suicide, do not demand causal attribution. Even the actions of the woman across the way as she goes to bed and turns out the light fascinate Clarissa. That other mind affects her—causes “thousands of emotions [in her to] meet, collide, and disappear in astonishing disorder” (SE 53). Clarissa, when young, had “gone on top of an omnibus with [Peter] somewhere,” had been “all aquiver” “spotting queer little scenes, names, people” (129); now, near the end of her party, too, she

part[s] the curtains; she look[s]. Oh, but how surprising!—in the room opposite the old lady stared straight at her! She was going to bed. And the sky. It will be a solemn sky, she had thought, it will be a dusky sky, turning away its cheek in beauty. But there it was—ashen pale, raced over quickly by tapering vast clouds. It was new to her. The wind must have risen. She was going to bed, in the room opposite. It was fascinating to watch her, moving about, that old lady, crossing the room, coming to the window. Could she see her? It was fascinating, with people still laughing and shouting in the drawing-room, to watch that old woman, quite quietly, going to bed alone. She pulled the blind now. The clock began striking. [ . . . ] There! the old lady had put out her light! the whole house was dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them. But what an extraordinary night! (157–8, emphasis mine)

Woolf sets out to destabilize her audience by endowing Mrs. Dalloway, an “ordinary” woman—not an intellectual or an artist—with these highly prized character-reading qualities and in this way privileges her as a model narrativizer. This flouts readerly expectations because Mrs.
Dalloway is condemned to what Simone de Beauvoir called the immanent sphere, one defined by repetitive acts which created nothing new and led to stagnation. De Beauvoir directly contrasts this sphere to the transcendent one of men, in which man “produce[s], fight[s], create[s], progress[es], go[es] beyond himself toward the totality of the universe and the infinity of the future” (468). In the next section, I will flesh out the implications of Mrs. Dalloway’s and other women characters’ status as both immanent and transcendent in de Beauvoir’s terms.

But Woolf stages an even greater coup by setting up Mrs. Dalloway’s mind as the central dilemma of the novel. In the end, we cannot say of her that she is this or she is that but only that she is and that we continue to desire to know her, as Peter continues to be psychologically and physiologically affected by her very presence. “However conflicted and confabulated she is shown to be, that Mrs. Dalloway exists and is in fact a figure worthy of our interest is the unquestionable premise that propels the novel” (Newman 44). As Woolf wrote in her notebook, “[e]very scene should build up the idea of C’s character. That will give unity, as well as add to the final effect” (“The Hours” 422).

This final impression of Clarissa’s character as being one that fascinates others can also be seen in Vanessa Bell’s picture, “Mrs. Dalloway’s Party.” In her analysis of this portrait, Diane Gillespie writes: “Although Vanessa has blurred facial features in the background and suggested potential movement among her temporarily frozen party-goers by arranging them so they are partly obscured by each other or edges of the canvas, she has orchestrated shoulders and gestures to draw our eyes back to the woman dominating the center” (129–30). Another woman who is seated looks up at the woman dominating the center. It is mostly this gaze—what is the seated woman looking at which so fascinates her?—that continually draws the viewer’s eyes back to the face of the central, standing figure. In the same way, Peter repeats throughout the narrative that it
is Clarissa “one remember[s],” even though she is not “striking; not beautiful at all; there was nothing picturesque about her; she never said anything specially clever; there she was, however; there she was” (65). Peter describes her dominating any scene like Bell’s portrait’s central figure dominates her own: “[Clarissa] came into a room; she stood, as he had often seen her, in a doorway with lots of people round her” (64).

In an echo of Woolf’s fellow passenger Mrs. Brown in “Character in Fiction,” Peter metaphorizes his own inability to stop thinking about Clarissa, who “keep[s] coming back and back” to his mind, as like someone’s inability to disregard “a sleeper jolting against him in a railway carriage” (65). He finds himself, still, after thirty years, “trying to explain her” (65). Peter, after all this time, can only make a “mere sketch” of Clarissa because try as he might to “account” for her, though she is “so transparent in some ways, [she remains] so inscrutable in others” (66). There is “something very profound in her, which [Peter] had felt again this morning talking to her; an impenetrability” (52). “In between the ‘Mrs. Dalloway’ of the first line of Woolf’s novel, and the ‘Clarissa’ of the concluding lines of its last page, the reader is led to an awareness of the enormous complexity of the character in question” (Hawthorn 9). “Throughout the day, she comes in and out of focus (for herself as well as the reader), dissolves and materializes, lapses into dull conventionality and bursts into exquisite originality” (Kiely 142). In the final analysis, Clarissa’s interiority has not been completely revealed to us; on the contrary, she continues to elude us, even as her very presence provokes our affective narrativizations.

“It is Clarissa,” [we read].

“For there she was.” (165)
Encountering the ordinary women artists of *Mrs. Dalloway*

If Woolf, in her own life, had committed the grave error of disallowing Kitty Maxse full interiority, she now atones for that error by creating an immanent woman who is both the focus of the narrative’s epistemological desire and its most privileged narrativizer. In framing her narrative in this way, Woolf anticipates and actively fights against the case Simone de Beauvoir will mount in *The Second Sex* (*Le Deuxième Sexe*, 1950) that women necessarily fall back from transcendence to immanence when they are required to perform “feminine” tasks such as sewing or readying for a party and that such activities disallow them full interiority. For Woolf, finding transcendence in the immanent lives of her women characters is a necessary feminist project for a feminist novelist; *because the immanent sphere is where most women live, they must find transcendence there*. Disallowing any woman who is a housewife, a mother, a menial worker, a daughter access to the transcendent sphere because she is not economically and socially independent is an extremely dangerous proposition for Woolf. Woolf set out to chronicle the life of Mrs. Dalloway, a wife and mother, and Rezia Smith, a displaced Italian hat-maker whose husband is suffering from psychotic episodes following his service in World War I, *precisely because* these are women “doomed” to the immanent sphere. She could have chosen to write about women like herself and de Beauvoir, intellectuals, writers, or like her sister Vanessa and de Beauvoir’s sister, painters. Yet she chooses another way—the portrayal of women “artists” making transcendent art out of the materials of the immanent sphere.

I’ll now turn to a close reading of Mrs. Dalloway’s deep subjectivity and point out the ways in which Woolf achieves her intention of creating immanent women characters who achieve transcendence. After the novel’s opening, in which Clarissa goes into town to buy the flowers for her party that night, she takes down her green dress, which has been torn, for
mending, as her maids are occupied with preparations and she has decided to wear the dress to
the party. And so she “take[s] her silks, her scissors, her—what was it?—her thimble, of course,
down into the drawing-room, for she must also write, and see that things generally were more or
less in order” (38). This dress is a favorite of Clarissa’s, one of the last made by Sally Parker
before she retired from dressmaking; Clarissa considers her “a real artist.” And as Clarissa
begins to sew, she reaches a moment of transcendence before she is interrupted; not only does
Clarissa transcend the present moment and the present menial labor of sewing, but she also
becomes, through a thought experiment, pure externality. Thus, she exists in the tension, the
ambiguity de Beauvoir maintains is the tragedy of the human condition; she both “escap[es] from
the sensible world” and is “engulfed in it,” she both “yield[s] to eternity” and “enclos[es]
[her]self in the pure moment” (*Ethics* 8):

> Quiet descended on her, calm, content, as her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to
> its gentle pause, collected the green folds together and attached them, very lightly,
to the belt. So on a summer’s day waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and
fall; and the whole world seems to be saying “that is all” more and more
ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach
says too, That is all. Fear no more, says the heart. Fear no more, says the heart,
committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and
renews, begins, collects, lets fall. *And the body alone* listens to the passing bee;
the wave breaking; the dog barking, far away barking and barking. (39–40, my
emphasis)

As Bernard—Woolf’s supreme figure of the artist—muses in *The Waves* (1931) about his
own “being” in his famous final soliloquy, Clarissa becomes a heart in a body, *a body without a*
self. In this depiction of death, the “letting fall” into a scene where the body alone, separated from the heart, remains, the bee passing, the waves breaking, and the dogs barking are still heard by the body. How are we to account for this description of a world that still exists and is still being perceived by the body? It is not “the world without a self” (Naremore), as Ann Banfield correctly argues, but the world as seen without a self, for in this passage, the world is still being heard but by a body emptied of an individual consciousness. Banfield terms Bernard’s question at the end of The Waves, “[h]ow describe the world seen without a self?” “the project of a language of sensibilia” (287, 297). As she avers, “[t]he past participle ‘seen’ calls for commentary. Omitted in the title of [James] Naremore’s The World Without a Self, it has generally gone unnoticed. Glossed by Russell’s theory of knowledge, it receives its meaning, for ‘seen’ places unobserved sensibilia at the center of Woolf’s aesthetic as well as vision” (297).

Bertrand Russell, whom Banfield “take[s] finally as the synthesizer of Cambridge-Bloomsbury philosophical thought” (47), was to call the sounds of the bee passing, the waves breaking, and the dogs barking “sensibilia.” As Banfield points out, “[s]ensibile-ia, the OED (second edition, 1989) states, was a ‘term popularised by Bertrand Russell’” (40). Sensibilia, the “unsensed sensations” which “the body which lies in the sun on the beach” after the loss of the heart hears, are crucial to Russell’s own project of establishing the “logical possibility of the detachment of sense-data from sensation, and, a fortiori, from the subject of sensation” (69). Sense-data, on the other hand, are “the things that are immediately known in sensation: such things as colours, sounds, smells, hardnesses, roughnesses, and so on” (Russell 12). The distinction between sense-data and sensibilia is what will distinguish Woolf’s characterization of life and death in the novel. Sensibilia, “the sense appearances ‘not data to anyone’” (71) become sense-data when they are perceived by a subject.
Clarissa achieves this position of becoming a body without a self while she is engaged in one of the activities of the immanent sphere: sewing. This case study, then, belies de Beauvoir’s insistence that “the married woman” “insists on doing things herself [!]]” in order to “realize herself as an activity” but engages in these household duties to no avail: “[housekeeping] is an activity that brings [the married woman] no escape from her immanence and allows her no individual affirmation of herself” (472). Clarissa, I think, to the contrary, is afforded the ultimate escape from immanence; she transcends the mind/body split altogether: she becomes a body perceiving the world without a self.

So, too, does Lucrezia Warren Smith, a young Italian woman Septimus Smith meets in Italy during his service in the Great War, achieve transcendence through immanent menial labor—in this case, through hat-making. Rezia sits, with other Italian girls, making hats, “rubbing wires among coloured beads in saucers; turning buckram shapes this way and that; the table was all strewn with feathers, spangles, silks, ribbons; scissors were rapping on the table” (87). Rezia is not a mere hat-maker for Woolf, however, for she is an artist, and she achieves the creation of art through her profession: Rezia has little artist’s fingers that she would hold up and say ‘It is all in them.’ Silk, feathers, what not were alive to them. ‘It is the hat that matters most,’” she would say, when [she and her Septimus] walked out together. Every hat that passed she would examine; and the cloak and the dress and the way the woman held herself. Ill-dressing, over-dressing she stigmatized, not savagely, rather with impatient movements of the hands, like those of a painter who puts from him some obvious well-meant glaring imposture; and then, generously, but always critically, she would welcome a shopgirl who had turned her little bit of stuff gallantly, or
praise, wholly, with enthusiastic and professional understanding, a French lady
descending from her carriage, in chinchilla, robes, pearls. (87)

In her diary entry for Friday 18 June 1925, Woolf wrote: Lytton Strachey “thinks
[Clarissa Dalloway] is disagreeable & limited, but that I alternately laugh at her, & cover her,
very remarkably, with myself” (D III: 32). It is indeed remarkable that Woolf should “cover” an
immanent woman with her own self-portrait, that she should endow her creations Clarissa and
Rezia with immanent transcendence, living, as she did, the life of a Bloomsbury intellectual. Yet
Woolf set out to show how ordinary, nonintellectual, uneducated women could achieve
transcendence by elevating immanent tasks into forms of art and in Mrs. Dalloway, she succeeds.
The novel pushes back against de Beauvoir’s later dogged assumption that no immanent woman
can achieve transcendence and in so doing provides a way for women to achieve the status of
creators in the places where they actually live.

Megan M. McCue, in “Confronting Modernity: Virginia Woolf and Walter Benjamin,”
situates Mrs. Dalloway at the intersection of “the old world of tradition and human relationships”
and the new, modern world of Simmelian metropolitan relations—this new world of consumer
culture “contains only commodified interactions” between people (311). McCue maintains that
Mrs. Dalloway’s characters “connect only superficially as they meet in the streets of London and
interact throughout the novel” and that this loss of connection is “replaced by new relations to
objects”; the modern world, according to McCue, is now “one mediated by objects rather than
one connected by people” (310, 311).

Modernity—sky-writing aeroplanes, commerce—in Mrs. Dalloway, contra McCue,
affords new and highly significant opportunities for human connection. For a hat, the product of
an immanent-transcendent woman artist, affords Septimus and Rezia Warren Smith a singular
connection. Rezia’s hat is what allows real communication between herself and her mad husband. That art is contained within the noumenal realm—or that realm relating to the Kantian thing-in-itself—means that it “offer[s] disinterested aesthetic pleasure—free from personal interest, use, or purpose; relatively free, too, of particular local, national, and cultural contexts—art indirectly mediates the sociability that Kant considers humanity’s ‘highest end,’ in line with the Enlightenment sociopolitical ideal, the ‘right to go visiting’” (Froula 13). As Christine Froula states, Woolf, “[t]hrough Leslie Stephen and Bloomsbury[,] inherited the Kantian idea of Enlightenment as unending struggle for human rights, self-governance, and peace in the name of a ‘sociability’ conceived as humanity’s highest end” and “Kant’s influence on Fry, Woolf, and Bloomsbury aesthetics can hardly be overestimated” (2, 14). S.P. Rosenbaum has observed that Bloomsbury’s “aesthetic attitudes descend mainly from Kant,” and Froula states that this points to, more specifically, Kant’s Third Critique, the Critique of Judgment (qtd. in Froula 12).

In this critique, Kant maintains that a work of art is beautiful if it “manifests ‘purposiveness without purpose’ in its form” (13). And when the artwork is freed “from the everyday life of purpose and gain,” one may escape one’s own personality: “[t]o exercise reflective judgment in making or contemplating art is to try to see ‘things in themselves,’ beyond one’s thick little ego (that is, apart from interest, possession, utilitarian purpose); to posit ‘subjective universal validity’ for one’s judgments; to think as oneself in the place of the other” (13). Rezia’s hats, then, and especially the hat that she and Septimus create together, can be seen as actualizing a freedom that the realm of things-in-themselves possess for communication, for the hat allows an indirect mediation of sociability between the married couple. This gives the lie to de Beauvoir’s insistence that social life, such as party-giving or, it can be presumed, the hat-making that partly makes possible women’s social visits “does not create between [a woman]
and others real communication. It does not wrest her from her solitude” (584). The hat the Warren Smiths create will always serve as a representation of the married couple’s “real communication”; “Yes, it would always make her happy to see that hat. He had become himself then, he had laughed then. They had been alone together. Always she would like that hat” (144, my emphasis). This moment occurs just before Septimus commits suicide by throwing himself out the window; Mrs. Filmer, an onlooker, comments: “Oh no, oh no! They were carrying [Septimus’s dead body] away now. Ought [Rezia] not to be told? Married people ought to be together, Mrs. Filmer thought” (151, my emphasis).

**To the Lighthouse; or, tunneling to Mrs. Ramsay**

In her 1939–40 “Sketch of the Past,” never intended for publication, Virginia Woolf writes of her first memory: as she lies on her mother Julia Stephen’s lap while traveling either by train or by omnibus, she sees “red and purple flowers on a black ground—[her] mother’s dress” (MB 64). Because Woolf is on her mother’s lap, she “s[ees] the flowers she was wearing very close; and can still see purple and red and blue, [she] think[s], against the black” (64). This memory is such a crucial one to keep in mind when reading To the Lighthouse (1927)—the book that finally laid to rest the ghosts of Leslie and Julia Stephen for Woolf—because it represents “those instincts, affections, passions, attachments—there is no single word for them, for they changed month by month—which bound [Woolf], [she] suppose[s], from the first moment of consciousness to other people” (80, emphasis mine). Analyzing why Julia Stephen seemed so singularly to affect others, Woolf surmises that it was her “complexity,” the marriage of “simplicity and directness” with “a skeptical, serious spirit” in her personality “that accounted for the great impression she created on people; the positive impression” (90). This complexity,
containing both a “practical” component and a “depth”—Woolf cites Elizabeth Robins (a friend of Julia’s, feminist, activist, intellectual, and writer) as saying “She was a mixture of the Madonna and a woman of the world” (90)—also accounts, I would argue, for what Woolf herself called her obsession with her mother.

Woolf, then, from a very young age, was both powerfully emotionally bound to her mother, and more importantly for a study of Lighthouse, compelled to “tunnel” into the mind of her mother as a function of what Woolf deemed Julia Stephen’s complexity. What is most interesting in the juxtaposition of Woolf’s early memories of Stephen and the function of the character of Mrs. Ramsay in Lighthouse, is that Woolf in “Sketch” twice mentions how she “opened out” a scene with her mother during her childhood as the result of her attention to her mother’s gaze. Woolf later employed this method, whereby one character “opens out” another’s inner life as a result of attending to the other’s gaze, in her fictional works, most notably in “An Unwritten Novel,” as discussed earlier.

In the first instance, young Virginia is playing and stops to speak to her mother, when she “half turn[s] from [the children], and lower[s] her eyes” (82). From this “indescribably sad gesture [Woolf] kn[ows] that Philips, the man who had been crushed on the line and whom she had been visiting, was dead” (82). Young Virginia is drawn to the “loveliness” of even this gesture as she was proud of her mother’s beauty and imagines that she “seem[s] to say” with it “It’s over” (82). In the second instance, Woolf admits she is “making up” a scene—although this does not invalidate her conjecture as we will see later when we turn to the scenes Lily Briscoe “makes up” about the Rayleys—as she “opens out” a scene of her mother reading: “Once when she had set us to write exercises I looked up from mine and watched her reading—the Bible perhaps; and, struck by the gravity of her face, told myself that her first husband had been a
clergyman and that she was thinking, as she read what he had read, of him. *This was a fable on my part;* but it shows that she looked very sad when she was not talking” (82, emphasis mine).

From these autobiographical sketches, we can trace why Woolf focalizes the character of Mrs. Ramsay, modeled as she is on Julia Stephen, through the consciousness of Lily Briscoe, a painter, who visually represents Mrs. Ramsay and her son James nonrepresentationally as a purple triangle. Just as Mrs. Dalloway had approximated Septimus Warren Smith’s response to Dr. Bradshaw, first motivated by her affective response to him, Lily desires to see Mrs. Ramsay and visualizes her in much the same way as she had envisioned herself, as a “wedge-shaped core of darkness” (52). Mrs. Ramsay’s complexity is such that one must view her from many different perspectives, from both near and far, to get all the way “round that one woman” (161). The critical distance needed for this project—Woolf writes in “Sketch” that “she never got far enough away from [Stephen] [in her childhood] to see her as a person” (83)—explains why Lily is emphatically not Mrs. Ramsay’s daughter but unrelated to her entirely and “keeping house for her father off the Brompton Road” (19).

In fact, Woolf’s greatest achievement in *To the Lighthouse* is her transformation of her mother from a “complete” to an “incomplete” character. As Vanessa Bell recognized, this triumph involved envisioning their mother in an entirely different way:

> Anyhow it seemed to me that in the first part of the book you have given a portrait of mother which is more like her to me than anything I could ever have conceived of as possible. It is almost painful to have her so raised from the dead. You have made one feel the extraordinary beauty of her character, which must be the most difficult thing in the world to do. It was like meeting her again with oneself grown up and on equal terms and it seems to me the most astonishing feat of creation to
have been able to see her in such a way. You have given father too I think as clearly but perhaps, I may be wrong, that isn’t quite so difficult. There is more to catch hold of. Still it seems to me to be the only thing about him which ever gave a true idea. So you see as far as portrait painting goes you seem to me to be a supreme artist and it is so shattering to find oneself face to face with those two again that I can hardly consider anything else. In fact for the last two days I have hardly been able to attend to daily life. Duncan and I have talked about them, as each had a copy, whenever we could get alone together, Roger too furious at being out of it for us to be able to do so when he was there. I dont think it is only that I knew them though that makes me feel all this, for Duncan who didn’t know them says too that for the first time he understands mother. So your vision of her stands as a whole by itself and not only as reminding one of facts. (L 3: 572–3, emphasis mine)

In the following section, I will examine Woolf’s reconstructed memories of her mother more closely in order to argue that what Lily achieves at the close of the novel is not a perfectly clear and eternal vision of Mrs. Ramsay—despite her thought “I have had my vision” (170)—but rather the ability to “see with” others, which she achieves by following the objects of others’ gazes, a trait of Mrs. Ramsay’s that she shares. This appropriation of what I will call Mrs. Ramsay’s “intersubjective vision” also foregrounds Mrs. Ramsay’s role as an immanent-transcendent woman artist: her aesthetic vision consists in her ability—in “bring[ing] people together” and commanding “‘Life stand still here’”—to change the ways in which others see and, more suggestively, see together (133).
As Lily avers in “The Lighthouse,” she owes this “revelation,” that “[i]n the midst of chaos there was shape,” to Mrs. Ramsay (133). And this revelation, Mrs. Ramsay’s “making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent),” is due to the highly intersubjective nature of her vision. Later, when Lily “had gone one day into a Hall and heard [Charles Tansley] speaking during the war,” for instance, “[s]he had looked at him ironically from her seat in the half-empty hall” “and suddenly, there was the old cask or whatever it was bobbing up and down among the waves and Mrs. Ramsay looking for her spectacle case among the pebbles” (161). In this scene, Lily realizes that “[i]f she wanted to be serious about [Charles Tansley] she had to help herself to Mrs. Ramsay’s sayings, to look at him through her eyes” (161). This, then, is how Mrs. Ramsay’s mere act of looking, of asking, as she “step[s] back and screw[s] up her eyes, “Is it a boat? Is it a cork?, “Is it a boat? Is it a cask?” as she “beg[ins] hunting round for her spectacles” “survive[s], after all these years, complete, so that [Lily] dipped into it to re-fashion her memory of [Charles Tansley], and it stayed in the mind almost like a work of art” (132, 141, 133). Mrs. Ramsay is, then, not only someone Lily sees but also someone Lily sees through as she envisions how she might relate to others.

From “Reminiscences” (1908) to “A Sketch of the Past” (1939–40)

The incomplete nature of Mrs. Ramsay’s character can be traced to Woolf’s own evolving relation to her mother, Julia Stephen. Woolf’s later vision of her mother in “Sketch” (1939–40) is markedly different from an earlier version of a similar scene in “Reminiscences” (begun in 1908), and these differences point to a very important shift in Woolf’s conception of her mother and to her later theory about “complete” or “incomplete” characters. In
“Reminiscences,” Woolf claims that “by the time [she and her siblings] knew [Stephen], she was the most prompt, practical and vivid of human beings. It was as though she had made up her mind definitely upon certain great matters and was never after troubled to consider herself at all; but every deed and word had the bright, inexorable, swift stamp of something struck clearly by a mass of hoarded experience” (*MB* 34). Stephen, it seems, had made up her mind about two things: “the futility of all effort [and] the mystery of life” (36). Moreover, these two things corresponded to both her nature and experience and could be clearly seen in her face. These assertions, especially when taken all together, mark Stephen as a very “complete” character according to Woolf’s later taxonomy of character in “Sketch”; in fact, her character, already stamped before Woolf comes to know her, is in this description overdetermined, a “caricature” who is “very simple” and “immensely alive,” as are three men and a woman Woolf describes in “Sketch” who died when she was a child (73).

In “Sketch,” Woolf describes Mr. Wolstenholme, “a very old gentleman who came every summer to stay with [the Stephens],” as having “only one characteristic—that when he ate plum tart he spurted the juice through his nose so that it made a purple stain on his grey moustache” (73). Woolf continues her description to “shad[e] him a little,” adding that the Stephen children “had to be kind to him because he was not happy at home; that he was very poor, yet once gave Thoby half a crown; that he had a son who was drowned in Australia; and I know too that he was a great mathematician. He never said a word all the time I knew him” (73). This man’s character, the model for the poet Augustus Carmichael in *Lighthouse*, can be made with “three strokes of the pen” and here Woolf achieves just such a feat. Carmichael, as Susan Dick points out, is the “one adult in the narrative whose mind is, except for one brief moment at the end of Part II, consistently closed to us” (56). Indeed, Carmichael also only speaks aloud twice during the
course of the novel. In “The Window,” he takes up Mr. Ramsay’s repetition of “Luriana Lurilee,” chanting the last words, “Luriana Lurilee,” and “bows to [Mrs. Ramsay] as if he did her homage,” effectively crowning her scene of triumph at dinner (“‘It is a triumph,’ said Mr. Bankes, laying his knife down for a moment” [82]); later, standing by Lily on the edge of the lawn in “The Lighthouse,” he intones, “‘They will have landed’”—Lily thinks that he has here also “crowned the occasion” of the lighthouse landing (169). My interest in Carmichael’s character mainly lies in the way in which Lily explicitly contrasts her way of knowing him, as a “complete” character according to “Sketch”’s taxonomy, to her way of knowing Mrs. Ramsay, an “incomplete” one.

Notice the similarities between Woolf’s description of Wolstenholme in “Sketch” (especially her emphasis on his single characteristic and his total silence) and her description of her mother in “Reminiscences” discussed earlier:

She kept herself marvellously alive to all the changes that went on round her, as though she heard perpetually the ticking of a vast clock and could never forget that some day it would cease for all of us. People of the most diverse kinds came to her when they had reason to rejoice or to weep; she seemed, if anything, a little indiscriminate in her choice of friends; but bores and fools have their moments. And it must be owned that living thus at high pressure she contrived to invest the whole scene with an inimitable bravery as though she saw it properly composed, of fools, clowns and splendid Queens, a vast procession on the march towards death. This intense preoccupation with the event of the moment arose partly no doubt because nature had fitted her to deal victoriously with such matters; but also because she had inborn in her and [had] acquired a deep sense of the futility of
all effort, the mystery of life. You may see the two things in her face. ‘Let us make the most of what we have, since we know nothing of the future’ was the motive that urged her to toil so incessantly on behalf of happiness, right doing, love; and the melancholy echoes answered ‘What does it matter? Perhaps there is no future.’ Encompassed as she was by this solemn doubt her most trivial activities had something of grandeur about them; and her presence was large and austere, bringing with it not only joy and life, exquisite fleeting femininities, but the majesty of a nobly composed human being. (36, emphasis mine)

This passage, of course, also recalls the one that I earlier discussed at length in which Peter theorizes about what he calls Mrs. Dalloway’s “atheist’s religion.” Here, as in that passage, Woolf develops a theory about Stephen’s philosophy of life and how her everyday actions correspond to that theory and also imagines what she might say to herself, effectively writing a dialogue for the twin philosophical strains she imagines motivate Stephen’s every action. This passage goes even further than the one in Mrs. Dalloway, however, for here, Woolf claims that these “two things,” “the futility of all effort, the mystery of life,” are visible on her mother’s face.

Yet, if this early portrait can be said to be made with three strokes of the pen, Woolf’s conception of her mother later in life is decidedly more complex. In “Sketch,” Woolf wonders why her mother is difficult to describe, since the others she names (Wolstenholme, Gibbs, Clarke, and Nonon) who died when she was a child are “complete” and can be easily seen, “completely undisturbed by later impressions” (80). “[T]he theory [she has expounded],” Woolf explains, “though true of them, breaks down completely with her” (80). Woolf still sees Stephen: “I see her at the head of the table,” “I see her going to the town with her basket,” “I see her
knitting on the hall step while we play cricket,” “I see her stretching her arms out to Mrs. Williams,” “I see her writing at her table in London,” “And there was my last sight of her; she was dying” (84). Yet, when Woolf turns to portray Stephen’s childhood, she imagines a scene at Little Holland House, “an old white country house”—where, in, say, 1860, on a “hot summer day,” “a stream of ladies in crinolines and little straw hats” “are attended by gentlemen in peg-top trousers and whiskers” and “[t]ea tables with great bowls of strawberries and cream are scattered about the lawn” (86)—in which she sees her mother but cannot imagine, as a result of seeing her, what she is thinking or feeling. Though Woolf can clearly see her mother, “‘a vision’ as they used to say,” “wearing that striped silk dress buttoned at the throat with a flowing skirt that appears in the photograph,” as “she stands, silent, with her plate of strawberries and cream; or perhaps is told to take a party across the garden to Signior’s studio,” it is “difficult” “to single her out as she really was; to imagine what she was thinking, to put a single sentence into her mouth!” (87) By contrast, “[h]ow easy it is to fill in the picture with set pieces that I have gathered from memoirs—to bring in Tennyson in his wideawake; Watts in his smock frock; Ellen Terry dressed as a boy; Garibaldi in his red shirt—and Henry Taylor turned from him to my mother—‘the face of one fair girl was more to me’”—so he says in a poem” (87).

Why is it, Woolf wonders, that before she wrote Lighthouse she “could hear [Stephen’s] voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say as [she] went about [her] day’s doings” and yet, afterward, she no longer hears her mother’s voice or sees her? I would argue that Woolf’s mother has ceased to be a “complete” character, drawn with three strokes of the pen, now that Woolf has imagined her inner life as a character in a novel and realized her ultimate unknowability, the ways in which her life philosophy cannot be reduced to competing twin strains or seen clearly on her face at a given moment. Now, “it is so difficult to give any clear
description of her” because through Woolf’s writing of Lighthouse, she has “lived on and [been] added to and filled and left finally incomplete” as had the others who had not died when Woolf was a child (81, 75).

In section 11, Lily’s vision of Mr. Ramsay (who is far out to sea) is juxtaposed to her vision of Mr. Carmichael (who sits next to her on the lawn). Lily thinks as she contemplates Carmichael about how he has become a famous poet in his old age and how he must have changed as a result of Andrew Ramsay’s death and how her way of knowing him is “one way of knowing people”—“to know the outline, not the detail” (159). She then shifts her attention to Charles Tansley’s character and realizes that her idea of him is “grotesque”—she can only see him clearly if she “look[s] at him through [Mrs. Ramsay’s] eyes” (161). Lily, now absorbed in her contemplation of Mrs. Ramsay, realizes the immense difficulty of seeing her: “One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with, she reflected. Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with, she thought” (161). “Seeing” Mrs. Ramsay, finally, for Lily, is not a matter of having a vision of the dead woman, although she has such visions after Mrs. Ramsay’s death:

*It was strange how clearly she saw her, stepping with her usual quickness across the fields among whose folds, purplish and soft, among whose flowers, hyacinths or lilies, she vanished. It was some trick of the painter’s eye. For days after she had heard of her death she had seen her thus, putting her wreath to her forehead and going unquestionably with her companion, a shadow, across the fields. The sight, the phrase, had its power to console. Wherever she happened to be, painting, here, in the country or in London, the vision would come to her, and her eyes, half closing, sought something to base her vision on.* (149, emphasis mine)
Translating the shock of desiring Mrs. Ramsay and having visions of her into her own aesthetic vision requires that Lily “see with” her, follow her gaze. If the Woolf who wrote “Reminiscences” had determined that Stephen’s twin philosophies could be clearly seen in her face, the Woolf writing “Sketch” instead looks to where or what Stephen looks at (lowering her eyes, directing her gaze away from the children; reading a book, perhaps the Bible) in order to guess what she might be thinking about (Phillips, the man she has visited and who has died after being crushed on the line; her first husband, who had been a clergyman and who had also died). This propensity for intersubjective vision will be given to both Mrs. Ramsay and Lily, and it is Lily’s achievement of an intersubjective vision, inherited from Mrs. Ramsay, that will allow her finally to “see with” and “see through” Mrs. Ramsay and shape her vision.

Seeing through Mrs. Ramsay

If Peter “constructs” Mrs. Dalloway as I outlined in the first section of this chapter—she sits down to dash off a letter and he imagines what she must have been thinking and feeling as she did so—Lily Briscoe, the figure of the artist, even more self-consciously “makes up” scenes about people she knows. In the third section of the novel, “The Lighthouse,” Lily “tunnel[s] her way into her picture, into the past” (142), much as Woolf had described her tunneling process in her diary: “I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment” (D II: 263). Lily, unlike Peter, who is supremely confident that “at least he” “know[s] everything” “about the people [he] lives with every day,” knows “[n]ot a word of [the scenes she had just made up] was true” (MD 164, 163; TTL 142).
Lily “makes up” many more of these scenes than Peter had in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and none of these scenes is precipitated by an understanding of what must have happened, for instance, when Peter deduces Mrs. Dalloway must have sat down right away and dashed off a letter in order for it to have arrived so quickly after his visit. Rather, Lily “collect[s] her impressions of the Rayleys”; “[t]heir lives appear to her in a series of scenes” (142). In “one, on the staircase at dawn,” Minta, dressed garishly, has sauntered in at three in the morning and Paul abuses her on the stairs so as not to wake their two sons (142). In another scene, “built up” around one of Paul’s sayings, that he “played chess in coffee-houses,” Lily sees Paul “sitting in the corner of some lugubrious place where the smoke attached itself to the red plush seats” (142). In a third, in a scene Lily had actually witnessed when she had been staying with the Rayleys last summer, Minta hands tools to Paul in a way that suggests to Lily that they are no longer “in love”—both Minta and Paul have presumably taken lovers—but are nonetheless “excellent friends” (143). If in this scene Lily triumphs over Mrs. Ramsay, “who would never know how Paul went to coffee-houses and had a mistress; how he sat on the ground and Minta handed him his tools; how she stood here painting, had never married, not even William Bankes” (144), *seeing against* her injunction “Marry, marry!,” her meditations quickly turn to her lifelong friendship with Bankes and to the moment when Bankes first saw Mrs. Ramsay:

And once something led him to talk about the Ramsays and he had said how when he first saw her she had been wearing a grey hat; she was not more than nineteen or twenty. She was astonishingly beautiful. There he stood looking down the avenue at Hampton Court, as if he could see her there among the fountains. She looked now at the drawing-room step. *She saw, through William’s eyes*, the shape of a woman, peaceful and silent, with downcast eyes. She sat musing, pondering
(she was in grey that day, Lily thought). Her eyes were bent. She would never lift them. Yes, thought Lily, looking intently, I must have seen her look like that, but not in grey; nor so still, nor so young, nor so peaceful. The figure came readily enough. She was astonishingly beautiful, William said. But beauty was not everything. Beauty had this penalty—it came too readily, came too completely. It stilled life—froze it. One forgot the little agitations; the flush, the pallor, some queer distortion, some light or shadow; which made the face unrecognizable for a moment and yet added a quality one saw for ever after. It was simpler to smooth that all out under the cover of beauty. But what was the look she had, Lily wondered, when she clapped her deer-stalker’s hat on her head, or ran across the grass, or scolded Kennedy, the gardener? (146, emphasis mine)

As Lily tunnels her way into her picture and her past, the person she most wants to get back to is Mrs. Ramsay, the ghost-like figure who has haunted the novel even before it is revealed through a bracketed section of “Time Passes” that she has died, and she does this by continually remaking a vision of Mrs. Ramsay, not as a complete character but as an incomplete one, who alters even as Lily alters and whose gaze does not reveal all, in direct contradiction to the account of Stephen in “Reminiscences.” If the impetus of the text of Mrs. Dalloway is for Mrs. Dalloway to affect the reader even as she affects others and even as she herself is the model for ethico-affective response, the impetus of the text of To the Lighthouse is to see Mrs. Ramsay looking, even as she herself is the model for intersubjective vision. And just as Clarissa’s physiological response to the news of Septimus’s death marks the climax of Mrs. Dalloway, so too do the paired scenes of Mrs. Ramsay’s vision during the Bœuf en daube scene and Lily’s final vision, her picture, mark the climaxes of To the Lighthouse.
And yet Mrs. Ramsay, as Jean Guiguet’s magisterial study, *Virginia Woolf and her Works* (1965) attests, as “central character” “dominates the book” in a different way from Mrs. Dalloway in hers (Guiguet 253). “Behind the account of Mrs. Ramsay’s day,” Guiguet continues, we find no analysis of her feelings, no generalized interpretation of her attitudes; she is not the centre toward which all events converge, as was the case with Mrs. Dalloway, in order to define her and strengthen her autonomous personality in face of the conflicts that divide her and the contradictory impressions that she arouses around her. On the contrary, by a kind of centrifugal process, Mrs. Ramsay radiates through the book, impregnating all the other characters. And it is the relations that emanate from her personality, rather than the personality that emanates from these relations, that become the focus of interest in the book. (253)

Guiguet’s account emphasizes the ways in which Mrs. Ramsay dominates her book centrifugally rather than centripetally, as Mrs. Dalloway dominates hers, but he does not consider that it is Mrs. Ramsay as character who is outward-directed, and that her characterization as a center radiating out is a function of the very limited time she has to “be herself, by herself” (52).

Woolf could only really visualize her mother “in company; surrounded; generalized; dispersed, omnipresent”; she cannot “remember ever being alone with her for more than a few minutes” because “she liv[ed] on such an extended surface that she had not time, nor strength, to concentrate, except for a moment if one were ill or in some child’s crisis, upon [her], or upon anyone—unless it were Adrian” (*MB* 83). If Woolf, then, is determined to present her mother’s (or a woman like her mother’s) deep subjectivity and her status as creator—and I think this is a central aim in both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Lighthouse*—she must imagine her mother transcending the immanent sphere as she presides at the dinner table, as she writes letters at the beach, and as
she puts the children to bed and not just as she becomes one with the third stroke of the lighthouse in her few moments of solitude afterwards. If Gayatri Spivak is right that “To the Lighthouse can be read as a project to catch the essence of Mrs. Ramsay,” and I think she is, then Mrs. Ramsay must be seen both from the inside as she sits alone knitting after the children have gone to bed and before Mr. Ramsay enters the scene and from the outside, as a mind existing in all those other minds of the book, Lily’s, Mr. Ramsay’s, Cam’s, James’s, William Bankes’s, Charles Tansley’s, Augustus Carmichael’s (118). This approach is deftly articulated by Erich Auerbach in “The Brown Stocking,” the last section of the most influential study of Lighthouse, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature (1946), in which he claims that the frequent shifts in focalization mean Mrs. Ramsay is “encircled by the content of all the various consciousnesses directed upon her (including her own); there is an attempt to approach her from as many sides as closely as human possibilities of perception and expression can succeed in doing” (536).

Before I turn to a closer examination of Mrs. Ramsay’s intersubjective vision, I want to briefly mention the long and varied history of critical responses to the character of Mrs. Ramsay, deftly delineated by Brenda Silver in “Editing Mrs. Ramsay: or, ‘8 Qualities of Mrs. Ramsay that Could be Annoying to Others’” (2008) and “Mothers, Daughters, Mrs. Ramsay: Reflections” (2009). This critical history has been intensely polarized, and this is the result of the incomplete nature of Mrs. Ramsay’s character. Lily seeks to fill in Mrs. Ramsay, even as she is left after her death with a profound ambivalence that will remain unresolved. As Silver points out, Joseph Blotner’s 1956 essay "Mythic Patterns in To the Lighthouse," which portrayed Mrs. Ramsay as an idealized mother/goddess, was highly influential well into the 1970s, though Glenn Pederson’s 1958 “Vision in To the Lighthouse” and Mitchell Leaska’s 1970 Virginia Woolf’s
Lighthouse: A Study in Critical Method are both highly critical of Mrs. Ramsay. In 1973, Carolyn Heilbrun followed up these attempts to displace Mrs. Ramsay as the ideal mother/woman in the critical imagination with her classic 1973 Toward a Recognition of Androgyny, in which

she follows her statement that “To the Lighthouse is Mrs. Woolf’s best novel of androgyny” with the surprising statement that the novel “enables us to see that, just as Flaubert said: ‘I am Emma Bovary,’ so Virginia Woolf has, in a fashion, said, ‘I am Mr. Ramsay.’” What follows is one of the sharpest critiques of Mrs. Ramsay’s roles as perfect wife, beautiful woman, and earth mother you’re likely to read, including their destructive impact on herself and others. (Silver, “Editing Mrs. Ramsay,” 4)

I gesture toward this critical trajectory here in order to foreground how the perceived necessity for a split in sympathy—one must be either sympathetic to Mrs. Ramsay the mother or to Lily the surrogate daughter—has foreclosed the possibility critics such as Phyllis Rose and Beth Rigel Daugherty proffer: Woolf, Rose maintains, “dramatizes the working out of a way in which she can see herself as her mother’s heir while still rejecting the model of womanhood she presents. She does this by conceptualizing Mrs. Ramsay as an artist, transforming the angel in the house, who had been for the Victorians an ethical ideal, into a portrait of the artist”; (169).

According to Daugherty, Woolf solves the dilemma of “need[ing] to kill the Angel and need[ing] a female tradition to nurture her work [when] her female tradition [i]s the Angel” by “expos[ing] the mythic origins of the pressures on the mother to play the Angel role, reveal[ing] the daughter’s struggle to resist those pressures, and accept[ing] and understand[ing] the mother, thus freeing her from those pressures”; “For Lily and Woolf as daughters, the questions [“What
did the hedge mean to Mrs. Ramsay, what did the garden mean to her, what did it mean to her when a wave broke?”] reflect an interest in how someone else sees, but without any compulsion to see in the same way, and thus they free mothers and daughters to be themselves” (290, 300). While Zwerdling questions the assertion of Mrs. Ramsay’s domestic artistry found in accounts such as Rose’s and Emily Blair’s *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel* (2007), calling it a “very modern bit of legerdemain,” as I have argued here, it is not Mrs. Ramsay’s domesticity but her intersubjective vision that establishes her as an artist (208).

Though Mrs. Ramsay is often characterized as a beautiful woman, someone to be looked at, it is she who *sees* the whole picture as if she held it together formally during the famous dinner scene:

> It could not last she knew, but at the moment her eyes were so clear that they seemed to go round the table unveiling each of these people, and their thoughts and their feelings, without effort like a light stealing under water so that its ripples and the reeds in it and the minnows balancing themselves, and the sudden silent trout are *all lit up* hanging, trembling. So she saw them; she heard them; but whatever they said had also this quality, as if what they said was like the movement of a trout when, at the same time, *one can see* the ripple and the gravel, something to the right, something to the left; *and the whole is held together*; for whereas in active life she would be netting and separating one thing from another; she would be saying she liked the Waverley novels or had not read them; she would be urging herself forward; now she said nothing. For the moment *she hung suspended*. (87, emphasis mine)
Mrs. Ramsay, moreover, is not a passive observer; she actively orients and re-orients herself—“hover[ing] like a hawk suspended” (85)—in order to achieve her vision. She ascertains the precise distance on which her intersubjective vision depends and maintains that precise distance, hanging suspended. Lily, throughout the narrative and as the primary focalizer of Mrs. Ramsay, must orient and re-orient herself around Mrs. Ramsay in order not to see her but to “get round her”: “One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with, she reflected. Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with, she thought” (161). In the end, Lily sees Mrs. Ramsay both as imbued with an intense emotion—her heart “leap[ing] at her and seiz[ing] her and tortur[ing] her”—and as a “part of ordinary experience,” “s[itting] there quite simply, in the chair”; she sees both “[Mrs. Ramsay’s] shadow on the step” and steps that are empty; she sees Mrs. Ramsay both up close, leaning her head on her knee, and from far away (165). “So much depends,” Lily muses, “upon distance: whether people are near us or far from us” (156). When Lily has her vision, it is as if “she s[ees] [her blurred canvas] clear for a second” (170). For a moment, the “whole,” the relation of mother and son, Mrs. Ramsay and James, is held together, is seen distinctly and clearly as it was during Mrs. Ramsay’s earlier vision. The precarious and fleeting nature of these aesthetic visions, however, is foregrounded: the moment will not last, but Mrs. Ramsay’s eyes “seemed” to have a perfectly transparent vision of everyone’s thoughts and feelings; the painting will be hung up in attics, but “as if she saw it clear for a second,” Lily completes her picture.

**Encountering Mrs. Ramsay as an immanent-transcendent artist**

Mrs. Ramsay, of course, is not a perfect seer. She is nearsighted; it is her husband who sees the long view. Most conspicuously, her vision of “the Rayleys” and their future blessed
union is proven false by what Lily later reports (“the marriage had turned out rather badly” [142]) and by the scenes Lily conjures up to attempt to “see” the Rayleys’ relations. Mrs. Ramsay misperceives other sights, as well: as James Harker points out, she wrongly identifies what are probably numerous rooks settling on trees outside the window on varying days as Joseph and Mary, two distinct birds (10–11). Though many critics point to the conspicuous failures of characters in modernist novels to connect to other minds and to communicate effectively with those other minds, *To the Lighthouse*, as Vera Tobin avers, “is critically structured around the way that visual attention serves as a key physical manifestation of characters’ mental states” (192). Though, of course, Woolf does not present minds that are transparent and easily accessible, she does present minds that are partly accessible and, as Tobin argues in her “Joint Attention, *To the Lighthouse*, and Modernist Representations of intersubjectivity” (2010), one of the most crucial ways that characters in *Lighthouse* access other minds is via visual cues as to what a character is looking at and about how the character looks.

As Martha Nussbaum observes in “The Window: Knowledge of Other Minds in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*,” “Woolf’s image of the window suggests that people are not completely sealed to one another. There is an opening, one can see through or see in, even if one cannot enter” (743). Mrs. Ramsay, despite her imperfect seeing, is the model for intersubjective vision in the novel. During the dinner scene, she looks at her children, Jasper, Rose, Prue, Andrew, all sitting in a row and guesses at what they have “hoarded behind those rather set, still, mask-like faces,” even as she begins to differentiate Prue’s “shy, curious” gaze at Minta as signaling Prue’s envy of Minta’s engagement and her doubts about her own future happiness. In response, Mrs. Ramsay “look[s] from [Prue to Minta] and sa[y]s, speaking to Prue in her own mind. You will be as happy as she is one of these days” (89). This ability of Mrs. Ramsay’s to
communicate just by looking may explain why other characters such as James and Lily remember her not by what she says or does but by how she directs her gaze on objects and other subjects as she sits, say, in a chair knitting or writing letters by a rock.

James, for instance, is reminded of his mother while he, Cam, Mr. Ramsay, Macalister, and his son make their way to the lighthouse by a look that “come[s] upon [Cam’s] face”: “They look down, he thought, at their knitting or something. Then suddenly they look up. There was a flash of blue, he remembered, and then somebody sitting with him laughed, surrendered, and he was very angry. It must have been his mother” (139, emphasis mine). Likewise, Lily remembers one highly salient scene at the beach: Mrs. Ramsay “look[s] up at last at something floating in the sea, ‘is it a lobster pot? Is it an upturned boat?’ As Lily and Charles Tansley skip stones over the waves, “[e]very now and then Mrs. Ramsay looked up over her spectacles and laughed at them. What they said she could not remember, but only she and Charles throwing stones and getting on very well all of a sudden and Mrs. Ramsay watching them” (132, emphasis mine).

Mrs. Ramsay, as Ralph Freedman points out, is not only “seen in the window [in section one]; she also sees through the window” so that “[p]erceiving and being perceived is a basic function of the window as well as a quality of Mrs. Ramsay” (230). And Mrs. Ramsay is not only associated with the window but also with “seers,” for as Louise A. Poretsky asserts, the theme of shortsightedness and blindness abounds in the work and Mrs. Ramsay’s “weak sight classifies her along with such blind visionaries as Homer and Tiresias, who possess an acute in-sight that compensates for their weak out-sight” (134). Yet Mrs. Ramsay is not only a character who perceives (gazing at the lighthouse through the window) and is perceived (framed for the reader by Lily’s painting and by the window while Lily paints her), for she is also the model for intersubjective vision in the novel. To provide evidence for this claim, I will now turn to an
analysis of Mrs. Ramsay as seer and what I will call “double visuocognitive frames” (to appropriate Alan Palmer’s “double cognitive frames” discussed earlier in this chapter).

Section 1, “The Window,” opens with Mrs. Ramsay’s statement to her son James, “Yes, of course, if it’s fine tomorrow,” and ends with her statement to her husband, “Yes, you were right. It’s going to be wet tomorrow” (7, 100). Mrs. Ramsay demonstrates, throughout this section of the novel, that she is able to see both that the weather will be or might be fine and that the weather inevitably will not be fine. She exists “in a kind of fourth dimension where it is always raining and always fine” (Naremore 144). Yet what is most significant about this vision and Mrs. Ramsay’s ability to see both/and is that this is so because Mrs. Ramsay is able to see both with James and with her husband. As she smooths James’s hair, she tells him, “Perhaps you will wake up and find the sun shining and the birds singing,” “for her husband, with his caustic saying that it would not be fine, had dashed his spirits she could see. This going to the Lighthouse was a passion of his, she saw” (16, emphasis mine). And Mrs. Ramsay’s statement to her husband at the end of “The Window,” “Yes, you were right. It’s going to be wet tomorrow,” is more than a statement of fact, for it represents her triumph and the culmination of her ability to see him watching her and to create a double visuocognitive frame—to know what he is thinking and feeling as he looks at her and she returns his gaze.

As David Herman has demonstrated, the Ramsays’ dialogue during the close of the first section must be situated in the context of their very long history in order for their utterances to signify at all:

Taken out of context, these nine utterances [Mr. Ramsay’s two and Mrs. Ramsay’s seven] comprising some 52 words within a seven-page chapter, might suggest that language is at best an impoverished resource for communicative
interaction, and at worst superfluous or even downright misleading. [. . .] Woolf’s chapter suggests that [. . .] interlocutors as well as analysts can take the true measure of discourse only in situ—by considering utterances as part of more global environments for sense-making. (“Dialogue,” 79)

This highly situated dialogue scene begins when Mrs. Ramsay, as Herman argues, responds to the “positive face want” of Mr. Ramsay.75 Mrs. Ramsay “fe[els] he [i]s still looking at her, but that his look ha[s] changed. He wanted something” (99). In this moment of intimacy, she does not mind that he sees her gazing at the lighthouse;76 as she looks away, she knows that his gaze follows her and that he is thinking she looks beautiful and desires her to tell him she loves him. Rather than say anything, however, she at first only looks at him, triumphing because he has understood with her look that she does love him without her having to say the words. Only then, smiling at her triumph, does she again look out the window, seeing with him and concede that because of the weather, the trip to the lighthouse must be cancelled.

Another significant instance of the power of Mrs. Ramsay’s intersubjective vision occurs just before the scene discussed above. Cam and James are wide awake quarreling about a boar’s skull that is nailed fast to the wall when Mrs. Ramsay enters their bedroom—Cam can’t go to sleep because of the skull and James screams if anyone touches it. When Mrs. Ramsay enters the room, she “sit[s] down on the bed by [Cam’s] side. [Cam] could see the horns, [she] said, all over the room. It was true. Wherever they put the light (and James could not sleep without a light) there was always a shadow somewhere” (92–3). Here, Mrs. Ramsay sees with Cam and attempts to persuade her that this is “a nice black pig” like the ones Cam has previously seen at the farm. When Cam is not consoled by this, Mrs. Ramsay
open[s] the little drawers quickly one after another, and not seeing anything that would do, quickly t[akes] her own shawl off and w[inds] it round the skull, round and round and round, and then come[s] back to Cam and la[ys] her head almost flat on the pillow beside Cam’s and sa[ys] how lovely it look[s] now; how the fairies would love it; it was like a bird’s nest; it was like a beautiful mountain such as she had seen abroad, with valleys and flowers and bells ringing and birds singing and little goats and antelopes . . . She could see the words echoing as she spoke them rhythmically in Cam’s mind [ . . ] (93, emphasis mine)

Of course, as many critics have noted, this shawl is unwound in “Time Passes”: “one fold of the shawl loosened and swung to and fro” (106). So, too, at the end of the dinner scene, Mrs. Ramsay, “[w]ith her foot on the threshold[,] waited a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked” (90). Lily’s painting, likewise, will probably be hung in the attics, but she has finally achieved a vision of Mrs. Ramsay, not as framed—as in section one, “with her head outlined absurdly by the gilt frame, the green shawl which she had tossed over the edge of the frame, and the authenticated masterpiece by Michael Angelo”—but as a seer: she suddenly wants Mr. Ramsay after proclaiming of her vision of Mrs. Ramsay “There she sat” because she knows now that she will be able to see Mr. Ramsay with Mrs. Ramsay’s intersubjective vision (27–8, 165). And readers have, as the American novelist and poet Conrad Aiken so beautifully put it in his July 1927 review for Dial, “experience[d] all of this [the tragic futility, the absurdity, the pathetic beauty of life] in our sharing of seven hours of Mrs. Ramsay’s wasted or not wasted existence. We have seen, through her, the world” (208, emphasis mine).
CHAPTER 4 NOTES

47. Clarissa is now aged fifty-one, so her rejection of Peter’s proposal the summer she was eighteen occurred thirty-three years earlier. See Bradshaw 185.

48. The reference to “soliloquies in solitude” appears in Woolf’s 1927 essay “The Narrow Bridge of Art” in Essays. For critics, see, for instance, DiBattista, Imagining: “Mrs. Dalloway[’s] protagonist is struck and somewhat tormented by the difference between the private Clarissa and the public Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (33). In a later account, however, DiBattista claims that Mrs. Dalloway is “among the first modern characters to confront the antithetical nature of the Self as both deeply personal and profoundly social” (Novel Characters 122).

49. Tobin takes up this modernist trope of “joint attention”—“the ability to share attention to some object with another person and mutually recognize that the attention is shared”—and claims that it is “a foundational facet of intersubjectivity” in her study of Lighthouse (185, 186).

50. The term “cognitive narratology” is a recent coinage (1997) and “can be defined as the study of mind[–brain]-relevant aspects of storytelling practice wherever—and by whatever means—those practices occur” (Herman, “Cognitive Narratology,” paragraph 2). The “Cognitive Approaches to Literature” discussion group’s proposal for division status was approved by the MLA in 2011. This group will begin functioning as a division in 2013.

51. Hence, the dual nature of my title, “Narrativizing Characters”: characters are both narrativized by the text (if “narrativizing” is read as a verb) and in the process of narrativizing other characters (if “narrativizing” is read as an adjective). I borrow this construction from George Butte’s subtitle, “Narrating Subjects,” and his explanation of its dual nature in his introduction (vii).

52. See Flatley, as well as Keen, Empathy and the Novel. See also Hogan for a comparative analysis of cross-cultural narrative patterns that seeks to illuminate “the ways in which our emotion systems affect and explain our stories” (23). Hogan argues that “narratological treatments of emotion have on the whole been relatively underdeveloped, at least in comparison with other aspects of narrative theory” and seeks to redress this imbalance by “conten[ding] that story structures are fundamentally shaped and oriented by our emotion systems” (1).

53. Miller, by contrast, posits such a hierarchy of knowledge of narrator over characters: “The proper model for the relations among minds in Mrs. Dalloway is that of a perfect transparency of the minds of the characters to the mind of the narrator, but only a modified translucency, like glass frosted or fogged, between the mind of one character and the mind of another” (192).

54. See Keen, “Narrative Empathy.”

55. See Herman, Introduction.
56. See Butte for more on what he calls “deep intersubjectivity, that chiasmus [. . .] of consciousness of consciousness felt, registered and rerepresented, of perception of perceptions perceived and interpreted and sometimes espoused, sometimes violated” (236).

57. See Schappell.

58. As Richardson maintains, “a kind of aesthetic tension mounts as long as the two strands [the Mrs. Dalloway and the Septimus Warren Smith narratives] resist unification” (99).

59. Woolf had earlier entertained the possibility of expanding the short story into a longer work. On 28 August 1922, she writes: “Shall I write the next chapter of Mrs D.—if she is to have a next chapter; & shall it be The Prime Minister?” (D II: 196).

60. For more on Kitty Maxse as the model for the character of Mrs. Dalloway, see Curtis; Hoffman, “Real Mrs. Dalloway”; and Latham, “The Model” and “Origin.”

61. See Woolf’s diary entry for Wednesday 4 October 1922: “I have done my task here better than I expected. Mrs Dalloway & the Chaucer chapter are finished; I have read 5 books of the Odyssey; Ulysses; & now begin Proust” (D II: 205).

62. For more on the manuscript revisions of what would become Mrs. Dalloway, see Hoffmann, “From Short Story to Novel”; Latham, “The Manuscript Revisions” and “Origin”; and Woolf, The Hours.

63. Woolf claimed (in her introduction to the 1928 Modern Library edition) that Mrs. Dalloway was “originally to kill herself” (MDR 11).

64. See Herman, “Re-minding Modernism.”

65. Dannenberg defines the “modernist coincidence” as one in which “[a]nalogous relationships link characters and objects on the same spatial and temporal level” (251). Though modernist coincidence, as Dannenberg notes, “can also take a purely perceptual form” (106), in other words, occur in a character’s mind and not in space and time, to my knowledge, Mrs. Dalloway is the first double plot novel in which the major protagonists from each strand never actually physically meet. Even in the highly experimental Ulysses, for example, Joyce creates a significant delay between Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom's meeting that ratchets up narrative tension, but these major protagonists do eventually meet.

66. The idea for this unlikely encounter and also for Clarissa’s physiological response to it may have come in part from Vanessa Stephen’s response to the death of a young man at a party she attended on 26 June 1922:

Dinner with Nessa last night. My attempt[s] at sensation were over-shadowed by her really great & surprising one—nothing less than the death of a young man at Mrs Russell’s dance. They sat out on the roof, protected by fairy lamps & chairs. He crossed, perhaps to light a cigarette, stepped over the edge, & fell 30 feet onto
flagstones. Adrian alone saw the thing happen. He called a doctor sitting there, & very calmly & bravely, so Nessa felt, climbed the wall into the garden where the man had fallen, & helped the Dr over. But there was no hope. He died in the ambulance that fetched him. The dance was stopped. Nessa says the younger generation is callous. No one was upset; some telephoned for news of other dances. Aunt Lou bungled everything with her salt American cheerfulness. It was odd how, sitting high up, one began to get a sense of falling. The man was called Wright, aged 21: for some reason he had his birth certificate on him. Only the girl who brought him knew him. The parents, rich country people, came up, were shown the spot & had nothing to say except, ‘That was where he fell’—but what could they say? Aunt Lou gave her version of the thing ‘not a tragedy—not in the least a tragedy—a stepmother only & seven other children—and its over for him poor boy.’ A strange event—to come to a dance among strangers & die—to come dressed in evening clothes, & then for it all to be over, instantly, so senselessly. Pippa had warned them. No brandy was to be had in any of the three houses. (D II: 51, emphasis mine)

67. Here, I’d like to note a parallel scene of an intensely “private” moment which is also shared with another, Septimus’s act of suicide: “Coming down the staircase opposite an old man stopped and stared at [Septimus]. Holmes was at the door. ‘I’ll give it you!’ [Septimus] cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer’s area railings” (127).

68. When Woolf turns to portray women artists, like the painter Lily Briscoe in To the Lighthouse, critical attention focuses almost entirely on the “woman artist” character, as she fits into the “portrait of the artist” Modernist narrative, to the almost exclusion of Mrs. Ramsay, who is not a traditional artist but a mother and housewife.

69. See “Sketch”: “I wrote the book [Lighthouse] very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her”; “Further, just as I rubbed out a good deal of the force of my mother’s memory by writing about her in To the Lighthouse, so I rubbed out much of his memory there too. Yet he too obsessed me for years (81, 108) and Diary: “I used to think of him and mother daily, but writing The Lighthouse laid them in my mind (D III: 109). For other accounts of Woolf’s relation to her dead parents, see Spilka and Hyman: “Her hostility [to Leslie Stephen] seems to have remained as an undercurrent in her writing until, at the age of 44, she ‘suddenly’ decided to rid herself of her ‘obsession’ with her parents by writing To the Lighthouse. As the continued conflicts in ‘A Sketch of the Past’ make clear, this attempt at therapy failed, and her quarrel with her father (i.e. her conflicted feelings) continued to trouble (and to puzzle) her to the end of her life” (25).

70. See Bradshaw’s note on Wolstenholme as a model for Augustus Carmichael (174). Carmichael only speaks aloud twice during the course of the novel.

71. Minow-Pinkney also points out that Carmichael’s “consciousness is never rendered from the inside” (115).
72. For other approaches to the nature of Lily’s aesthetic vision, see Matro and Friedman, who argues that Lily “has received a final intuition of the essential truth of the nature of reality: that one must be both subjectively involved in and objectively detached from life” (155).

73. Schulkind also writes about these differences in characterization in her introduction: “When Virginia Woolf writes again of Julia in ‘A Sketch of the Past,’ long after the cathartic experience of writing To the Lighthouse, she does so with perception and understanding gained partly, no doubt, through abandoning the unwitting subterfuge of reverence and honestly confronting her feelings towards her mother in all their ambivalence and complexity. As a result, both Julia Stephen and Virginia Woolf are much more fully realized; the slightly implausible, superficial identities created in the first memoir now reveal nuances and depths of meaning which were barely suggested in the earlier sketch” (13).

74. See, for instance, Lilienfeld’s sympathetic portrayal of Lily the orphan in contrast to her unsympathetic portrayal of Mrs. Ramsay “The Great Mother,” who sacrifices human lives on the “marriage altar.”

75. Theorists of face and cross-cultural politeness define politeness as “saving face” for others. See Herman, “Dialogue” (82).

76. For more on the opportunity joint visual attention affords characters in Lighthouse, see Tobin: “Sharing attention to objects in the outside world is critical for Woolf’s characters as an opportunity—even if a frequently fraught or thwarted opportunity—for closeness and sympathy” (192).
CHAPTER 5

“THAT IS THE BLOW YOU HAVE DEALT ME”: (RE)WRITING THE SELF IN THE WAVES (1931)

On the title page of the first manuscript draft of what would later become known as *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf wrote her first working title and subtitle, “The Moths?/ or the life of anybody. life in general” (Draft 1 page 1). The tension inherent in the resulting narrative of Woolf’s “abstract mystical eyeless” “playpoem” is already apparent here in the two subtitles, “the life of anybody” and “life in general” (7 November 1928). This chapter analyzes what is precariously held within the tension of the narrative form of *The Waves*—which moves between the extreme close-ups of the lyric present in the episodes and the extremely distant views of the interludes—namely, the crisis of the self writing its life as set against the self’s crisis when it faces the presence of other beings in the world and death. The self is compelled to narrativize itself despite its awful realization of the ways in which it “forms” itself into narrative (and so is only an illusion) and despite the ways in which encounters with others and, finally, with death, constantly threaten to un-make this illusion, once and for all.

Woolf’s subtitle “the life of anybody” already points to the metanarrative quality of *The Waves*; this narrative is a formal reflection upon how the self, any self, narrativizes its inevitable crisis of subjectivity, and so is not primarily about how the self gets itself constructed by the subject but about why the subject must create a self. What motivates us as human subjects to tell ourselves the stories of our experiences, which then become the stories of our lives? If we have traced how Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay are, in a sense, called into being—if they exist in part as they are constructed in the texts—because Peter Walsh’s and Lily Briscoe’s desire to
know these ordinary women propels the narrative desire to know them even if they cannot be known perfectly, the six characters, or “emanations,” of *The Waves* can be said to propel their own narratives forward. Each must construct a self through narrative in order to continue living, and each must construct a self to present to the others. The constructed nature of these narratives is always salient, and yet even when the characters are highly self-aware of the constructedness of their selves, they find they cannot function without them. The narrative registers the experience of the crisis of subjectivity, the “inherent tension between the subjective consciousness and the irrecoverable otherness of both things [or nature] and other people” from a first-person perspective: Bernard describes being “pierced” by “arrows of sensation” when Mrs. Constable bathes him with a sponge, for instance, and Neville describes childhood as “gongs striking; cries of despair; blows on the nape of the neck in gardens” (McConnell 83; 200; 30). But the text also registers the human impetus to create a self-narrative despite this tension, what I call the will-to-self-narrative.

This will-to-self-narrative is, of course, not without its perils. In Woolf’s “The Mark on the Wall” (1921), the narrator claims, “novelists in future will realize more and more the importance of [our] reflections” “as we face each other in omnibuses or railways”; “those are the depths they will explore” (85). The passenger’s self-image, “the romantic figure with the green of forest depths all about it,” however, can easily be smashed when she is confronted with “that shell of a person which is seen by other people” (85). This crisis of subjectivity is, indeed, more fundamentally a crisis of intersubjectivity, for it registers each encounter with the other as a direct assault on the self’s ability to maintain its own self-narrative. *The Waves* extends this argument, suggesting both that the self *must* create a narrative about itself in order to cohere and function and that the presence of others might unravel these self-constructions.
By tracing how each of the characters, or “waves,” first arises beneath the surface of the sea, then collect, eventually breaking on the shoreline, or ceasing to be, Woolf sketches the “life of anybody” against the backdrop of “life in general.” Taking up this metaphor of the individual life as the wave, I will first analyze how the self emerges via the act of narration, then how it negotiates the crisis in (inter)subjectivity when its self is contracted by other selves. I will proceed by examining what I take to be the lesson in how to be a modernist writer of the self that is enacted by Bernard, the artist figure who “sums up” in the ninth section. Bernard writes his self, finally, by continually shifting his perspective and by absorbing the self-narratives of those selves closest to him. Though his example is not an unproblematic one, by the end of the novel he is the model for writing and rewriting self-narratives—self-narratives that continue to be motivated and destabilized by the presence of others—before he is removed from any human presence and faces death, absorption into the eternity of nature, alone.

The self emerges via the act of narration

“Self-definition is the central problem in The Waves,” writes Maria DiBattista in Virginia Woolf’s Major Novels: The Fables of Anon (1980). This central problem of self-definition, however, is really a problem of self-redefinition, as Tamlyn Monson points out:

[T]he central metaphors of the novel suggest a cyclical model of subjectivity—a process of self-constitution and dissolution represented by the image of a wave rising and then crashing, only to be drawn back into the sea where it rises once more; of a drop forming, becoming heavy, tapering to a point, and then falling, followed by the next drop. (173)
This process of self-definition is a continuous one in *The Waves*. The self, in other words, is being defined as something that experiences itself—even as it is faced with the reality that it is a kind of illusion—as a narrative that is continuously being told and retold, written and rewritten, to itself and others. The highly detached way that the selves reflect on their own experiences, the way that their experiences are always already mediated, has been interpreted by James Naremore to mean that these voices are “inhabit[ing] a kind of spirit realm from which, in a sad, rather world-weary tone, they comment on their time-bound selves below” (173). I read this detachment, however, as a suggestion that the self always experiences itself at a remove, as a fiction, a narrative, that must be made up and told to oneself and to others, as it is the presence of others that necessitates self-narrative in the first place. What motivates this self-redefinition will be my focus here, as I will argue that *The Waves* registers a crisis in subjectivity which is more fundamentally a crisis in intersubjectivity, for in Woolf’s conception, the self cannot exist in isolation but must be defined over and against other selves.

As Anna Snaith notes in *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations* (2000), “*The Waves* is the only novel in which Woolf does not use free indirect discourse and instead uses, as [Woolf] puts it, ‘a series of dramatic soliloquies,’ alternating amongst six characters”” (82). Snaith continues, “Woolf does not use a narrator because the characters narrate their own lives, and the novel is in part about that process: the articulation of identity” (83). Jonah Lehrer, in *Proust was a Neuroscientist* (2007), claims that “Woolf realized that the self emerges via the *act of attention*” (181). Here, six differentiated selves emerge, not just as they “turn [their] sensory parts into focused moment[s] of consciousness” but as they *narrate* those moments of consciousness: “‘I see a ring,’ said Bernard [. . . ] ‘I see a slab of pale yellow,’ said Susan [. . . ] ‘I hear a sound,’ said Rhoda [. . . ] ‘I see a globe,’ said Neville [. . . ] ‘I see a crimson tassel,’
said Jinny [. . . ] ‘I hear something stamping,’ said Louis” (Lehrer 183; 5). These descriptive phrases do not merely record the subject’s impression of sense-data but are self-conscious presentations of these impressions to a listening audience, the reader, as Snaith emphasizes. These presentations are, moreover, self-narratives, for contained within Louis’s description of a great beast’s chained foot stamping is his own self-image as the son of a banker in Brisbane who speaks with an Australian accent, the latter self-narrative occurring just a few pages after the opening description.

Within these opening descriptive lines lies a related tension to the central tension (the self versus others and the world), that of the individuating impetus of the characters—the drive to separate one’s self from the others in the present moment—and the impetus collectively to create some thing “that globes itself here” (119). The impetus to differentiate, to mark one’s self as experiencing differently, begins immediately, with the opening lines. As James Phelan notes, this “initial group of speeches establishes the separateness of the speakers. We do not have different perceptions of a common phenomenon or different participations in a common action, but rather different consciousnesses with different perceptions (some hear, some see, but no perceptions overlap) following one another in sequence” (7). The tension produced by the collective desire to come together “to make one thing, not enduring—for what endures?—but seen by many eyes simultaneously” is ratcheted up to its highest point during the Hampton Court scene. There, a red carnation in a vase is transformed from a “single flower as we sat here waiting” into “a seven-sided flower, many-petalled, red, puce, purple-shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves—a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution” (104).

Whether these characters are attempting to explain themselves to themselves or to the group, they are narrating or writing themselves into being. “Just as a novelist creates a narrative,
a person creates a sense of being”; for Woolf, “the self is an illusion,” but a necessary one (Lehrer 182). And the tense of these self-conscious presentations—presentations to the self and to an other or others—indicates that the self always experiences itself both as immediate and as removed in time and place. To unpack this claim, I will first examine one of the first extended passages in which the dominant lyric present, or pure present, shifts to the past tense, Neville’s dramatic soliloquy detailing his experience of hearing about a man who was found in the gutter with his throat cut: “The apple-tree leaves became fixed in the sky; the moon glared; I was unable to lift my foot up the stair. He was found in the gutter. His blood gurgled down the gutter. His jowl was white as a dead codfish. I shall call this stricture, this rigidity, ‘death among the apple trees’ for ever” (18). Here, Neville’s meditation on this definitive moment in his life is presented in the past tense, even as he projects this incident’s implications into the future (future tense “shall call”), claiming that he will continue to call this moment “death among the apple trees” forever.

This shift in tenses means Neville’s narrative contains both the past and the future. This shift performs a similar function to that of the lyric present in other passages: though the experiences relayed by the lyric present are immediate ones that happen in real time, the self experiences them as having timeless immediacy. Thus, the lyric present can contain the present and be outside time simultaneously. Take, for instance, a passage from one of Rhoda’s soliloquies: “I choose out across the hall some unknown face and can hardly drink my tea when she whose name I do not know sits opposite. I choke. [ . . . ] I imagine these nameless, these immaculate people, watching me from behind bushes. I leap high to excite their admiration. At night, in bed, I excite their complete wonder. I often die pierced with arrows to win their tears” (33). These lyric present verbs (“I choose out,” “I choke,” “I imagine,” “I leap high,” “I excite,”
“I die”) do not just describe the present actions of Rhoda’s self but seem to contain her self’s 
essence”; these verbs represent continuous acts that Rhoda uses to describe her “self.” Rhoda 
always does or is these actions, for they comprise her self-narrative.

After Susan is devastated by witnessing Jinny kiss Louis, Bernard distracts her with a 
story. As he makes up the story in real time, both he and Susan experience the events of his story 
as immediate and as timeless, as if they were reading from a storybook: Bernard says, “Put your 
foot on this brick. Look over the wall. That is Elvedon. The lady sits between the two long 
windows, writing” (12). Moreover, Bernard tells Susan this story of the lady writing and the 
gardeners sweeping to quiet her fears; its creation, in other words, is motivated. The self, 
Bernard’s story intimates, is a necessary illusion that is felt as both immediate and timeless and 
is ultimately motivated by the fear of death and the inevitable dissolution of the self.

_The Waves_, however, is ultimately just as preoccupied with how easily self-narratives can 
be smashed and must be remade as with how we continuously make up these stories we never 
stop telling ourselves. And what can destroy one’s self-narrative is paradoxically what makes it 
possible—the presence of others. The central metaphor of the waves is, as Monson claims, a 
model for cyclical subjectivity but more specifically suggests a cyclical intersubjectivity: each 
“thick stroke mov[es], one after [the] other, beneath the surface, follow[s] [the] other, pursu[es] 
[the] other, perpetually” (3). The impact of one character upon another, then, both destroys one 
character’s coherent narrative and motivates self-redefinition.

Toward the end of his “summing up,” Bernard addresses his silent listener directly, 

Oh, but there is your face. I catch your eye. I, who had been thinking myself so 
vast, a temple, a church, a whole universe, unconfined and capable of being 
everywhere on the verge of things and here too, am now nothing but what you
see—an elderly man, rather heavy, grey above the ears, who (I see myself in the
glass) leans one elbow on the table, and holds in his left hand a glass of old
brandy. That is the blow you have dealt me. (244)

This blow recalls Bernard’s comment that Neville had rent his defenses with his “astonishing
fine rapier” earlier when he proclaimed: “You are not Byron; you are your self” (72). There,
Bernard had claimed that we are many more selves than our friends think. Yet the stranger’s
“blow,” which, like Neville’s earlier “stab,” “contracts” Bernard’s many selves into a static
image, is also what motivates Bernard’s final summing-up; this chance meeting of an unknown
person causes him to “try to break off, [t]here at th[e] table, what he call[s] ‘his life’” (230).
Hence, even though others see us as mere “shells” of people, we continue to try to communicate
our self-narratives to others; Bernard’s final speech “dramatizes” “the tenacity of our hold on the
illusions by which we live,” and one of these illusions is that we can successfully relay our many
selves to other listeners, even to ourselves (Dick 44).

The face and the looking-glass: the crisis of intersubjectivity

Elizabeth Alsop, in her study of the poetics of speech in modernist fiction, claims that the
structure of a text’s “staging of spoken language” might hold some meaning apart from its
semantic content (2). “[M]anifest affects,” a term Alsop coins, “might be telegraphed less
through discrete fictional utterances, and more through the larger system or architecture of
utterances that emerges in a given [modernist] narrative” (2). Alsop continues with an analysis of
the discursive structures of Henry James’s late fiction, concluding that late James’s characters’
“speech practices reflect what could be called a collective desideratum, an aspiration to some
form of intimacy that if only obliquely expressed in the narrative, is more emphatically broadcast
in its discursive structures” (4). Alsop’s approach here—reading quoted speech as rhetorical structure—could be very productive when applied to *The Waves*. Indeed, although each of the characters is easily distinguished from the others by what I will call “markers,” such as repeated images or phrases that serve as *leitmotivs* throughout the narrative, critics have noted that Bernard’s rhetorical use of language overlaps at points with that of the unnamed narrator of the italicized interludes preceding each section. While this fact has been used to support an argument for Bernard’s status as narrator, or master, of the text, the interludes’ narrator also speaks using the “markers” of other characters. For instance, the fifth section’s interlude concludes: “[t]he waves fell; withdrew and fell again, like the thud of a *great beast stamping*” (Louis’s marker) (123, emphasis mine). And the concluding lines of section two, “[t]he waves *drummed* on the shore, like turbaned warriors, like turbaned men with poisoned *assegais* who, whirling their arms on high, advance upon the feeding flocks, the white sheep,” echo Rhoda’s description of a procession, “[t]here is a dancing and a *drumming*, like the dancing and *drumming* of naked men with *assegais*” (60, 115, emphasis mine).

That Bernard most often echoes both the interlude narrator and the others points not to his privileged status but rather to his inclination to occupy others’ perspectives. I will turn later to instances in which Bernard explicitly not only sees what the others see when he creates a willow tree but uses their valuations, or markers (specifically Rhoda’s and Jinny’s), to describe what he has seen. Although each of the characters is distinguished by textual markers, then, the rhetorical structure of the speeches points to an Alsopian “manifest affect,” a *textual desire*—occurring across speech acts and not linked to any particular speaker—for self-narrativization by means of a continually shifting perspective that absorbs others’ self-narratives.
This desire seeks to counteract the violence of being “contracted by another person into a single being,” the violence often associated, in both The Waves and Woolf’s shorter fiction, with a looking-glass (72). On 28 May 1929, the date on the earlier of the two typescripts of “The Looking-Glass: A Reflection,” Woolf “noted in her diary that she felt ‘no great impulse’ to begin The Moth [The Waves]” (CSF 306). “Looking-Glass,” as noted in chapter one, opens with the line “People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms any more than they should leave open cheque books or letters confessing some hideous crime” and closes with the line “People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms” (221, 225). Why the repeated injunction against looking-glasses? Woolf characterizes the nature of the looking-glass reflections as both fixed and eternal in these lines from “Looking-Glass” and The Waves, respectively: “[b]ut, outside, the looking-glass reflected the hall table, the sunflowers, the garden path so accurately and so fixedly that they seemed held there in their reality unescapably. It was a strange contrast—all changing here, all stillness there”; “[r]immed in a gold circle the looking-glass held the scene immobile as if everlasting in its eye” (CSF 221; W 174, emphasis mine).

When the narrator of “Looking-Glass” finally espies Isabella, the title character, in her looking-glass, she appears “fixed” and the narrator concludes, devastatingly, that Isabella is “perfectly empty”: “She had no thoughts. She had no friends. She cared for nobody” (225). This violent misperception is a result of the flattening effect of the looking-glass, which “pinion[s]” the body (233). When Bernard sees the face of the silent listener in the final section, he remarks, “I, who had been thinking myself so vast, a temple, a church, a whole universe, unconfined and capable of being everywhere on the verge of things and here too, am now nothing but what you see—an elderly man, rather heavy, grey above the ears, who (I see myself in the glass) leans one elbow on the table, and holds in his left hand a glass of old brandy” (244, emphasis mine).
How to be a modernist writer of the self

Gabrielle McIntire reads Bernard’s final soliloquoy as a “take over” or “siege” of the narration; she claims Bernard effectively “displace[s] the community of speaking voices that has constituted the text thus far” because Woolf is setting up a “dialogic encounter between monologism and heteroglossia” in order to privilege heteroglossic discourse (31). I would argue, instead, that Bernard is the final voice because he has been the character most consistently motivated throughout the novel to narrativize others; if any character is to “absorb” all the others, Bernard is that character because he is a novelist. Novelists, according to Woolf in “Character in Fiction” (1924),

differ from the rest of the world because they do not cease to be interested in character when they have learnt enough about it for practical purposes. They go a step further; they feel that there is something permanently interesting in character in itself. When all the practical business of life has been discharged, there is something about people which continues to seem to them of overwhelming importance, in spite of the fact that it has no bearing whatsoever upon their happiness, comfort, or income. The study of character becomes to them an absorbing pursuit; to impart character an obsession. And this I find it very difficult to explain: what novelists mean when they talk about character, what the impulse is that urges them so powerfully every now and then to embody their view in writing. (SE 39, emphasis mine)

All the characters in The Waves are highly motivated to self-narrativize and to include their narrativizations of others in their own self-narratives. Louis, for instance, narrativizes Rhoda standing at the blackboard in the first section: “And as she stares at the chalk figures, her
mind lodges in those white circles, it steps through those white loops into emptiness, alone. They have no meaning for her. She has no answer for them. She has no body as the others have. And I, who speak with an Australian accent, whose father is a banker in Brisbane, do not fear her as I fear the others” (16, emphasis mine). Here, Louis’s narrativization of Rhoda functions to refer back to his own self-narrative and why he specifically, according to his self-narrative as the son of a banker from Brisbane (a phrase he and others repeat endlessly throughout the text), relates to her in the way in which he does. Note, too, that Louis makes the claim that Rhoda is distinct from the others because she has no body, a claim very close to the one Rhoda endlessly repeats, although the first mention does not occur until section two: “I have no face” (25).

Bernard and Jinny, however, are the only characters who actively seek out unknown others as an “absorbing pursuit.” Jinny, always looking to the door to see who is coming into the room, “catch”es people—a judge, a millionaire, a man with an eyeglass—“decipher[s] the hieroglyphs written on other people’s faces” because she is “infinitely curious and do[es] not know what is to come” (144, 145, 143). Though Jinny “reads” faces, Bernard is the only character to fully inhabit those qualities of the novelist Woolf outlines in “Character in Fiction.” In his second story to an audience of one (the first was the story of Elvedon he told to Susan to comfort her after she witnessed Jinny kiss Louis), Bernard tells Neville the story of Dr. and Mrs. Crane. The inadequacy of this story is foregrounded as Bernard breaks off with “But stories that follow people into their private rooms are difficult. I cannot go on with this story” (39).

Though his stories may trail off, Bernard “can never read a book in a railway carriage without asking, Is he a builder? Is she unhappy?” (61) Much later, he wonders, upon seeing “an expression in the tail of the eye of the hairdresser as if something interested him in the street[,] ‘What interested the hairdresser? What did the hairdresser see in the street?’” and muses that it is
this “curiosity, envy, admiration, interest in hairdressers and the like” that “bring[s] [him] to the surface,” that recalls him to the body and the material world (234). Indeed, Bernard’s motivation to create narrative sets him apart from the other characters. “A born storyteller, and naturally gregarious, Bernard displays a novelist’s curiosity about other people which licenses him to imagine their feelings, and finally to act as the book’s central consciousness,” Julia Briggs comments (249). But it is not only Bernard’s function as storyteller that “licenses” him to “sum up” in the ninth and final section of The Waves. Nor does this section “performatively enact heteroglossia’s failure” (McIntire 33). Rather, Bernard, as the figure of not only the artist—recall that both Neville and Louis are poets—but more specifically as the figure of the novelist, narrativizes all the others in the process of his self-narrativization because he is the character who has always been the most preoccupied with seeing as if he occupied the others’ positions; he is the character who has most completely experienced his life through the others’ experience of their lives.

In section one, the lyric present (Cohn) morphs into the past tense as Louis recounts being kissed by Jinny (“She has found me. I am struck on the nape of the neck. She has kissed me. All is shattered” [8]), Jinny recounts kissing Louis (“‘Is he dead?’ I thought, and kissed you” [8]), Susan recounts having witnessed the kiss (“I saw her kiss him” [9]), and Bernard recounts Susan’s affective response to the kiss (“I saw you go. As you passed the door of the tool-house I heard you cry, ‘I am unhappy’” [10]). Susan does not actually cry out “I am unhappy”; instead, desiring to isolate herself and examine her anguish far away from the eyes of the others, she runs past Bernard and Neville: “They will not find me. I shall eat nuts and peer for eggs through the brambles and my hair will be matted and I shall sleep under hedges and drink water from ditches and die there” (9). Bernard reads Susan’s grief by reading her “handkerchief screwed into a ball”
and her eyes, “narrow as cats’ eyes before they spring” (9). But Bernard does not only read Susan’s anguish, for her anguish becomes his own. Later, in section nine, as Bernard constructs an argument about “how incompletely we are merged in our own experiences,” he claims to have observed “some witless servant laughing at the top of the house” as she whirred the wheel of the sewing-machine round and round “even in the midst of my anguish when, twisting her pocket-handkerchief, Susan cried, ‘I love; I hate’” (207, emphasis mine). Bernard also pointedly juxtaposes his affective response to Susan’s anguish as over against Neville’s: “It was Susan who cried, that day when I was in the tool-house with Neville; and I felt my indifference melt. Neville did not melt. ‘Therefore,’ I said, ‘I am myself, not Neville,’ a wonderful discovery” (201). It was Susan’s “wet pocket-handkerchief, and the sight of her little back heaving up and down like a pump-handle, sobbing for what was denied her” that “screwed [Bernard’s] nerves up” (201). The “forces we fight against” were first evident at this primal scene and motivated Bernard’s first narrative, as they do his last.

That Bernard’s final speech is “overtly public,” as Snaith points out, told to a specific man with whom Bernard dines, suggests that the six speakers’ selves exist just as much as a function of Bernard’s (or anyone else’s) narrativization of them as they do of their own (84). Indeed, as Laura Marcus attests, “each of the six creates the others’ lives by incorporating elements of [the others’] stories into his or her own” (134). Though each of the characters narrativizes the others, creating them, Bernard is the only one who is explicit about this process: “Let me then create you [Neville]. (You have done as much for me)” (68). Yet even the two Bernard names the “authentics,” claiming they “exist most completely in solitude,” Louis and Rhoda, do, contra Bernard, “need the illumination of other peoples’ eyes” to be themselves (95). Even Rhoda, provoked to speech by Neville’s “Let Rhoda speak, whose face I see reflected
mistily in the looking-glass opposite” (113), claims her solitary wanderings into distant lands begin from the presence of the others: “[T]hese pilgrimages, these moments of departure, start always in your presence, from this table, these lights, from Percival and Susan, here and now. Always I see the grove over your heads, between your shoulders, or from a window when I have crossed the room at a party and stand looking down into the street” (114). Even when “[p]rofoundly self-absorbed, and separated from the lives of others, the individual life is yet dependent on the community for definition and confirmation” (Newman 61). Hence, Woolf’s “one foray exclusively into the private mind retains its public aspect, since the interior monologues are speech rather than thought, and since they are coherent. *The Waves*, although about the conception of self, is as much about public stories as private, about the linguistic process of bringing the private self to a listener, or a reader” (Snaith 86).

Woolf has Bernard “absorb all those scenes” because he is most motivated to rewrite his self as a direct result of the presence of others; he claims, “I am made and remade continually. Different people draw different words from me. Thus there is not one person but fifty people whom I want to sit beside tonight. [. . . ] I shall go into more rooms, more different rooms, than any of you” (110). Indeed, by the ninth section, Bernard has most completely absorbed the others’ self-narratives into his own (*D III*: 339). For instance, one night, while “s[u]nk down on a sofa in a corner,” Bernard sees “two figures standing with their backs to the window against the branches of a spreading willow” (226). “With a shock of emotion [he] feels, ‘There are figures without features robed in beauty’” (226, emphasis mine). Rhoda, in section three, also sees two people—cut out against the night sky near the railings of a square—upon exiting a drawing-room and coming out onto a balcony. She, too, had found “faces rid of features, robed in beauty” (86, emphasis mine).
Harvena Richter, in *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage* (1970), argues that “[i]n *The Waves*, Woolf takes the self of a single being, ultimately represented by Bernard, and slices it into six sections which personify, on a varying number of levels, the conscious and unconscious selves and drives within the human personality” (120). The consensus among many critics remains that Bernard is the “single” consciousness that has been split into all the “parts”—or other characters—during the course of the narrative. But, as Phelan points out, this interpretation “den[ies] the reading experience of the novel” (note 7). Woolf’s decision to have Bernard “absorb” the others’ scenes is not an authorial sanction of his character or even of his evaluations of the other characters: I am not arguing that Bernard is being privileged above all the others in the final section. *The way he reads* the others, however, *is* being privileged, as Molly Hite attests in her introduction to the 2006 Harcourt edition:

> the extreme density of the descriptions, the intensity of the passions, and the play of humor, resentment, abjection, care, infatuation, interest, vivacity, depression, and courage within phrases, sentences, and soliloquies, as well as among the speakers, suggest that rather than rushing to decide where to assign value, *we might try instead to absorb* all the disparate elements of the saturated moment. (lxiv, emphasis mine)

This method is the same one Woolf expounds in her “How Should One Read a Book?” (*The Second Common Reader* [1932]), as Hite notes. “[T]o absorb all the disparate elements of the saturated moment,” Bernard occupies the different subject positions of his friends and senses, perceives as if there were “no division between [him] and them”; he feels acutely “I am you” and continues to explain: “Here on my brow is the blow I got when Percival fell. Here on the nape of my neck is the kiss Jinny gave Louis. My eyes fill with Susan’s tears. I see far away, quivering
like a gold thread, the pillar Rhoda saw, and *feel the rush of the wind* of her flight when she leapt” (241, emphasis mine).

These affective responses parallel Mrs. Dalloway’s affective response to Septimus Warren Smith when she hears news of his death at her party (note also that both Septimus’s and Rhoda’s leaps are acts of suicide), and Bernard can possess such visions as Rhoda’s pillar because he has listened attentively to the other speakers’ self-narrativizations and has even, by the end, begun to speak in the valuations of the others. He has, in effect, become the narrator—absorbing each of the speakers’ dramatic soliloquies into free indirect discourse, organized at one point around each of their visions of a willow tree he creates. “I was saying there was a willow tree,” begins Bernard’s story. First, “Neville, for example, sat with me on the turf,” he continues. As Bernard sits with Neville on the turf near the willow tree, Bernard “follow[s] [Neville’s] gaze,” through the branches, to a punt on the river, and a young man eating bananas from a paper bag.” “The scene,” Bernard says, “[is] cut out with such intensity and [is] so permeated with the quality of [Neville’s] vision that for a moment [Bernard] [can] see it too” (210).

Next, Bernard sees the willow as Rhoda “saw it, gr[owing] on the verge of a grey desert where no bird sang. The leaves shriveled as she looked at them, tossed in agony as she passed them. The trams and omnibuses roared hoarse in the street, ran over rocks and sped foaming away. Perhaps *one pillar*, sunlit, stood in *her desert by a pool* where wild beasts came down stealthily to drink” (211, emphasis mine). These descriptors recall Rhoda’s “pilgrimage” to Oxford Street to buy stockings and pick violets to offer to Percival after he has died: then, she had mused, “We will gallop together over desert hills, where the swallow dips her wings in dark pools and the pillars stand entire” (135, emphasis mine).
“Then Jinny came. She flashed her fire over the tree. She was like a crinkled poppy, febrile, thirsty with the desire to drink dry dust. [. . . ] So little flames zigzag over the cracks in the dry earth” (note the presence of Jinny’s markers here: earlier, she had described herself dancing in this way: “I flicker [. . . ] I leap like one of those flames that run between the cracks of the earth [. . . ] I catch fire” [32]) (211). Jinny “made the willows dance, but not with illusion; for she saw nothing that was not there” (211). Bernard, seeing as Jinny sees, also sees nothing that was not there: “It was a tree; there was the river; it was afternoon; here we were; I in my serge suit; she in green” (211). Next, “[t]hrough [Louis’s] landscape[,] the tram squealed; the factory poured its acrid fumes” (211). When Louis gets up and leaves, “[they] all got up; [they] all went. But [Bernard], pausing, looked at the tree, and as [he] looked in autumn at the fiery and yellow branches, some sediment formed; [he] formed; a drop fell; [he] fell—that is, from some completed experience [he] had emerged” (211–2). If we have seen, in chapter four, the world differently, as does Lily Briscoe, through the eyes of Mrs. Ramsay’s intersubjective vision, here Bernard strives to see through each of the other character’s eyes as well as to narrate that vision using the others’ markers (a skill of Mrs. Dalloway’s).

Bernard’s story-making, however, is not unproblematic. Neville is the most outspoken critic of what he evaluates as unethical phrase-making: “But what did Bernard feel for the plumber [he met on the train]? Did he not only wish to continue the sequence of the story he never stops telling himself? [. . . ] We are all phrases in Bernard’s story, things he writes down in his notebook under A or under B. He tells our story with extraordinary understanding, except of what we most feel” (55, emphasis mine). Moreover, the most damning account of Bernard’s method is his own:
But if I find myself in company with other people, words at once begin to make smoke rings—see how phrases at once begin to wreath off my lips. It seems that a match is set to a fire; *something burns*. An elderly and apparently prosperous man, a traveller, now gets in. [. . .] I wish to add to my collection of valuable observations upon the true nature of human life. My book will certainly run to many volumes, embracing every known variety of man and woman. I fill my mind with whatever happens to be the contents of a room or a railway carriage as one fills a fountain-pen in an inkpot. I have a steady unquenchable thirst. [. . .] As we exchange these few but amiable remarks about country houses, I furbish him up and make him *concrete*. He is indulgent as a husband but not faithful; a small builder who employs a few men. In local society he is important; is already a councillor, and perhaps in time will be mayor. *He wears a large ornament, like a double tooth torn up by the roots, made of coral, hanging at his watch-chain.*

Walter J. Trumble is the sort of name that would fit him. He has been in America, on a business trip with his wife, and a double room in a smallish hotel *cost him a whole month’s wages. His front tooth is stopped with gold.* (53–4, emphasis mine)

Bernard’s detailed observations of and speculations about this man’s profession, wages, and physical appearance parallel those of Woolf’s Mr. Bennett in “Character in Fiction.” Instead of being motivated by the *impression* of the fellow traveler, “a character imposing itself upon another person”—similarly described as “like a smell of burning”—as is Woolf’s narrator in “Character,” Bernard is lit within by his own linguistic proficiency and by his “collector’s” instinct (42, 41). Neville’s objection that Bernard’s narratives do not include “what [his characters] most feel” is also Woolf’s objection to Bennett: “[Bennett’s] characters live
abundantly, even unexpectedly, but it remains to ask how do they live, and what do they live for?” (SE 7) But, if Bernard characterizes himself as Woolf characterizes Bennett in “Character,” Peter Kaye rightly argues that “the movement of Bernard [across the book] is a movement away from Bennett-like writing toward Woolf-like writing” (2). Tamar Katz also points to Bernard’s “alternative narrative form[s]” as “oppos[ing] closure and unity with the values of profusion and excess” (246).

In the final section, Bernard does narrativize what the others most feel—Susan’s anguish, Rhoda’s fear and agony. Moreover, it is the presence of the others, providing shocks like the falling waves, that provoked Bernard’s very first self-narrative, “I see a ring hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light”; now that his self, according to his account, is dead, Bernard asserts that a hypothetical young man or woman has nothing new to tell him; if the woman were to get up and leave she would not make him look after her, for “[t]he shock of the falling wave which has sounded all [his] life, which woke [him] so that [he] saw the gold loop on the cupboard, no longer makes quiver what [he] hold[s]” (5, 243, emphasis mine).

Not only is Bernard’s self-narrativization from the beginning of the novel, then, provoked by the presence of the others (the shock of the waves), but his self is also “made to quiver,” destabilized, by those presences, hence provoked to continue rewriting itself using the language of perception: “under your [listener’s] gaze with that compulsion on me I begin to perceive this, that and the other. The clock ticks; the woman sneezes; the waiter comes—there is a gradual coming together, running into one, acceleration and unification” (245). “With [the others] [Bernard] [is] many-sided” because they—as well as he—create his self and because they provoke his continuous re-self-narrativization (95). When his self has died, “no one sees [him] and [he] change[s] no more” (245). The characters of The Waves, then, are not “insubstantial
selves without a world” but selves that owe their very substance, their self-narratives, to the presence of the others who also make up that world (Zwerdling 12). Their perspectives become “aspects of Bernard’s enlarged vision” as he emerges finally as a model modernist writer of the self (Dick 41).
CHAPTER 5 NOTES

77. This reference seems to be to the famous “madwoman in the attic” (Bertha Rochester) in *Jane Eyre*, whose laughter Jane mistakes as being that of the servant Grace Poole’s. Susan’s marker “I love, I hate” also ties her to Charlotte Brontë, whom Woolf characterizes in this way in *Common Reader*: “When Charlotte wrote she said with eloquence and splendor and passion ‘I love,’ ‘I hate,’ ‘I suffer’” (159).

78. Banfield (*Phantom Table*) argues that Jacob Flanders “consists of Mrs. Papworth’s Sanders and Mrs. Norman’s young man in the carriage as much as of his private experience” (332).

79. Note the similarities here between Bernard’s following Neville’s gaze and the intersubjective vision of *Lighthouse*’s characters, namely Mrs. Ramsay.
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