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“The World Without a Self”: Non-Being and Ontological Leveling
in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*

Morgan Ashley Lewis

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

“The World Without a Self”: Non-Being and Ontological Leveling in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*

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Virginia Woolf is perhaps best known for her explorations and depictions of human consciousness. However, more contemporary science reveals that consciousness is only a small part of what constitutes our brain function. Rather, there are a dual functions within the human brain: consciousness and cognition. This nonconscious cognition is what allows us to see patterns, to make judgements, and to act reflexively, while consciousness is the function that shapes our individual identity and the story we tell about ourselves.

Though previous studies have focused primarily on Woolf’s representations of consciousness in her short stories and novels, there is much left to be explored when we look at her works through the lens of nonconscious cognitions, or as Woolf might call them, “moments of non-being” (*Sketch* 70). In my reading of *The Waves*, I leverage cognitive theory and new materialism to demonstrate how Woolf creates a world in which humankind—and therefore consciousness—is not entirely absent, but radically decentered. What remains is a world that is purely nonconscious cognition: still full of life and movement, but resistant to the individual identity and narrative structure so deeply sought after by humans. This cognitive project becomes especially apparent in the juxtaposition to the human characters’ consciousness-driven narratives about their individual views of the world. I suggest that in the italicized interludes interspersed throughout *The Waves*, Woolf is writing moments of non-being, what Bernard calls the “world seen without a self”—a world in which human life is only marginal, leaving a quiet scenery full of microscopic action that often remains unseen in the self-focused, stream-of-consciousness narration of the chapters (*Waves* 287). I argue that by marginalizing humankind and shedding consciousness in the interludes of *The Waves*, Woolf places humans on the same ontological plane as the rest of the world. In this process, the scenes lose individual identity and traditional narrative, but reveal a connection with lively materials outside of the human self and with the rhythmic circularity of the universe.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, cognition, consciousness, *The Waves*, interludes, ontology, form

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“The World Without a Self”: Non-Being and Ontological Leveling
in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*

Lauded as Virginia Woolf’s most experimental novel, *The Waves* eludes definitive genre classification—and intentionally so: Woolf writes that the project was to be “an abstract mystical eyeless book” (*Diary III* 203). She also describes her novel as a new kind of drama or a “playpoem,” making it difficult for scholars to place it squarely in the “novel” category because of the avant-garde form incorporating elements of poetry, drama, and the novel. This genre-crossing was perhaps Woolf’s attempt to “saturate” the novel: “The poets [succeed] by simplifying: practically everything is left out. I want to put practically everything in; yet to saturate. That is what I want to do in *The Moths*.¹ It must include nonsense, fact, sordidity: but made transparent” (*Diary III* 210). Paul Stasi writes that this saturation is “subjective intensity; it is a text composed almost entirely of moments of being” (441). I, however, find that her goal for “saturation,” was to include every moment that composes a life, while still infusing even the mundane moments with irrefutable importance the way each word in a line of poetry is crucial to the whole.² For Woolf, saturation requires that each word and phrase be carefully chosen to express the most meaning—subjective or otherwise. To accomplish this, *The Waves* breaks into “acts”: episodic soliloquies of stream-of-consciousness rooted in the minds of the six main characters, which are broken up by italicized “interludes” that function as intervals to break up the nine acts of the characters’ lives. While writing *The Waves*, Woolf speaks of these interludes

¹ As I will discuss in further depth later, *The Moths* was an early working title for the project that became *The Waves*.

² In this way, Woolf adheres to Ezra Pound’s poetry manifesto, “A Few Don’ts,” which declares definitively that poetry should treat its subjects directly, should be musical, and should be economical—each word contributing to the whole.

as “very difficult, yet...essential; so as to bridge & also give a background,” indicating their significance to her project (*Diary III* 285).

Scholarship on *The Waves* has focused predominantly on the soliloquies, though several scholars have noted the importance of the interludes. While the novel’s compelling characters and experiments with stream-of-consciousness in the soliloquy sections certainly warrant this investigation, the interludes are rarely given the attention that the novel dedicates to them—granting the scenes a space on center stage, completely separate from the characters’ filtered storytelling. Frank McConnell notes that the interludes are “deliberate and highly effective attempts to present a phenomenal world without the intervention of human consciousness, a world of blind things which stands as a perpetual challenge to the attempts of the six monologists to seize, translate, and ‘realize’ their world” (35). While I agree with McConnell’s characterization of the interludes as a world beyond the conscious grasp of the six characters, I don’t believe that the text reflects his argument that the natural world of the interludes is “simply and sublimely irrelevant” to the humans that inhabit it, and vice versa. Carrie Rohman reads the interludes as “the inhuman rhythms, the cosmological forces that in once sense stand outside of narrowly human or conventionally humanist preoccupations” (14). Rohman connects the human artistic sensibility with the sexual selection and mating rituals of the animal world, positing that Jinny is the best example of these subconscious rhythms and actions. This paper aligns with Rohman’s idea that the interludes represent something subconscious or instinctual within the human mind. Most recently, Paul Stasi has argued that the interludes represent a “world without humans,” and he goes on to discuss the subsequent ethical obligation of humans within the Anthropocene. Stasi, like McConnell, sees a fundamental divide between the human and surrounding natural world, but Stasi sees these interludes as an Anthropocentric world. He

therefore finds issue with their formal execution because “these vignettes...are laced with human meaning: they must, in some basic sense, be understood as originating in some form of thinking, some form of imaginative consciousness” (445).³ In other words, according to Stasi, the interludes can never fully convey a world without humans, because human thought itself is inescapable in written text. Yet, while Stasi argues that, as human beings, “we are always already thinking subjects” he does not separate “thought” into the two separate functions—cognition and consciousness—as I do (450). In portraying human thought as a single function, then, Stasi misses the agency and connectivity possible on a cognitive level, as well as the identity-forming, narrative ability of consciousness. Stasi’s argument that Anthropocentric ethics require that we acknowledge that humans are unavoidably conscious beings is certainly important to consider in the wake of our current climate crisis; however, I maintain that fictional literary form affords Woolf the ability to transcend the confines of reality to imagine and articulate scenes from a human cognitive perspective without the self-centered function of human consciousness.

Though these scholars have begun to explore the purpose and result of Woolf’s interludes, these sections of literary experimentation deserve more investigation, for, as Woolf herself admits, she originally did not intend to have characters in the novel at all (*Diary IV* 47). Though the rise of ecocritical thought has led scholars to focus more thoroughly on Woolf’s uses of nonhuman nature⁴—which features prominently in these interludes—little attention has been

³ Stasi, citing Claire Colebrook and Rosi Braidotti, also finds that new materialism is an insufficient lens to explicate these interludes because “the human is once again understood to be exceptional, even if only in its destructive capacity” and “humans must be situated with an expanded idea of life, but this cannot be achieved by ignoring our specific form of existence” (440–41). While his argument against new materialism is certainly compelling, I find the theory a useful one for approaching Woolf’s texts, which are especially concerned with meaningful connections and vitality in all its forms.

⁴ Though ecocritical theory is closely intertwined in both vital materialism and cognitive theory, I will not engage with ecocriticism directly within the confines of this paper. For more on ecocritical readings of Virginia Woolf and *The Waves*, see Bonnie Kime Scott’s *In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and Modernist Uses of Nature*, Jeffrey Matthews McCarthy’s *Green Modernism: Nature and the English Novel*, Christina Alt’s *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature*, and Kelly Sultzbach’s *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination*.

given to reading and analyzing the interludes themselves. In recent literary theory, new materialism gets comparatively close to the kind of non-being and nonhuman vitality that Woolf captures in *The Waves*, but misses the importance of the formal execution. Cognitive theory also addresses Woolf's psychological project and draws near the concept of human/nonhuman interconnectivity, and yet cannot quite capture the complexity of non-being or nonconscious moments. Additionally, while new materialism speaks to the content of the interludes themselves, cognitive theory begins to address the mode of perceiving portrayed in the interludes of *The Waves*. In bringing previous theory and criticism together and studying the interludes as a cohesive piece of their own, I find that Woolf's text operates on a complex level that eludes theoretical pinning and feels insufficient when discussed in terms of formal, avant-garde innovation alone.

As this article will show, Woolf uses *The Waves* to create a world in which humankind—and therefore consciousness—is not entirely absent, but radically decentered. What remains is a world that is purely nonconscious cognition: still full of life and movement, but resistant to the individual identity and narrative structure so deeply sought after by humans. This cognitive project becomes especially apparent in the juxtaposition to the human characters' consciousness-driven narratives about their individual views of the world. I suggest that in the italicized interludes interspersed throughout *The Waves*, Woolf is writing moments of non-being, what Bernard calls the "world seen without a self"—a world in which human life is only marginal, leaving a quiet scenery full of microscopic action that often remains unseen in the self-focused, stream-of-consciousness narration of the chapters (*Waves* 287). I argue that by marginalizing humankind and shedding consciousness in the interludes of *The Waves*, Woolf places humans on the same ontological plane as the rest of the world. In this process, the scenes lose individual

identity and traditional narrative, but reveal a connection with lively materials outside of the human self and with the rhythmic circularity of the universe.

Consciousness, Cognition, and Vital Materialism

Woolf's interest in capturing both interior psychology and exterior surroundings is likely a result of her interest in the scientific discoveries and intellectual associations at the time. The turn of the twentieth century saw Einstein's theory of relativity, Bohr's model of the atom, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, and Hubble's discovery of a galaxy outside the Milky Way. Through her work with the Hogarth Press and the Bloomsbury Group, Woolf was steeped in conversations regarding these advancements.⁵ Morag Shiach notes that publications like *The Athenaeum*, to which Woolf herself contributed, disseminated this scientific knowledge to a wide audience (62). Shiach finds that Woolf turns to these physical sciences, especially Rutherford's atom, "to support her understanding of modernist fiction as a dynamic and abstract capturing of 'life' with its gaps and crevices" (64). Michael Boulter also evinces Woolf's association with scientific thinkers of her time, particularly her interest in the natural sciences, observing that "her writing about insects was to be much like it was about people: how they moved and interacted" (125). Perhaps most significant to Woolf's work, though, were studies of consciousness, including influential theories from psychologists like Freud, James, and Jung.

Woolf's oeuvre evidences her fascination with consciousness and her efforts to capture life in its ordinary entirety and acknowledge each one of the "incessant shower of innumerable atoms" that fall upon the mind ("Modern Fiction" 160). This objective is especially apparent in

⁵ Derek Ryan explores the ways in which Woolf was influenced by the "philosophy-physics" of the time in *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory: Sex, Animal, Life*, noting particularly the work of Planck, Bohr, Einstein, Heisenberg, and other notable contemporary scientists, especially in her portrayal of vital materialism in *The Waves* (171–197).

The Waves, one of her last published works, with the incorporation of the interludes between episodes of stream-of-consciousness narrative. These nonhuman interludes still reveal a persistent, vibrant life, attributing significance to nonhuman ontology and the moments of non-being that typically pass unnoticed by human consciousness.

Virginia Woolf writes of the modernist project: “[The novelist] has to have the courage to say that what interests him is no longer ‘this’ but ‘that’: out of ‘that’ alone must he construct his work. For the moderns, ‘that’—the point of interest—lies very likely in the dark places of psychology” (“Modern Fiction” 162). Woolf is especially concerned with capturing these “dark places” as well as the process of a thought as it enters the mind and becomes meaning. She seems particularly invested in how the mind transforms external stimuli into meaningful information about the self—the way that humans form cohesive identities and narratives about themselves, even though life itself is “not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged,” and identity is both malleable and multiplex (“Modern Fiction” 160). In *The Waves*, this becomes particularly apparent in the way that the typical conflict-resolution arc that readers expect from a story is instead obscured by the irresolvable, confluent soliloquies and detached, personless interludes. To capture both the world and the mind holistically, Woolf seems to convey in this novel, a writer cannot be restricted to linear plotlines.

Woolf again shows her interest in this project of depicting psychology and its intersections with selfhood in “A Sketch of the Past”:

Every day includes much more non-being than being...A great part of every day is not lived consciously. One walks, eats, sees things, deals with what has to be done; the broken vacuum cleaner; ordering dinner; writing letters to Mabel; washing; cooking

dinner; bookbinding. When it is a bad day the proportion of non-being is much larger...The real novelist can somehow convey both sorts of meaning. (70)

What Woolf is saying here is that unremarkable moments of non-being are just as—if not more—influential on identity than the briefly interspersed moments of “being”: the memorable moments of transcendence, discovery, and mourning—the moments to which we ascribe so much importance. However, while we are aware of knowledge and personality traits formed by instances of being, the longer stretches of non-being shape us without our perception. Woolf is invested in depicting through literature not only the moments of being, but also the moments of non-being, the forgettable, trivial moments of nonhuman characters, moments that permeate the majority of days and weeks and years.⁶

In approaching Woolf’s exploration of moments of non-being, I’m working with two separate, though interrelated, theories: the first is cognitive theory, which engages with literature using scientific research about the mind, and which I see informing the perspective Woolf uses to articulate the interludes. The second theory is vital materialism, a theory that looks at the liveliness of nonhuman objects, which is most apparent in the content of the interludes.⁷

Cognitive theory has become more popular in recent years, but has its roots in studies of consciousness, which has a much longer history. By the turn of the twentieth century, when Woolf was writing, identifying types or levels of consciousness was a prominent topic of conversation. William James, for example, discusses “fields” of consciousness that lie beyond

⁶ In “Modern Fiction” and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” Woolf critiqued Edwardian authors for their overly detailed accounting of exterior materials and lack of attention to interiority of character; however, Woolf here is interested in elevating materials as things in themselves, deserving of attention and investigation of their own accord. While the Edwardians treated materials as tools for describing character or scene, Woolf treats an object as a being on its own terms—not as it is seen in relation to human life.

⁷ Both theories overlap with ecocriticism, though I’ll address ecocritical thought only lightly within the boundaries of this paper. For more thorough discussions of the intersections of new materialism and ecocriticism in modernist literature, see Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy’s *Green Modernism: Nature and the English Novel* (5-6, 82-83).

the margin of awareness in *Varieties of Religious Experience*: “Our whole past store of memories floats beyond this margin, ready at a touch to come in; and the entire mass of residual powers, impulses, and knowledges that constitute our empirical self stretches continuously beyond it” (232). James recognizes that human cognitive function works beyond human awareness, and yet makes itself known through its influence on observable behavior in the “empirical self.” James finds religious connections with this kind of consciousness that supersedes the self, recounting the story of Dr. Bucke’s experience of “cosmic consciousness,” to illustrate the level of consciousness through which humans can recognize and connect with the vitality of the entire universe.⁸

Freud also addresses this feeling of connection with the exterior world, but with far more skepticism. In the introduction to *Civilization and its Discontents*, he talks about a correspondence with an anonymous friend, in which they discussed their differing beliefs about religious feeling. “It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of ‘eternity,’ a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded, something ‘oceanic’” (8). This feeling not only sounds suspiciously akin to cosmic consciousness but also calls forth the imagery of Woolf’s waves which feature so prominently in her novel. Yet, Freud remains hesitant about the unnamed friend’s description of religious feeling. He insists that these expansive feelings “of indissoluble connection, of belonging inseparably to the external world as a whole” are difficult to classify scientifically, though he continues to try (8–9). Rather than focusing on a consciousness that allows for universal connectivity, however, Freud finds another explanation for extra-marginal consciousness: the “unconscious.”

⁸ Of this cosmic state of mind, Dr. Bucke explains, “I saw that the universe is not composed of dead matter, but is, on the contrary, a living Presence; I became conscious in myself of eternal life” (qtd. in James 399). Through cosmic consciousness, or awareness of the extra-marginal cognitive functions, Bucke is able to acknowledge that same consciousness—or at least aliveness—of surrounding matter and his own placement in that vital world.

Woolf's conception of non-being resembles both James's cosmic consciousness and the Freudian unconscious, but resists aligning with either one fully. For example, Freud believed that the unconscious was the storehouse for deeply rooted anxieties, traumas, and the sex/death drives—repressed biological impulses that would be dangerous to society if they were too close to surface behavior. On the other hand, Woolf's non-being comprises daily thoughtless movements and forgotten feelings: it is life lived on auto-pilot or, as I discuss in this paper, the cognitive function of the brain.

In "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf mentions that bad days typically cause an increase in non-being and so alludes to a type of repression similar to that of the unconscious. When she recounts her sexual assault, Woolf observes that, even as a young child, she felt an instinctive resentment toward the assault. "It proves," she writes, "that Virginia Stephen was not born on the 25th January 1882, but was born many thousands of years ago; and had from the very first to encounter instincts already acquired by thousands of ancestresses in the past" (*Sketch* 69). In this example, Woolf demonstrates that non-being is both a repression of memory and a connection with the universe. By relating her traumatic personal experience to non-being, Woolf demonstrates the similarities of her concept to other contemporary psychological theories, namely those of James and Freud. However, although non-being bears resemblance to Freudian unconscious, it lacks the neuroses and deterministic connotations of the unconscious. Non-being is less rooted in fear and shameful thoughts and more a result of instinctive knowledge passed through generations of human experience: it is connective rather than isolating.

Although contemporary neurologists and cognitive theorists have made continued efforts to systematize cognition, none quite capture what Woolf is able to portray in *The Waves*. N. Katherine Hayles asserts—in concert with Woolf—that the cognitive function, which she terms

“nonconscious cognition,” is actually what constitutes the majority of our minds, even though we as humans tend to focus primarily on consciousness.⁹ In her book *Unthought*, Hayles suggests, “Once we overcome the (mis)perception that humans are the only important or relevant cognizers on the planet, a wealth of new questions, issues, and ethical considerations come into view” (11). What Hayles implies here is that as humans consider the full implications of the cognitive similarities between humans, nonhuman organisms, and nonliving cognizers like computers, the ethics of our treatment of and relationships to those entities begin to change. It is Hayles’s theory of nonconscious cognition that I see playing out most clearly in the interludes of *The Waves*, not only in the experimental form and narrative perspective of the interludes, but in the content and focus of the interludes themselves.

In my reading of *The Waves*, what will become clear is that the novel’s unique literary form is able to accomplish what other efforts to systematize cognition or consciousness cannot do. In writing experimental fiction rather than empirical scientific research, Woolf avoids drawing empirical, abstract models that oversimplify the complex, interconnected processes of cognitive function. In the same way that James takes religious experience at its word, Woolf explicates the nonconscious mode of thought seriously in all its intricacy, rather than trying to fit it into a rigid structure—which almost always misses the mark in some way. Although Woolf wrote *The Waves* well before the ascent of cognitive science as a discipline, her work

⁹ In the mid-twentieth century, Julian Jaynes argued the pre-evolutionary existence of a “bicameral” mind in Neanderthals and ancient humans, a kind of mind that processed information without consciousness at all (84–99). More recently, Rupert Sheldrake outlines a theory of “morphic fields,” which asserts that cognitive reactions are garnered through collective memory, which then forms habits that are passed down genetically and drive evolutionary change (108–127). These morphic fields span not only vertically to past generations but horizontally to other beings on a nonconscious level (237–256). In literary theory, Christopher Collins cites the Dual-Process Theory in brain function, noting that System 1 is the fast, automatic, more ancient part of our brain that we share more closely with animals and other people. Meanwhile, System 2 describes the slow, deliberate, more recent development in human brains (31). Collins, therefore, argues that poetics are actually deeply engrained in our brains and date back to a pre-linguistic time.

perceptively depicts different brain functions, interconnectivity, and ontological modes as they are actually experienced in the mind, and perhaps is more successful in this endeavor for her resistance to clear definition.

While cognitive theory alone tends to oversimplify Woolf's psychological project, I find that including vital materialism¹⁰ better accommodates the way in which non-being is portrayed in *The Waves*, especially in the liveliness of nonhuman objects in the interludes. Like cognition, materialism also has history in philosophy that stretches back hundreds of years. For example, the Duchess of Newcastle Margaret Cavendish engaged with similar ideas in natural philosophy as early as the seventeenth century. Cavendish, responding to Descartes and his theory of mind-body dualism, collapses the proposed division between mind and body and asserts that the mind is, along with everything else in the universe, "completely material" (*Stanford Encyclopedia*). This cognizant material is called rational matter and is dispersed to even the smallest fraction of an atom—whether that atom resides in a woman in town, in a hare in the woods, or in a rock on the side of the road.¹¹ Anne Thell writes that Cavendish's philosophy "collapses ontology and epistemology" (9). In other words, a being's aliveness depends on its ability to cognize, and this intelligence is latent in everything—organic and inorganic material alike; this rational matter, which is "infinite, continuous, self-knowing, self-moving, sensitive, and alive," is the core of free will, emotion, and life itself (Thell 8). According to Cavendish, matter itself thinks, makes decisions, and interacts at the most minute, atomic level, which then manifests as larger, visible actions and interactions.

¹⁰ Vital materialism falls under the umbrella of new materialism, a theoretical field that explores the various ways in which objects are agentic forces in the world. I choose vital materialism, coined by Jane Bennett, here because I believe it captures the nuance of an object's "aliveness" as I see it presented in Woolf's work.

¹¹ Specifically, in Cavendish's poem entitled "The Hunting of the Hare," Wat, an innocent woodland hare, is pursued by a hunter and his dogs until he is caught and killed, shedding tears as he dies. The poem is told entirely from Wat's perspective, giving him full narrative power and tracing his emotions during the chase.

Woolf was certainly knowledgeable about Cavendish's plays, philosophies, and even her poems—though her opinion of them was less than favorable.¹² Yet, though Woolf writes severe critiques of Cavendish, she also writes, “There is something noble and Quixotic and high-spirited, as well as crack-brained and bird-witted, about her.”¹³ Her simplicity is so open; her intelligence so active; her sympathy with fairies and animals so true and tender” (*The Common Reader* 78). Despite her distaste for Cavendish's actual body of work, Woolf finds virtue in the way Cavendish writes, especially about nonhuman beings. And, in drawing the reader's focus to objects and attributing livelihood to inorganic objects, Woolf is engaging with Cavendish's philosophies, with her aforementioned “sympathy” with the nonhuman.¹⁴

In more recent theories of vital materialism, Jane Bennett raises the political implications of taking the vitality of nonhuman bodies seriously, which echoes Hayles's claim about focusing on nonconscious cognition over consciousness. Bennett discusses thing-power, or the capacity of objects to “act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (*vii*). Because of the current rise of intelligent technology and the simultaneously dire outlook of climate change, both vital materialism and cognitive theory are increasingly relevant, and have the power to shape future solutions for peaceful coexistence of humans with both nature and technologies. Furthermore, the early twentieth century saw a similar burst of technology and fear for the well-being of the natural world, which makes both theories especially pertinent when investigating Woolf's innovative work.

¹² Brandie Siegfried notes that this harsh opinion may have roots in Woolf's lack of formal education in science and mathematics (12–14).

¹³ In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf writes, “What a vision of loneliness and riot the thought of Margaret Cavendish brings to mind! as if some giant cucumber had spread itself over all the roses and carnations in the garden and choked them to death. What a waste that the woman who wrote ‘the best bred women are those whose minds are civilest’ should have frittered her time away scribbling nonsense and plunging ever deeper into obscurity and folly till the people crowded round her coach when she issued out” (46).

¹⁴ Woolf's sympathy with nonhuman animals is especially apparent in her novel *Flush: A Biography*, a fictional biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's pet Cocker Spaniel.

The World Seen Without a Self

The formal execution of the interludes is certainly unique: because of the repeating juxtaposition and italicized format, the contrast between the narrative style of the soliloquies and that of the interludes is all the more jarring.¹⁵ As the novel progresses, the interludes predominantly focus on one location through a single day, evinced by the sun's rise and fall. Though the scenes are nearly devoid of humans (only two of the nine sections mention human figures—all of whom remain nameless), there are recurring objects that take the stage in each scene: the sun, a house's interior, a few birds, and of course, the waves. The interludes are also written in a voice that is unemotional and distant, yet not entirely omniscient; the narrator has no personality markers and is rendered very nearly invisible. As it moves from entity to entity, giving each element of the scene its due time, no one "character" stands out as more important than the others. There is no judgement, moralizing, or even narrativizing from the speaker. Instead, the voice is merely descriptive of the observable activities happening through the course of a day.

Additionally, the sections are written predominantly in the past tense but imply a current action. The words "now" and "here" are sprinkled through the scenes to indicate the present moment: the fifth section reads, "Now the sun burnt uncompromising, undeniable," and from the sixth section, "Now [the birds] paused in their song as if gluttoned with sound" (148, 165). Or, in some cases, the verb itself switches to present tense, as in the fourth section: "Now and again [the birds'] songs ran together in swift scales like the interlacings of a mountain stream whose waters, meeting, foam and then mix, and hasten quicker and quicker down the same channel

¹⁵ Elicia Clements notes that these "acutely aural interludes...frame and bridge the movements of the larger inter-chapters, surrounding the soliloquies with musicalized language" (168). Yet, these interludes do more than the merely formal or stylistic work of marking section breaks, linking the episodes together, or providing respite from the soliloquies; they portray vibrant life, action, and even a linear arc.

brushing the same broad leaves. But there is a rock; they sever” (109). This switch from past to present tense echoes the suddenness of the water meeting the rock in the stream, but also brings the reader abruptly to the presentness of the scene once again. Through this unusual merging of past and present, the text describes the nature of a moment: as soon as the brain processes an action, the action is over. The moment is fleeting—both here and gone. The combination of these formal elements allows us to read the interludes as representative of cognition or non-being.¹⁶

The first interlude begins in the same vein as Genesis: in indistinguishable, unified darkness until the sun begins to rise and “a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually” (7). Here we see the first stirrings of life.¹⁷ The sun divides the darkness from light, the sea from the sky, the water from the earth, until the sun rises high enough to illuminate the plants in the garden, the birds that begin to chirp, and, finally, the house—evidence of human life, though humans themselves are absent. Though Woolf was a professed atheist, this imagery invokes the Judeo-Christian creation myth—even introducing the materials in the same order.¹⁸ Summoning this myth allows Woolf to express not only a beginning, but *The Beginning*, signaling the later connection Bernard feels

¹⁶ Both Maureen Chun and J. Hillis Miller briefly discuss the interludes: Chun finds that the interludes work together with the soliloquies to demonstrate “an impersonal consciousness, unfixed in subjectivity, [that] both corresponds to and infiltrates the limitless physical world” (54). Miller, in a similar vein, reads the interludes as “a vast impersonal memory bank that stores everything that has ever happened, every thought or feeling of every person,” a center that is attached to the characters, though they are unable to fully access it (668).

¹⁷ Jean Alexander sees the short scenes as playing a mythic role, asserting that “the interludes in their totality must be read as terrestrial history: emergence from chaos, proliferation of life, intense individuation, exhaustion, breakdown of the forms of life, and return to chaos” (173). For Alexander, these interludes signify existential patterns and narratives much larger than the individual lives of the characters. I, however, see these interludes as coming somewhere between the two arguments: in demonstrating the “world without a self,” as Bernard articulates, or “non-being” as Woolf describes in *A Sketch of the Past*, the interludes connect the human and nonhuman from one individual’s cognitive perspective. In this process, they also demonstrate a more universal mythology that places humans in context of the wider surrounding world—showing the relative unimportance of a single life or even the whole human species within the larger scheme of the world’s story.

¹⁸ See Genesis 1 (Authorized King James Version)

to a “primitive self.” If this moment is the initial motion of the waves, which symbolize life that persists, this is the beginning of life itself. Furthermore, the waves are personified, “sighing like a sleeper whose breath comes and goes unconsciously” (7). This line performs two functions: by anthropomorphizing the inorganic waves, Woolf shows that they symbolize human life, and through a metaphor of unconscious action—breathing while asleep—Woolf demonstrates a persistent liveliness in moments of non-being.

The association between the waves and human life becomes more clear as the wave imagery appears consistently throughout the novel. An earlier draft of *The Waves* was entitled *The Moths*, evincing Woolf’s interest in natural sciences and personal “sympathy with animals” that she praises in Cavendish.¹⁹ The moths in the former version perform the same metaphorical function as the waves in the latter, but the shift is essential: while Woolf recognizes resilience and persistence in moths, a moth is still a fairly delicate insect with a brief, individual life. In changing the symbol to the waves, Woolf designates a nonliving material to represent the continuity of human life: a material which in reality is far more consistent and powerful than even a swarm of moths.

Each life is represented by a wave on the surface of the ocean—but a wave has two parts. On the surface, the waves are variable and in constant flux. They converge and diverge, rise and fall, individually and collectively, moving one after the other to crash on the shore, but there is no end to the different waves—the different selves or lives—that are created and obliterated constantly. In the same vein, Tamlyn Monson notes that this wave represents “a process of self-constitution and dissolution”—the rise of the wave symbolizing will and agency, while its fall

¹⁹ Christina Alt explores Virginia Woolf’s interactions with moths and other natural history objects in *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature*. For a more thorough explanation of Woolf’s writing of moths specifically, see pages 147-151. See also Woolf’s essay “The Death of the Moth.”

portrays passivity and disintegration of certainty (174). In either reading, the motion on the surface of these waves demonstrates an unsteadiness of identity and consciousness. Yet, below the crests and troughs of these waves is a far more stable body of water. Below the waves, the water moves slowly and with far more constancy; it does not rupture the way that the surface does. The body of water remains continuous and undivided, and even as the waves form and collapse, the water's mass remains unaffected. Therefore, the shallow motions of these waves represent the conscious, performed, individual self, while the water below represents the cognitive, deep, collective function that connects each person to all humankind. This deeper water, when read this way, symbolizes the constancy of all life on earth—the way it persists long before and long after the life of an individual—a far more apt metaphor than moths.

As the interludes continue, there is an arc of activity. The first four interludes grow increasingly lively: the birds begin to sing “stridently, with passion, with vehemence” and interact enthusiastically with each other, the light sharpens and defines the objects in the house, and the waves fall more regularly “with the energy, the muscularity of an engine” (108-9). In contrast, the final four interludes slow down dramatically. The tide recedes and the dancing “water-coloured jewels with sparks of fire in them” lose their dynamism and become “a wall of grey stone, unpierced by any chink of light” (73; 207). The light that once enlivened the house becomes a “brown tinge [with] some abandonment” and mutes the very colors it previously revealed (183). The birds isolate themselves and stop singing until there is “no sound save the cry of a bird seeking some lonelier tree” (236). In short, the interludes, though they leave humans at the margins, ascribe a human-like vitality to not only nonhuman beings, like the birds and plants, but to inorganic materials like the sun, the waves, and the house. The rise and fall of energy, along with the anthropomorphic metaphors in these interludes, mirrors human

development and the arc of activity in a life. One day is described in terms of an entire human life. However, the interludes also demonstrate that the human development cycle is merely reflective of the larger cycle of life on the earth. All things fall into the rhythm of birth, life, death, rebirth—and humans are a small part of that cycle. By anthropomorphizing nonhuman matter, Woolf creates “not the humanization of landscape, but the assimilation of human into the nonhuman, with both engulfed in the vision of an inhuman eye” (Chun 57). In these brief scenes, Woolf places all ‘things’ on the same plane—no single object emerges as protagonist, and certainly no human. Yet, though humans are nearly nonexistent in these scenes, it is precisely this absence of a “self” that allows for an increased interconnectivity between humans and the natural, material world.

Though humans themselves have been decentralized, there is evidence of human activity through the anthropomorphic metaphors throughout the text. Paul Stasi finds an insufficiency in the text’s attempts to describe a posthuman world because “it is nearly impossible to describe a natural scene without falling back on some anthropomorphic metaphor...The attempt at a neutral seeing, in other words, only reveals the inescapability of human perception and the irredeemably human nature of descriptive language” (444). However, I find that the anthropomorphic metaphors are actually further evidence that these scenes represent human cognition isolated from consciousness. Because I see the interludes as narrated through the lens of human cognition, it is only natural that the brain would make subconscious connections between current observations of nature and previous observations of human behavior. For example, the first interlude personifies the slowly brightening sky:

The sky cleared as if the white sediment there had sunk, or as if the arm of a woman couched beneath the horizon had raised a lamp and flat bars of white, green and yellow,

spread across the sky like blades of a fan. Then she raised her lamp higher and the air seemed to become fibrous and to tear away from the green surface flickering and flaming in red and yellow fibres like the smoky fire that roars from a bonfire. (7)

The text carries this association between the sky and a woman through several of the interludes in the first half of the novel; in the fifth interlude, the sky image becomes “a girl couched on her green-sea mattress tir[ing] her brows with water-globed jewels that sent lances of opal-tinted light falling and flashing in the uncertain air like the flanks of a dolphin leaping, or the flash of a falling blade” (148). In each of these dense metaphors, the cognitive mind is freely associating nature, humans, animals, and objects—connecting the living to the nonliving through similar imagery. The effect is not unlike Eliot’s insistence that the mind of a poet is “a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together” (72). In essence, what we see in the interludes is the receptacle, the perceptive cognitive mind of a poet prior to the interference of consciousness.

The reader can see cognition as a receptacle also when the interludes draw upon imagery from the first soliloquies, which reveal the characters’ minds in early childhood. For example, in the first soliloquy, Louis says, “I hear something stamping...A great beast’s foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps,” and “The beast stamps; the elephant with its foot chained; the great brute on the beach stamps” (9–10). This same image of the waves as a great beast returns in the fifth interlude: “The waves fell; withdrew and fell again, like the thud of a great beast stamping” (150). This excerpt is a clear callback to Louis’s childlike observation in the earlier soliloquy, which is dominated by sensory words—seeing, hearing, feeling—and clear-cut images that represent the characters’ preconscious minds: dependent on sensory input and unaware of

the “self” as a defined, separate entity. However, the observations made in this developmental stage are archived in the cognitive part of the brain and resurface throughout the later conscious soliloquies. What becomes significant, though, is this particular instance of recall within cognition. The cognitive interlude conjures up the image that Louis created in the earliest, preconscious soliloquy to once again describe the waves. While there is not sufficient evidence to claim that all of the interludes are from Louis’s cognitive perspective, this callback to the soliloquy—comparing the waves to a “great beast stamping”—certainly supports the view of the interludes as human cognition, which is able to store and recall previous knowledge and experience without the interference of consciousness.

This previous knowledge and experience is not limited to metaphor, though. Because these interludes return to the same imagery throughout the book, we can safely conclude that almost all of the interludes are rooted in one specific location. However, the fifth interlude, which falls directly in the middle of the story, noticeably departs from the norm. In addition to the familiar characters of the previous and subsequent interludes—the sun, the waves, the birds, and the house—the reader is introduced to new scenery, movements, and entities. Rather than remaining anchored in the waterfront location, the point of view moves back and allows a wider perspective of the earth:

[The sun] gave to everything its exact measure of colour; to the sandhills their innumerable glitter, to the wild grasses their glancing green; or it fell upon the arid waste of the desert, here wind-scourged into furrows, here swept into desolate cairns, here sprinkled with stunted dark-green jungle-trees.... Through atoms of grey-blue air the sun struck at English fields and lit up marshes and pools, a white gull on a stake, the slow sail of shadows over blunt-headed woods and young corn and flowing hay fields. (148)

These incongruous biomes are not associated with any specific country, which is perhaps precisely the point. Further highlighting the distinction, the text juxtaposes “long-breasted white-haired women who knelt in the river bed beating wrinkled cloths upon stones” with “steamers thudding slowly over the sea [carrying] passengers who dozed or paced the deck” (148). In setting one scene alongside the other, the text highlights a vast difference in technologies, in action, and in people. While the washerwomen work tirelessly with crude materials under the heat of the sun, the steamer passengers are nearly inert, lazing about on the machine that propels them forward. Yet, the interlude maintains its egalitarian perspective of human life: both groups remain nameless and neither is attributed with more importance than the other. And, more notably, both groups are given minimal descriptive space when compared to the attention paid to the natural world. Humans are in this world, of course, but they are not the conquerors of it. Rather, they are small motions amid a vast world of vitality and movement, no more significant than the “atoms of grey-blue air” or the “minnow hiding in the cranny” (148–9).

Collectively, this section seems to embody the perspective of the sun—a clear shift from the other eight sections, which are grounded in and limited by human perspective—which is able to both observe and shine on all areas of the whole world equally and simultaneously from its most distant position, its “full height” at noon (148). However, if the interludes are representative of human cognition, then this anomalous interlude provides unique insight into human cognition, namely that it is not bound by location. Cognition here detaches from mere observation and enters the realm of the hypothetical and the artistic: drawing upon what could be either theoretical knowledge or memories of lived experience, the nonconscious mind is free to move beyond observable reality and imagine the world from the comprehensive viewpoint of the sun.

As with the anthropomorphic metaphors, the cognitive brain has the ability to draw upon knowledge that may not be present to the eye.

Yet, despite the ability of cognition to privilege memory and imagination over observation, this ability has its limits. The end of the interlude returns to the familiar scene, interrupting the cognitive imagination with the “birds [that] sang passionate songs addressed to one ear only” (149). The cognitive mind is brought back to the physical space in which it resides, taking detailed notes on the status of the objects in the house, the flowers in the garden, and the activity of both the birds and the waves. This return to the observable scene reinforces that the interludes are written from a singular human perspective—rather than an omniscient or collective one—driven by both present perception and past memory.

Given the rich and layered meanings that emerge from studying the interludes, it is particularly interesting that so little attention has been directed to the “world without a self” in *The Waves*, especially because there is a wealth of scholarship on the “Time Passes” section of *To the Lighthouse*—an excerpt that resonates strongly with the interludes in both form and content. In both sections, the description is set apart from the main narrative arc. In both, there is a liveliness to both the nature and the nonliving materials featured.²⁰ However, in “Time Passes,” the reader follows the empty house through a span of ten years, surrounded on each side by a one-day narrative.²¹ Inversely, the interludes in *The Waves* follows only one day—the sun rises and sets on a scene anchored in one main setting—which interjects throughout the novel’s time span of an entire life.

²⁰ Of “Time Passes,” Doug Mao writes that Woolf “registers an enormous esteem for presentations of the object world from which consciousness is apparently excluded,” and in creating such a world in her fiction, introduces the idea that humans may be unnecessary to such a serene world (*Solid Objects* 59–61).

²¹ Leanna Lostoski reads “Time Passes” in terms of Jane Bennett’s vital materialism, though I find it more appropriate to invoke Margaret Cavendish’s theories of vital atomism here because Woolf was already engaging with Cavendish’s works.

Though “Time Passes” emphasizes over and over again the emptiness of the house, a flutter of life remains. Airs, or breezes, enter the house and interact with the materials inside, “questioning and wondering, toying with the flap of hanging wall-paper, asking, would it hang much longer, when would it fall?...At length, desisting, all ceased together, gathered together, all sighed together; all together gave off an aimless gust of lamentation to which some door in the kitchen replied; swung wide; admitted nothing; and slammed to” (130–131). These airs, like the waves, have life; they are curious as they move around the house poking and prodding. Air, of course, is inorganic and even invisible material, and yet Woolf seems to give the airs agentic ability to provoke reactions and have emotions, echoing the self-knowing, self-moving, rational matter of Margaret Cavendish’s atom poems.²² These airs move individually and yet work together to move in sync with each other, taking on the qualities of a community, or a larger material whole. This power of agency is projected onto living and nonliving materials alike:

What power could now prevent the fertility, the insensibility of nature?...Nothing now withstood them; nothing said no to them. Let the wind blow; let the poppy seed itself and the carnation mate with the cabbage. Let the swallow build in the drawing-room, and the thistle thrust aside the tiles, and the butterfly sun itself on the faded chintz of the arm-chairs. Let the broken glass and china lie out on the lawn and be tangled over with grass and wild berries. (142)

²² In *Poems and Fancies*, Cavendish writes a series of atom poems, which explain her theories of the miniscule workings of matter. In “A World Made by Atoms,” Cavendish personifies the atoms that dance around and work together to create material forms. This particular poem is an effort to write against the mechanistic philosophies of her contemporaries. Rather than machines working as they are programmed, Cavendish animates the atoms, giving them the power to interact, make choices, and “agree” with each other—in the same way that human workmen would. This anthropomorphic philosophy found in “A World Made by Atoms” was later fleshed out in *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, her philosophical treatise. According to Cavendish’s theory, then, all rational matter contains life, intelligence, and agency—and all rational matter deserves the attention of humans.

In this passage, which abandons the human characters' story to track the action within the abandoned house, the organic interacts with the inorganic in both symbiotic and combative ways and life persists even though humans have vacated the house. The objects act and interact willfully and entropically, free from the constraints that a human presence would have imposed. The carnation rebelliously turns outside its species; the butterfly rests comfortably indoors; the china and glass have escaped their domestic confines and are immersed in nature. As Woolf moves her human characters to the periphery, couching their actions in parentheses, the narrative shifts to the house itself and the matter within. Just as in the interludes in *The Waves*, the reader's attention is directed to the interactions, emotions, and cognizance of the materials—both organic and inorganic—that are typically ignored in traditional storytelling.

Toward Ontological Interconnectivity

Unlike “Time Passes,” the interludes in *The Waves* are not entirely estranged from the rest of the story: to varying degrees, the main characters feature the imagery of these interludes in their soliloquies. This is most obvious when Susan speaks because she is arguably most in-tune with the materials around her, though only when she is in the countryside:

Now the wind lifts the blind...Jars, bowls, matting, and the shabby arm-chair with the hole in it are now become distinct...The bird chorus is over, only one bird now sings close to the bedroom window...I think I am the field, I am the barn, I am the trees; mine are the flocks of birds and this young hair who leaps, at the last moment when I almost step on him. (97)

As she becomes conscious of the actions of the birds and the wind, Susan feels indelibly connected with the objects of her home, attributing importance to the mundane observations that for most would remain in non-being. She, more than the other five characters, aligns herself

ontologically with the surrounding world and places herself on the same plane as the materials in that world, embodying the psychological wholeness sought by Woolf.

Like Susan, Bernard too begins to feel unified with the world around him, though his acknowledgement grows increasingly apparent at the end of the novel. As he realizes the insufficiency of the language he had tried so hard all his life to wrangle, he reaches a new level of connection with the surrounding world and recognizes, finally, the objects that were so prominent in the interludes, “the house, the garden, and the waves breaking” (287). He aligns himself with the titular image, the waves, observing, “in me too the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back” (297). In recognizing the liveliness of the wave within himself, Bernard experiences the same kind of ontological wholeness as Susan. Both “become” the nonliving material in their careful acknowledgement of it. Similarly, though his final moments are alone, he finds comfort and connection in the objects that surround him: “How much better is silence; the coffee-cup, the table...Let me sit here for ever with bare things, this coffee-cup, this knife, this fork, things in themselves, myself being myself” (295). Because Bernard is no longer focused on his conscious perceptions, and his quest to contain things in language, he finally connects with the ontology of the objects in the interludes so intimately that he feels the waves within himself.

Bernard does not merely unite with the nonhuman objects in the interludes, though. In his final moments, he feels so linked with his friends that he loses sense of his individual identity that his conscious mind had formed. He thinks,

‘Who am I?’ I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know. We sat here together. But now Percival is dead, and Rhoda is dead; we are divided; we are not here. Yet I cannot find

any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt, 'I am you.' This difference we make so much of, this identity we so feverishly cherish, was overcome...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, this pillar Rhoda saw, and feel the rise of the wind of her flight when she leapt. (289)

Though his friends are not physically present in this scene, Bernard feels "no division" between them because he was beginning to shed his conscious, individual identity. Bernard did not experience or even witness any of the above experiences, and yet he can feel the memory of them corporeally through the interconnectivity that exists beneath conscious individuality.

But this connectivity does not expand only horizontally among all present things but vertically to past beings as well. Masako Nasu discusses this subconscious primeval connection, finding that Woolf wanted to explore "*anonymous* voices rather than individual characters' voices...the human mind not as an individual entity, but as a collective concept. Such a collective psyche has existed universally as the subconscious or unconscious since primitive ages" (202). Though Nasu locates this collective human mind in *Between the Acts*, Woolf is clearly working with the same concept in the interludes of *The Waves*, published ten years previously, indicating Woolf's ongoing project in representing collective cognition. Moreover, Woolf depicts that primitive psyche as accessible to humans even in the present. Once again, Bernard is perhaps the best example of this. At the end of the novel, when Bernard is finally alone, he recognizes a primal being within him: "There is the old brute, too, the savage, the hairy man who dabbles his fingers in ropes of entrails; and gobbles and belches; whose speech is guttural, visceral—well, he is here. He squats in me" (289). This primordial man represents the

part of Bernard's mind that allows him to surpass language and connect with not only the other humans around him, but to his ancient ancestry. By reaching past conscious language to a deeper, cognitive level, Bernard can connect across time and space to the beings that preceded him. It is only when Bernard finally abandons his pursuit to form the perfect story with flawless phrases that he connects with every thing—human, nonhuman, close, distant, ancient, present—and in so doing feels “immeasurably receptive, holding everything, trembling with fullness, yet clear, contained,” a description that resonates noticeably with William James's articulation of cosmic consciousness (291). Bernard's cosmic experience confirms Woolf's notion that, within non-being, all things—human and nonhuman—are able to unite in a single expansive moment.

What End, or What Beginning

The Waves is perhaps Woolf's most valiant attempt to “convey both sorts of meaning” as she described in “A Sketch of the Past” (70). In this work, she deliberately refuses to hierarchize narrative consciousness, or moments of being, over the unrecognized but still vital moments of non-being. An early draft of the novel integrated interludes with the soliloquies in one holistic piece, rather than in separate sections as they appear now, which further enforced that moments of non-being are present in daily life. However, Woolf could only successfully portray this kind of non-conscious vitality by separating it entirely from the conscious narrative.

Counterintuitively, by uncoupling the two separate functions of the brain, consciousness and cognition, their simultaneity becomes all the more apparent.

This novel is also an endeavor to write against the trite stories that Woolf outlined in “Modern Fiction,” creating a work that encompasses “the proper stuff of fiction...every feeling, every thought, every quality of brain and spirit” (164). Bernard's prominence throughout the story is significant because he is the “storyteller” of the six friends. His inability to finish a story,

and insistence on creating clean, beautiful narratives of his friends—and their subsequent resistance to becoming mere “characters” in his stories—demonstrates Woolf’s belief about the deficiency of fiction as it had been rendered by previous authors. As his life comes to a close, though, Bernard comes to the same realization about the inadequacy of stories. To an anonymous listener, he tries to explain himself: “In order to make you understand, to give you my life, I must tell you a story—and there are so many, and so many—stories of childhood, stories of school, love, marriage, death, and so on; and none of them are true” (238). The last phrase undercuts all moments of being, all of the preceding soliloquy episodes, with the realization that none of these moments can honestly or wholly convey what Bernard’s life has been. Life is not found in the conspicuous landmark moments, but in “the confusion, the height, the indifference and the fury. Great clouds always changing, and movement” (239). Only by marginalizing human consciousness, leaving the individual self “forgotten, minute, in a ditch,” can Woolf draw proper attention to the fluctuating, complex, unnoticed materials that *do* constitute life (239).

Yet, even in this effort, the text cannot entirely abandon a linear storyline. Woolf is confronted with the challenge of capturing reality, articulated by Rancière: “Multipersonal life has no end. But a book, be it a novel or a theory of the novel, must have an end” (240). Despite radical experimentation in form, genre, and style, Woolf is bound by the conventions and constraints of a story. The interludes, despite their implied cyclicity, have a clearly demarcated beginning and ending, demonstrated by the rising and setting sun, and a distinguishable narrative arc—even if that arc seems plotless. The scenes feature defined characters and a setting—even if both are unconventional. Bernard questions, “Should this be the end of the story? a kind of sigh? a last ripple of the wave?...But if there are no stories, what end can there be, or what beginning? Life is not susceptible perhaps to the treatment we give it when we try to tell it” (267). Bernard’s

reflections here perfectly encapsulate the conflict embedded in the novel. As much as Woolf would like to depart from oversimplified story structure, something within human nature still looks to stories to make sense of the world. The “world without a self” is both alive and significant, but without consciousness it struggles to be meaningful. Life in its intricacy certainly is not susceptible to facile structures, and yet, the structures are all we have to comprehend it. And yet, because of the affordances of a fictional form, she has far more freedom than scientists and philosophers to represent the reality of both the conscious and cognitive functions of the mind in their wholeness.

Still, in her attempts to level the ontology of humans with nonhuman things, Woolf helps her readers come a little closer to seeing life as it really is—persistent, continuous, and self-sustaining—even without human consciousness to mediate it. Though life may never fit into a structure, there is certainly space to innovate better, more comprehensive structures for articulating life—and that is Woolf’s accomplishment in this novel. This shift in narrative priority has real-life implications for the ways in which humans view and interact with the materials that populate the spaces we inhabit. As N. Katherine Hayles suggests, when humans can look beyond the conscious stories we tell, the focus and scholarship of the humanities can be expanded exponentially, opening up countless possibilities for further connections and insights into the human—and nonhuman—condition. Studying the interludes, then, with their decentered human consciousness and ontological equality, has the potential to change the way we approach literature—both the writing and the reading of it—through the acknowledgement of the vast moments of non-being that constitute a life.

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