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## The Dark Places of Psychology: Consciousness in Virginia Woolf's Major Novels

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English 485

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### The Dark Places of Psychology:

#### Consciousness in Virginia Woolf's Major Novels

When Virginia Woolf published her 1919 essay “Modern Fiction,” she threw down a gauntlet. Defining herself and her peers against the previous generation of established authors (particularly the “Edwardian” writers H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy), in “Modern Fiction” Woolf challenges her contemporaries to disregard Edwardian tradition and forge a new era of English literature. Edwardians fail to capture the essence of character, she complains; “life escapes” their literature (*The Common Reader* 153). She asserts that adherence to their old, “ill-fitting vestments” of standard novelistic convention will doom Modern writing too to fall short. In order to truly seize the “unknown and uncircumscribed spirit” (154) of life, Woolf insists that writers must instead “record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall” (155), a charge that requires not only a change in style, but a new authorial focus: “[f]or the moderns ‘that,’ the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology” (156). The purpose of writing is to record “the pattern, however disconnected in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness” (155), a mission distorted when novelists focus on neat structure or coherent storylines. Woolf’s essay is “a voice

of protest” (158), she says, and a call for a Modern age that rips away any structure, convention, or artifice that distracts from communicating the true, pure, and raw shape of human thought.

Woolf was not unique in her desire to revolutionize the novel. Writers like T.S. Eliot, Marcel Proust, and William Faulkner were of a similar mind, and in “Modern Fiction” Woolf lauds James Joyce and Russian authors like Anton Tchekov for discarding the conventions of past novelists and for helping to forge a new kind of literature that captures vivid psychological experience. To accomplish this, she says that these writers were making vital stylistic changes, endeavoring to focus on “what is commonly thought small” (*The Common Reader* 155), to be willing to be sordid and incoherent (155), to emphasize “unexpected places” and to be “vague and inconclusive” (157). In this sense, Woolf was part of a large, reforming generation of Modern writers. Woolf is distinctive, however, in that she more than most of her contemporaries took seriously her own charge to make the inner workings of the mind not only a stylistic guide but “the point of interest” in her work. For Woolf, the nature of consciousness<sup>1</sup> became a central, pervasive concern, a guiding focus that molded much of her middle fiction.

Woolf’s literary concentration on consciousness and the mind has caught the attention of scholars and critics looking back on her work. Julia Briggs notes that Woolf’s fiction is wrapped up in “what makes up our consciousness when we are alone and when we are with others” (Briggs 72). Edwin Kenny observes that Woolf “carefully records consciousness” for the purpose of defining “the subjective reality of her characters” (Kenney 43). Meg Jensen characterizes Woolf as an explorer of the relationship “between internal and external, public and private experiences and identities” (Jensen 115). What seems clear in retrospect is that

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, *consciousness* is defined as the contents of awareness—the subjective experience of an individual

throughout her career, but most vividly in her four middle novels (*Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*), Woolf explores the nature of consciousness actively and thoroughly, demonstrating in each novel a nuanced and specific understanding of the relationship between the external world, the brain, and personal reality.

Yet only a handful of scholars have made a project of exploring Woolf's preoccupation with consciousness. The first in-depth study appeared in 1970, when Harvena Richter authored *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage*, in which she explores how consciousness operates in Woolf's novels. Writing at a time when modern cognitive psychology was still in its infancy, Richter uses what she takes to be the basic components of consciousness (emotion, perception, memory, and time) and demonstrates how Woolf innovatively uses novelistic conventions like point of view, voice, metaphor, structure, and narrator to accurately reflect how those components function in the individual mind. Richter's study is one of technique and effect: in her own words, Richter's project was to analyze Woolf's "subjective methods—not only the ways by which her reader is led 'inland' to the consciousness of her characters, but also the means by which he senses its very geography and climate" (Richter vii). Two other works—Judith Ryan's *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism* and Michael Whitworth's essay "Physics: A Strange Footprint"—take Richter's study a step further, analyzing Woolf's technique for the purpose of defining her implicit attitudes about consciousness and tracing them to their psychological roots. Both Ryan and Whitworth importantly note Woolf's ideological relationship with late 19<sup>th</sup> century psychological empiricism, arguing that the materialist/empiricist views that pervaded both psychology and philosophy at the time had a profound effect on Woolf's literature. In *The Vanishing Subject*, Ryan argues that Woolf

absorbed the reigning turn-of-the-century psychological theory of consciousness and used it as her own as she composed her middle fiction.

Though most scholars of Woolf acknowledge her interest in consciousness to a limited extent, these three critics have put forth the most comprehensive and established research on Woolf's use of consciousness theory across her relevant novels. Significantly, each of these scholars asserts that Woolf's relationship with consciousness theory was a passive one: Whitworth states that the scientific/psychological developments of Woolf's time "filtered out into the literary community" (Whitworth 208), affecting her work. Ryan asserts that Woolf "reenact[s] the primary phase of nineteenth-century empiricism" (Ryan 202). While they concede that Woolf's opinion about turn-of-the-century consciousness theory may change from novel to novel, never do they suggest that Woolf takes a proactive stance, actively engaging with turn-of-the-century theory and putting forth *her own* theory of consciousness.

This is an oversight: ample evidence indeed suggests that Woolf uses the empiricist psychological theory of her time only as a starting point, an initial theory to interrogate and explore. Over the course of her four middle novels, Woolf displays a dynamic evolution of theory, revising what she finds problematic in the psychologists' views, crafting a conception of consciousness that better reflects her own experiences and beliefs. Starting in *Jacob's Room* and concluding in *The Waves*, Woolf initiates and develops her own theory of consciousness. While it is useful to analyze Woolf's psychologist predecessors, as Ryan and Whitworth do, and define her initial theory of consciousness based on their influences, exploring how Woolf progressively revises and reshapes this theory into her own, unique psychological/philosophical view is a far more significant endeavor. Such an investigation will not only illuminate Woolf's rigorous, interactive relationship with consciousness theory that has been heretofore neglected, but it will

become apparent that Woolf's personal theory transcended her own time, sharing a closer kinship to the current, 21<sup>st</sup> century scholarship on consciousness today.

### **The Psychological Backdrop: Woolf's Influences**

As Ryan and Whitworth agree, at the core of Woolf's use of consciousness in her novels is an idea, born in the mid- to late-19<sup>th</sup> century, which grew and eventually became a central element in the cultural zeitgeist of the Modern era. As scientific advances like Darwin's evolutionary theory and the discovery of the atom eroded Westerners' belief in the supernatural, scientists, artists, and laypeople alike began to depend on the observation-based approach of the scientific method, which dictated that only that which can be directly, physically experienced can be verified as real. The reigning thought was that physical sensations were to be considered real, factual data, but virtually nothing else could be empirically proven: mental phenomena like “concepts and symbols were, in an extended sense of the word, ‘metaphysical’” (Whitworth 202), relegated to the unverifiable realm of the spiritual.

This idea, loosely termed positivism, empiricism, or materialism, eventually permeated contemporary Western thought. Originally termed “German empiricism,” the roots of this blossoming concept reside in the theories of Austrian empiricist/philosopher Ernst Mach. Writing primarily in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mach was among the first to argue from an extreme empiricist standpoint. Mach accepted basic physical sensations—colors, textures, pressure, feelings—as “given” phenomena, but questioned all other elements of personal experience. As Whitworth notes, in a view more extreme than subsequent empiricists, Mach believed that even “‘matter’ is metaphysical, a mental construct which allows us economically to describe the persistence of certain clusters of sense impressions” (Whitworth 202). Mach's logic,

in other words, is as follows: we often take for granted the assumption that a “substance” (such as a table) is a fixed and constant entity (or “matter”). This, however, is an illusion. In reality, what we directly perceive is constantly changing: our table can be “now bright, now dimly lighted. Its temperature varies. It may receive an ink stain” (Mach 2). When we experience this table, we believe we experience “a ‘thing-in-itself,’ different from its ‘appearance’” (6). But if all we can ever know and trust are our sensations, and these sensations constantly change, how can we be confident that this substance, this “thing-in-itself,” actually exists behind the constantly shifting sensations?

According to Mach, we can’t. There is no logical reason to believe anything beyond our physical sensations is real. It is this logic that leads Mach to conclude that “matter” is metaphysical—objects are constructs rather than entities—and that there are effectively no such thing as substances: “Thing, body, matter, are nothing apart from the combination of the elements,—the colors, sounds, and so forth—nothing apart from their so-called attributes” (Mach 6-7). As Ryan paraphrases, though we believe that we experience solidity, our true reality is limited to “a composite of disparate parts” and we cannot be sure that any “object exists independently of our perception of it” (Ryan 13), that any object is solid or real as it appears.

Mach’s theories have alarming implications. Confronted with an unstable, ever-changing complex of external sensations, all of us lead our lives not perceiving reality directly but as filtered through the illusion-generating perceptions that comprise our conscious lives. What’s more, the stabilizing faux-reality that each person creates is based on a series of sensations which only he, in his own mind, can be assured are trustworthy. Consequently, even our fictitious selves are inherently isolated; we are unable to share in each others’ sensations and so are irreparably separated from other people. In sum, for Mach, external reality is unstable chaos, of

which we make sense only through the filtering of personal consciousness. Consciousness, in turn, is a sustaining lie that walls us off from true engagement with others.

In his essay, Whitworth calls Mach a foundational materialist who would instigate “the presentation of a fragmentary reality in modernist fiction and poetry” (Whitworth 204). Ryan characterizes Mach, along with two other contemporaries, as “the [psychologists] who chiefly attracted the attention of writers” in the Modern era (Ryan 16). Some of Mach’s fame was undoubtedly based on the panic that his theories induced. Pervasive public worry, in any case, was primarily what prompted eminent psychologists like William James to respond to Machian theory, attempting to diffuse the alarmed cultural response. In his essay “Is Radical Empiricism Solipsistic?” James acknowledges that Mach’s theory indeed logically leads to isolation and solipsism, disqualifying the existence of anything beyond direct sensation: “If a series of experiences be supposed, no one of which is endowed immediately with the self-transcendent function of reference to a reality beyond itself, no motive will occur within the series for supposing anything beyond it to exist” (235). Yet however logically sound Mach’s argument is, James notes that radically empiricist views like Mach’s fail to explain “how the notion of a physical order, as distinguished from a subjectively biographical order, ever arose” (236)—how our notion of “substances” came to be if objects and substances do not actually exist. It would be issues such as these that would prompt James to reject Machian theory in favor of pragmatism.

Essentially, while James could not deny that Mach’s theories were convincing in their own right, he could also not deny the functional reality of the objects that Mach so casually dismissed as unreal; a hat may be nothing more than a mass of sensations, but this does not account for the fact that hats are around for people to wear or explain how they function in our lives. As Ryan explains, James simply “avoided the awkward problem” that Mach’s theories



created and accepted that though the concept of substances may be nothing more than “a convenient, practical label,” “since it accords with a strongly felt inner conviction, there is no reason to discard it” (Ryan 13-14). She goes on to note that James offered “a comforting way of re-envisaging what had already become a very disturbing point of view” (14).

James instead turned his attention to the practical, perception-based elements of consciousness, focusing on how our experiences seem to ourselves. He insisted that a scholar must “begin with the most concrete facts, those with which he has a daily acquaintance in his own inner life” (“The Stream of Consciousness” 151), rather than the seemingly remote world of sensations in which Mach resided. Still a child of empiricism, James too grounded his theories on the assumption that our world is a series of sensations, but made it his project to aptly convey how the flux and chaos that surrounds us *feels*. He famously described consciousness as a “‘river’ or a ‘stream’” constantly bombarded by external sensations. Criticizing his peers for being reductive in their conceptions of consciousness, James emphasizes the wash of impressions that surrounds us and the perpetual sense of transience that it creates:

The traditional psychology talks like one who should say a river consists of nothing but pailsful, spoonsful, quartspotsful, barrelsful, and other molded form of water. Even were the pails and the pots all actually standing in the stream, still between them the free water would continue to flow. It is just this free water of consciousness that psychologists resolutely overlook. Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows around it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead. (*Principles of Psychology* 245)

James, in other words, straddled the line between Mach's disorder and our functional realities: he recognized that our surroundings appear to us stable, yet we are, indeed, victim to a constant flux of sensation which we can perceive by attending to how our sensations and impressions flow past us in a state of rapid and constant change. To Modern authors, James' theories would become nearly as important as Mach's, for it is from James that the subjective experience of flooding sensations—and the concept of “stream of consciousness” itself—are drawn.

Mach's theory of consciousness and James' pragmatic characterization of the experience of awareness would jointly prove to be the foundation on which Woolf would construct her own conception of conscious experience. While the cultural zeitgeist alone would have likely made Woolf aware of these scholars, Woolf more specifically benefited from being part of an elite intellectual circle known as the Bloomsbury group, a community of artists and academics who would regularly gather to share their work and insights with one another. Membership in this group brought Woolf into contact and friendship with philosopher Bertrand Russell, who in 1921 (the year before Woolf published *Jacob's Room*) gave a series of lectures entitled *The Analysis of Mind*. In the first of these lectures, Russell discussed at length the views of Mach and James, characterizing Mach's *Analysis of Sensations* as “a book of fundamental importance” (Russell) to the then-current conceptions of consciousness. Woolf thus would have not only been informed of the prominent place that Mach's theory of consciousness held among psychologists and philosophers, but was likely well versed in its details as well.

Another link can be made between Woolf and turn-of-the-century consciousness theory through art critic Walter Pater, with whose work Woolf was also acquainted via the Bloomsbury group. Pater put forth a conception of consciousness and its relationship to the external world that blends the external flux and internal isolation theorized by Mach and the active experience

of these elements described by James. Pater's conclusion to his 1873 critical book *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* is widely regarded as his most overt theoretical statement on consciousness. In the conclusion, Pater states that the world is comprised

not of objects in the solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them... the whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind. (Pater 118)

Like Mach, Pater concludes that personal experience is thus “reduced to a group of impressions”—echoing Mach's sentiment of “the annihilation of permanency” (Mach 5)—which results in a “thick wall... through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us” (Pater 118). Within each of us is a “mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world” (118), an apt characterization of Machian isolation. Pater, too, describes external reality as chaotic, an eternal flux which, in a description more menacing than James' stream, constantly threatens to “bury us under a flood of external objects” (118).

Along with Machian and Jamesian sensibilities, Pater's conception of consciousness also utilizes the ideas of another scholar of the age, Henri Bergson, who is most famous for his radical conception of time. According to Bergson, our standard view of time is a distortion of a truer, more natural and internal sense of time, which he terms *durée*. The conventional way that we conceive of time is in terms of space; we usually think of time as points on a line, or a sequence of events traveling linearly out of the past and into the future (“Time and Free Will” 100-1), both of which are spatial representations. This is a practical necessity; we must think of time as segmented and individual successive moments to give order to our lives (104). Pure *durée*, by contrast, translates more into an individual's personal experience of time, unrestrained

by the societal constraints of minutes and seconds: it cannot be quantified (107), has “dynamic unity and wholly qualitative multiplicity” (239), and is not bound by space. *Durée* is instead best thought of in terms of continuity and accumulation: in every “moment” there exists the entirety of the past which is constantly gathering, like a rolling snowball, into the present moment. Based entirely on personal perception, in the *durée* conception of time, “moments” can last for an infinity, or as brief as a millisecond. In *durée*, there is no sequence, no order, no concept of speed or of “before” or “after.”

In the “Conclusion,” Pater uses a *durée*-like interpretation of time to provide a way to escape the desolation of Mach’s isolation. If consciousness is nothing more than the after-the-fact illusory structuring of fluctuating sensations, then our conscious lives are, essentially, “constantly reforming [themselves] on the stream” (Pater 119). “What is real in our life,” Pater says, “fines itself down” into a never-ending flow of “single sharp impression[s]” (119). Thus, all we can hope to do is “pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy” (119)—to live as constantly and as vividly in each individual moment as possible.

“To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life,” Pater states. And, he significantly adds, it is an artist’s job to attempt to capture this fleeting ecstasy, declaring those who pursue “art and song” to be “the wisest” of all people, for art “yield[s] you this fruit” (119) of the passionate, lived moment. Pater, through the manipulation of time, thus presents a route of escape for Mach’s isolated consciousness: by endeavoring to live in (and in art, perhaps capture) the “exquisite passion” of every moment as it passes, we “set the spirit free for a moment” (119).

So in the early 1920s, when Woolf declared that “new panorama of the human mind is revealed” for the Modern writer to explore (*The Common Reader* 179), she was likely referring to a fairly specific and defined conception of the conscious mind. Having been introduced to the most prominent ideas about consciousness of the time, born of empiricists and blossoming among art critics, Woolf approached her middle fiction with what Ryan calls a “particular version of elementaric empiricism” (Ryan 190) regarding her views of consciousness. This foundational theory of psychology assumed 1) that the external world is known to each of us only as a disordered and chaotic flood of sensations, 2) that time, too, is a fluctuating and unstable phenomenon prone to distortion based on internal interpretation, 3) that however ordered our filtered perceptions may seem, we are capable of sensing the underlying chaos, 4) that all of this results in a fundamentally illusory and isolated personal consciousness, and finally, 5) that there may be a possibility of breaching this sense of fabrication and isolation through art. Though Ryan and Whitworth insist that Woolf carried this same theoretical model through the remainder of her career, I will now argue that Woolf initiated her novelistic relationship with consciousness theory with a spirit more akin to launching than abiding, commencing with her fiction her own illuminating psychological experiments.

### ***Jacob's Room: An Introduction to Psychology***

Scholars of Woolf almost unanimously hail *Jacob's Room* as a turning point in Woolf's career. Though she had written two novels prior, *Jacob's Room* is typically considered Woolf's first “significant” novel, as it introduces a mature style and voice that would persist through much of her career. Critic Susanne Raitt notes that her peers “have often followed Woolf's lead in regarding *Jacob's Room* as a starting point of some kind” (Raitt 29), for Woolf herself wrote

in her diary that she had finally “found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice” (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 2: 186).

Though Woolf’s authorial growth with *Jacob’s Room* was a product of myriad forces, her newfound interest in psychology and its ability to revolutionize the novel, prompted by her profound dissatisfaction with the novelistic conventions perpetuated by the Edwardian generation of writers, was undoubtedly a major factor in the change. Woolf began writing *Jacob’s Room* in 1919, the same year she composed “Modern Fiction.” In “Modern Fiction,” Woolf calls for writers to focus on “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day” (*The Common Reader* 154). She claims that an author must “base his work on his own feeling and not upon convention” (154) and in doing so “convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible” (154). In this essay and in her similarly themed “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” Woolf called for novelists to focus on creating authentic characters, to forsake standard notions of plot or narrative, and to convey instead the unwieldy current of the mind-in-thought, which is where personality resides. These new, revolutionizing ideas were fresh in her mind as she took on the project of her new novel.

Thus, while it may be debated whether or not *Jacob’s Room* is truly Woolf’s first significant novel of her career, as the first novel published since the composition of “Modern Fiction,” it is indisputably the novel in which Woolf breaks ground in establishing the new, psychology-guided focus of her work.<sup>2</sup> And in reading *Jacob’s Room* from this perspective, with

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<sup>2</sup> This, however, is not to say that Woolf had no intellectual interest in psychology or the mind prior to 1920. On the contrary, her diaries provide evidence that Woolf had been engaging with issues and ideas about the brain for years prior to her first novelistic investigation. In a 1903 journal entry, Woolf wrote, “I think I see for a moment how our minds are all threaded together—how any live mind today is of the very same stuff as Plato’s & Euripides. It is only

an eye for how Woolf both lives up to her own expectations for Modern authors as well as how contemporary psychological theory enters her work, what we find is, perhaps unsurprisingly, that in this first novel Woolf appears to be in an introductory stage of her development as psychological consciousness theorist. *Jacob's Room*, while evidently influenced by the theories of Mach, Pater, and James, does not demonstrate the sense of interrogation or engagement with their ideas that will appear in Woolf's subsequent novels. As a result, *Jacob's Room* ultimately reveals itself to be, more than anything, a revelation of Woolf's acquaintance with 20<sup>th</sup> century consciousness theory, in which she only hints at the manner in which she will present and challenge these ideas in her later, more stylistically grounded novels.

Though concerned with issues of consciousness, *Jacob's Room* is first and foremost a novel about loss. Inspired by the death of her young brother Thoby (who died of typhoid in 1906) and connecting this event with the countless deaths of young men in the battles of the First World War, Woolf uses her central character Jacob to represent the irreparable void left behind by the dead. Jacob is constructed to be an intangible and elusive character. While the loose plot of the novel focuses on Jacob's life from the young age of six until his death in the war in his late twenties, our perspective is for the most part limited to Jacob's external circumstances. We gather the facts of his life: "Jacob Flanders, therefore, went up to Cambridge in October, 1906" (*Jacob's Room* 29). We hear others' opinions on him: "He is extraordinarily awkward... yet so

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a continuation & development of the same thing. It is this common mind that binds the whole world together; & all the world is mind" (*A Passionate Apprentice* 178). As we shall see in *The Waves*, Woolf's intuitive notion regarding the linking and interconnectedness between minds will become integral to her experiments with consciousness in her fiction. Thus, even though she deferred in-depth interaction with consciousness theory and expansion of her own ideas until decades later, Woolf had been formulating ideas about consciousness and thinking independently about the subject even in her earliest years as a writer.

distinguished-looking” (61). We observe his actions: “Jacob shifted perhaps five inches to the left, and then as many to the right. Then Jacob grunted, and suddenly crossed the room” (89). More often yet, we are provided with intricately detailed descriptions of Jacob’s immediate surroundings:

Jacob’s room had a round table and two low chairs. There were yellow flags in a jar on the mantelpiece; a photograph of his mother; ... His slippers were incredibly shabby, like boats burnt to the water’s rim. There were photographs from the Greeks, and a mezzotint from Sir Joshua... One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there. (39)

Yet for a vast majority of the novel Woolf is careful to deny us the privileged inner perspective of Jacob, presenting him to us instead like an empty silhouette made visible by his vibrant surroundings. The absence of Jacob’s voice is so distinct that some critics take the lack of Jacob’s narration as the crux of the novel as a whole. As one scholar of *Jacob’s Room* argues: “*Jacob’s Room* abandons the project of developing its protagonist’s voice altogether, and instead experiments with the voices of others speaking in his place, even down to the creaking of his empty chair” (Raitt 31).

But Woolf’s experimentation with “the concept of voice” (Raitt 31) in *Jacob’s Room* is not an end so much as a means: Jacob’s absence is but one element of many that illuminates Woolf’s project of reforming conceptions of character and consciousness. A second and possibly more significant element is Woolf’s manipulation of her narrator. Much of the novel cleverly utilizes the standard, third-person omniscient narrator of the conventional Edwardian prose piece. A great deal of the writing in *Jacob’s Room* would fit comfortably in a late Victorian novel, with its focus on external elements and the details of social engagements:



The Countess of Rocksber sat at the head of the table along with Jacob. Fed upon champagne and spices for at least two centuries (four, if you count the female line), the Countess Lucy looked well fed. A discriminating nose she had for scents, prolonged, as if in quest of them; her underlip protruded a narrow red shelf; her eyes were small, with sandy tufts for eyebrows, and her jowl was heavy... Lady Rocksber, whatever the deficiencies of her profile, had been a great rider to hounds. She used her knife with authority, tore her chicken bones, asking Jacob's pardon, with her own hands. (*Jacob's Room* 100)

The omniscience we would expect from such a seemingly conventional narrator, however, is persistently and self-consciously undermined by her inability to adequately penetrate the locked inner workings of Jacob's mind. She is occasionally even unable to clearly discern a scene:

"Heaven knows what they were doing. What was it that could *drop* like that?" (42). Dialogue especially eludes the narrator, as conversations are more often than not jarringly broken up by ellipses, or are simply not relayed at all: "Was it an argument? A bet on the boat races? Was it nothing of the sort? What was shaped by the arms and bodies moving in the twilight room?" (44). The qualifying words *perhaps*, *may*, *maybe*, *might*, and *could* intrusively crop up whenever the narrator moves from environmental description to interpreting characters' behavior, and such sections are frequently concluded with a dismissive "none can tell" (47) or "it is impossible to say" (49). Finally, the narrator is prone to declaring "that a profound, impartial, and absolutely just opinion of our fellow-creatures is utterly unknown" (71), that there is "no use trying to sum people up" (154), and that "novelists never catch" the true nature of life (156).

The often-baffled narrator of *Jacob's Room* has been met by a variety of critical interpretations. Edwin J. Kenney argues that such evident undermining of the Edwardian belief

in authorial omniscience defines the purpose of the novel: “*Jacob’s Room* is precisely about the way Edwardian conventions of ‘solid’ representation of character fail to represent Jacob: Cambridge, his room, his shoes are not Jacob” (62). Another scholar has suggested that Woolf constructs Jacob’s opaqueness, achieved “by means of external focalization” (Barzilai 234), in order to act as a “giant reflector” for the surrounding characters whose personalities are accessible to us (234). A third interpretation is that the failings of *Jacob’s Room*’s narrator—along with other characters’ lack of ability to understand Jacob and our general lack of access to his consciousness—contribute to the sense of loss that infuses Jacob’s character, advancing Woolf’s elegiac purpose.

While each of these interpretations is arguably sound, the implications of the narrator’s failed omniscience extend beyond the plot and characters of *Jacob’s Room*, and reflect more fundamentally on Woolf’s own system of belief that informed the novel: by dismantling her narrator’s ability to know and capture her characters, Woolf implicitly questions anyone’s ability to do the same. Mach’s theoretical influence in Woolf’s work thus becomes apparent. In *Jacob* there is “something which can never be conveyed” (*Jacob’s Room* 72); once he is gone, so goes his inimitable consciousness, and even the most vivid memories and diligent descriptions are not capable of capturing him. Woolf’s insistence that the third-person omniscient point of view is insufficient to provide us with a thorough sense of character begs the question: what would? Given that knowledge of Jacob rains down from every other conceivable source, including his actions, his words, his possessions and environment, and his friends, the only perspective we lack—the only perspective we will *always* lack, Jacob’s own consciousness—is logically the key to full knowledge of his character. Woolf’s narrator generalizes this condition to us all: we are each denied access to any personal consciousnesses except our own, and as such we are led to

conclude, as the narrator does, that we may never fully know each other (67). Knowing that we are forced to view one another from perspectives doomed to be inaccurate, the narrator laments the reality of our consequent mental solitude, exclaiming, “Never was there a harsher necessity! or one which entails greater pain, more certain disaster; for wherever I set myself, I die in exile” (69). In such sentences we see Woolf drawing on the notion of the isolation of consciousness—the “certain disaster” and the “necessity” that what we personally experience can never be shared—which is the central premise of Ernst Mach’s theory of consciousness.

Other, related aspects of the theory of consciousness expounded by Mach also appear in *Jacob’s Room*. Almost tangentially, Woolf’s narrator muses that perhaps another reason we are doomed to inaccurate views of one another is that “the observer is choked with observations. Only to prevent us from being submerged by chaos, nature and society between them have arranged a system of classification” (69). This sense of bombardment by “chaos” echoes Mach’s theory that we are continually awash in a sea of disordered sensations for which our consciousnesses (a product of “nature and society”) provide a constructed buffer through which we artificially organize experience. The narrator similarly often alludes to a sense of constant motion, creating perpetual transience that makes a sense of true consistency impossible to grasp: “In any case life is but a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows” (72). She goes on to observe that even if in one moment “the young man in the chair” seems to be “the most real, the most solid, the best known to us... the moment after we know nothing about him” (72). The underlying sensibility in these passages suggests Mach’s conclusion about substances and matter: with the sensations around us being in constant motion, the existence of “most real, the

most solid” substances cannot be assured. Decidedly Machian, these passages assume the chaotic nature of the external world and the consequent lack of enduring stability as fact.

Interestingly, however strongly the Machian-isolationist view of consciousness appears in sections like the one cited above, there are nevertheless points in *Jacob's Room* in which Woolf, confusingly, draws away from this stance. Rather than settling on a strong, consistently Machian perspective, there are seemingly contradictory passages that, like William James' conciliatory essay, second-guess Mach's isolationism. Though we are generally and noticeably blocked from Jacob's consciousness, there are a few instances in the novel in which the narrator *does* seem to succeed in penetrating into his mind. One such instance appears during the scene in which Jacob and his friend Timmy are sailing near the Scilly Isles. The chapter is introduced by a smattering of narrative observations that stop just short of entering what are presumably Jacob's thoughts: "What's the use of trying to read Shakespeare, especially in one of those little thin paper editions whose pages get ruffled...? Although the plays of Shakespeare had frequently been praised, even quoted, and placed higher than the Greek, never since they started had Jacob managed to read one through" (47). After a series of similar observations—presumably the narrator's but arguably Jacob's—we are inconspicuously informed that "[t]he seat in the boat was positively hot, and the sun warmed [Jacob's] back as he sat naked with a towel in his hand, looking at the Scilly Isles which—confound it! the sail flapped" (48). Physical sensations like heat inarguably reside within the domain of inner conscious experience which Mach believed to be inaccessible to others, part of the isolated world we can never share. Further, the mid-sentence interruption—a stylistic technique on which Woolf would come to rely heavily to demonstrate the rapid movement of consciousness in later novels—provides a sense of immediacy and closeness to the action that

suggests Jacob's consciousness. Though brief, in this single sentence Woolf's narrator breaches the seemingly-impenetrable wall so carefully constructed around Jacob.

Similarly, in chapter six, Woolf provides brief, frequent insights into the content of Jacob's thoughts as he spends an evening with Florinda. A chapter generally permeated with the musings of the narrator, the section begins with an open and broad description of "the city of London [being] lit up for a second" as people started their evening fires (74), and gradually narrows into the a description of the hotel dining-room, and finally to Jacob and Florinda, who sit together at a table (74-5). The perspective then narrows even further, and we learn that Jacob, infatuated with the Greeks, imagines that "they were making the flagstones ring on the road to the Acropolis" as he and Florinda walk around London (76); that he "took her word for it that [Florinda] was chaste" (78); and that "it did occur to Jacob, half-way through dinner, to wonder whether she had a mind" (79). Like the Scilly Island example, each of these glimpses of Jacob's inner experience is fleeting, limited to a sentence, and is, like the rest of the novel, surrounded by phrases that disrupt our trust in the narrator's knowledge of the situation: "Meanwhile, where had the other woman got to? And the man? The street lamps do not carry far enough to tell us" (81). They nevertheless provide us exceptional, precious access to Jacob's otherwise isolated mind.

Infrequent though they are, these intrusions into Jacob's inner thoughts indicate that however strongly and convincingly Woolf and her narrator communicate Machian isolation, as an author Woolf found that she was unable to craft the character and the novel she desired while unequivocally abiding by Machian theory. Indeed, the narrator vigorously, consistently asserts that attempting to know one another is "a matter of guess work" (73)—she repeats, verbatim, on two separate occasions that "[i]t is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not

exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done” (31, 154). After completing *Jacob’s Room*, there is little doubt left in a reader’s mind that Woolf wishes to emphasize Jacob’s opaqueness and our lack of ability to truly penetrate the minds and lives of other people. And yet, sporadically, as in the Scilly Isles example and London scene, Woolf evidently found it impossible to craft her fiction properly without breaching the supposedly impenetrable wall that isolates our consciousnesses. Inexplicably, in these scenes, the overriding Machian premise of the novel is undermined.

On the whole, *Jacob’s Room* acts as a fitting introduction to Woolf’s literary study of consciousness. Although it lacks the interrogative, penetrating exploration of consciousness theory that appears in *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, or *The Waves*, we do see Machian influence clearly at play. In *Jacob’s Room*, in order to generate an elegiac sense of absence and loss, Woolf utilizes Mach’s theories of the chaotic flood of surrounding sensations, the impenetrability of the individual mind, and the isolation of consciousness that ensues. Significantly, however, Woolf fails to be consistent on this matter; at various times in the novel, she allows her narrator to peek into Jacob’s inner world. Consequently, in terms of Woolf’s relationship with consciousness theory, two important implications are revealed: that Woolf 1) internalized Machian theory in concept, but 2) found herself unable to consistently abide by its terms in her work. It was all too important, too natural, to enter into Jacob’s consciousness at certain, crucial times. It seems likely that Woolf may have started the novel expecting to be able to abide strictly by Mach’s ideas, but in practice found it to be impossible. Therefore, upon embarking on her next novel, instead of accepting Machian theory as a premise, Woolf begins to question the psychological assumptions about consciousness so ingrained in her turn-of-the-century culture. *Is the isolation of consciousness the inevitable conclusion?*

### ***Mrs. Dalloway: Isolation and the Social Order***

In an essay entitled “Flying Over London,” Woolf remarks “how blindly the tide of the soul and its desires rolled this way and that, carrying consciousness like a feather on the top, marking the direction, not controlling it” (*The Captain’s Death Bed* 206). This description is a fitting characterization of the free-flowing narration style to which we are introduced in *Mrs. Dalloway*. In stark contrast to the exterior presentation of Jacob, in the first paragraph of Woolf’s next novel we are immediately immersed in the mind of Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway from the moment she steps out of her house into a crisp, autumn morning to buy flowers:

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French window and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course... looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, “Musing among the vegetables?”—was that it?—“I prefer men to cauliflowers”—was that it? (*Mrs. Dalloway* 3)

It is immediately apparent that *Mrs. Dalloway*’s narration will grant us access not only to Clarissa’s thoughts and feelings, but to the nature of her thought itself: its breathless pace, its self-doubt and self-correction, its abrupt and seemingly nonsensical twists and turns as memories and ideas flood past her, mingled with sensation. This intensely mind-focused narration is partly why *Mrs. Dalloway* is typically considered Woolf’s first stylistically grounded Modern novel. While in *Jacob’s Room* Woolf used an Edwardian narrative style to ironically highlight its failings in a way that reflected contemporary psychological tenets, in *Mrs. Dalloway* Woolf

writes with a truly psychologically-based voice: the narration clearly exemplifies a Jamesian understanding of how we experience consciousness. As we trace Clarissa's thoughts, we are submerged in her sensations, her surroundings, her memories, as if, per William James, "every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows around it" (*Principles* 245). Drawing from James, Woolf conceives of consciousness as a turbulent, flowing stream and communicates this with her freely associative prose.

What Woolf centrally presents in *Mrs. Dalloway*, however, is not merely a passive demonstration or description of the experience of consciousness, but an active interrogation of the Machian theory that proved problematic in her previous novel. This time, Woolf tackles the Machian assumption that she was previously unable to put into consistent practice: his conclusion that because our external world is chaotic, and consciousness an illusive means of coping with the chaos, each individual is irreparably isolated in his or her own mind. If this is true, Woolf asks, what are we to make of social connections—of friendships, marriages, and group engagements? We cannot deny that the social order exists, and, as Woolf determined in *Jacob's Room*, we are naturally inclined to feel as if we are capable of accessing each others' thoughts at times. How can one be a social being and yet be doomed to mental seclusion?

To explore these questions, Woolf first establishes the isolation of the individual consciousness as an initial premise. The two characters on whom the novel is centered—Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith—both strongly and vividly express an unshakable sensation of mental aloneness suggestive of Machian isolation. For Clarissa, solitude is a constant but comfortable state. Moments after descending onto the streets of Piccadilly Circus, Clarissa reveals that she "sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and



alone” (8). Deeper than an ambiguous feeling of detachment, Clarissa views this aloneness as a fundamental truth that prompts her to resolve that “she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 9). She characterizes the world around her as the “ebb and flow” in which she, alone, “survive[s]” (9). In short, Clarissa draws a Machian conclusion: that the isolation of the individual consciousness means that we cannot have concrete, assured knowledge of the substances (and people) external to ourselves.

This pervading sensibility persists throughout the novel as Clarissa proceeds through her day. Even as Clarissa engages in social interactions, such as her private conversation with Peter Walsh at lunchtime, Woolf’s language emphasizes the friends’ separateness rather than their intimacy. Illustratively, their thoughts are starkly juxtaposed as they interact:

She’s grown older, [Peter] thought, sitting down. I shan’t tell her anything about it, he thought, for she’s grown older. She’s looking at me, he thought, a sudden embarrassment coming over him, though he had kissed her hands...

Exactly the same, thought Clarissa; the same queer look... (40)

Later in the day, Clarissa ponders the “supreme mystery” (127) of isolation, which she respectfully terms “the privacy of the soul” (126). Unlike Peter, who feels affronted by the “impenetrability” (60) inherent in his interactions with Clarissa, Clarissa prizes her solitude. She has embraced the Machian state of the world; the isolation of consciousness ought not to be feared, for it results in a beautiful privacy that must be cherished and protected.

Septimus Smith, Clarissa’s ideological counterpart in the novel, represents another approach to Machian consciousness. Presumably suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder after the War—a condition that renders him virtually incapable of relating to other people and occasionally sends him spiraling into delusion—Septimus stumbles through the novel in a

preoccupied daze. While his status as a poor, crazed war veteran places him, by any conventional social standard, worlds apart from Clarissa, the two characters share a fundamental affinity in their awareness of their own isolation. Septimus frequently reiterates that he is separated from others in a way he has no hope of breaching: “He, Septimus, was alone” (67); “he was quite alone, condemned, deserted, as those who are about to die are alone” (92); “That was it: to be alone forever. That was the doom... to be alone forever” (145). Septimus experiences an extreme, pathological version of Clarissa’s “supreme privacy”: he treasures his isolation to the extent that social interaction terrifies him. When forced to face society (as while walking down a city street), Septimus struggles “to prevent him[self] from falling down, down, he cried, into the flames!” and he sees “faces laughing at him, calling him horrible disgusting names, from the walls, and hands pointing round the screen” (67). When alone, by contrast, Septimus is “free, as it was decreed, that he, Septimus, the lord of men, should be free” (67). Away from society’s constraints, he finds himself capable of “hear[ing] the truth, to learn the meaning” of life (67).

Significantly, Woolf discourages us from writing Septimus off as a deranged, radicalized version of Clarissa’s functional ideology. She takes several measures to ensure that we consider the two relative equals, despite Septimus’ disordered state. Hermione Lee points out a linguistic element in the text that serves this purpose: the repetition of the phrase “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun”:

Clarissa and Septimus are linked by a mutual leitmotif, the quotation from *Cymbeline* (“Fear no more the heat o’ the sun”), which Clarissa reads in Hatcher’s shop window in the morning, and which comes into Septimus’s mind as he lies in his room... For both it is a moment of tranquility, an escape from body, and possibly an anticipation of death. (“Mrs. Dalloway” 31)

Similarly, both Septimus and Clarissa persistently feel a sensation of rhythmic, wave-like flux: the former frequently senses a “rising and falling, rising and falling” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 22), while for Clarissa, all is “up and down, up and down” (35). This kinship is solidified at the end of the novel: at Clarissa’s party, after hearing the news of Septimus’ suicide, she thinks that she “felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself” (186). Once again, “the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun” (186), and Clarissa echoes the phrase most strongly identified with Septimus: “one was alone” (184). Though reacting in variant ways, Septimus and Clarissa are united in their acknowledgement of a state of existence that is distinctly Machian.

Other prominent characters in the novel—including Hugh Whitbread, Dr. Holmes, Doris Kilman, and William Bradshaw—act as a collective foil to the primary duo, in that they refuse to acknowledge, let alone enjoy, their Machian isolation. Perhaps subconsciously aware that they can never share their consciousnesses with other people, they compensate by instead immersing their minds in all-consuming societal ideologies. While Clarissa recognizes the value of privacy and individuality as the one remuneration afforded to her by her isolation, each of these “society characters” fervently relinquishes his or her individual selfhood in their attempts to avoid confronting isolation. As a result, they represent the lives that Septimus and Clarissa find repulsive and frightening.

Revealingly, in contrast to Clarissa and Septimus, who are characterized primarily through their distinctive modes of thought and their concern with the individuality of their personal consciousnesses, these society characters are predominantly, even exaggeratedly, defined by their social roles, making them caricatures more than characters. Hugh, for example, is “the perfect gentleman” (73). Grandly described as having “the most extraordinary, the most

natural, the most sublime respect for the British aristocracy of any human being” (71), Hugh is the picture-perfect representation of a man of high society: “No country but England could have produced him” (73). (By contrast, Clarissa reacts with offense and disgust when Peter accuses her of being “the perfect hostess.”) Similar to Hugh, Dr. Holmes and Bradshaw are ideal modern men, their minds commanded by reason and scientific principles. Sir William Bradshaw is particularly absurd in his absorption in his ideology, evidenced as Woolf describes his belief in “proportion” in overly grandiose language:

Proportion, divine proportion, Sir William’s goddess... Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalized despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion... so that not only did his colleagues respect him, his subordinates fear him, but the friends and relations of his patients felt for him the keenest gratitude for insisting that these prophetic Christs and Christsses, who prophesised the end of the world, or the advent of God, should drink milk in bed, as Sir William ordered... (99)

As these excerpts indicate, what is notable or outstanding about the society characters has little to do with their own personalities, voices, or memories; unlike Clarissa or Septimus, they are entirely defined by the social concepts in which they immerse themselves. Devoid of any “privacy of the soul” yet also failing to connect to individuals, these characters become nothing more than embodied abstractions, mindless representations of their ideologies.

Woolf furthermore makes it clear that the compulsion to flee from the acceptance of Machian isolation via social ideology is not just a pitfall for the upper classes. Doris Kilman uses her lower-class standing and religious belief as her replacement for self definition. What she

speaks and thinks is not a reflection of her own values, but is composed merely of the phrases and opinions that she has absorbed from her religious ideologies. After an interaction with Clarissa, Ms. Kilman fumes that “she had not triumphed; she had not mastered the flesh” (128), borrowing her language from Christian doctrine. She goes on to remind herself that “one must fight; vanquish; have faith in God. Mr. Whittaker had said she was there for a purpose... Knowledge comes through suffering, said Mr. Whittaker” (129). Just as the concepts of high society and proportion subsume the identities of those in the educated class, Ms. Kilman’s preoccupation with vague religious commandments robs her of her own voice, replacing it with that of the absent “Mr. Whittaker.”

Clarissa and Septimus react with revulsion to the society characters’ relinquishing of personal identity. Hermione Lee aptly describes the tension that exists between the two conflicting groups, saying that the society characters are

representative of a way of life, supported by Clarissa’s Prime Minister, in which individuals are made to tow the line, or are put away... Clarissa recognizes that Sir William would ‘force the soul,’ and responds as Septimus does to the goddesses of Proportion and Conversion. As an alternative to the lust for domination which Sir William calls Proportion and Miss Kilman calls ‘love and religion,’ Clarissa recognizes... the privacy and integrity of the individual. (“Mrs. Dalloway” 29)

Yet this description fails to capture the deep hostility and disgust that Clarissa and Septimus feel at the prospect of losing their individuality. In her room, Clarissa bitterly reflects on the two primary abstractions—“Love and religion”—that falsely presume to connect people and rob them of their privacy: “How detestable, how detestable they are!” she fumes (*Mrs. Dalloway*

126). As she believes that isolation is a natural and treasured state of being, she views others' attempts to circumvent isolation both impossible and undesirable:

And the supreme mystery which Kilman might say she had solved [with religion] or Peter might say he had solved [with love], but Clarissa didn't believe either of them had the ghost of an idea of solving, was simply this: here is one room; there another. Did religion solve that, or love? (127)

Thus, Woolf presents a social dichotomy that also translates into a psychological one: people may be split into those who recognize and accept the reality of Mach's isolation of consciousness and therefore preserve their individual selfhoods (like Clarissa and Septimus), and those who ignore isolation by defining themselves with abstract ideologies and thereby relinquish their private identities (like Bradshaw and Ms. Kilman).

This dichotomy usefully answers why, despite the isolation of individuals, large and abstract structures of society remain intact; weak-minded individuals, afraid to confront their isolation, submerge their identities in social concepts. But what of social interactions between individuals? How can they fit into Mach's theory of mental isolation? Woolf probes further into the relationship between society and consciousness through the characters of Septimus and Clarissa themselves; after all, if they are both informed by Machian theory, why is Septimus driven to a violent suicide, while Clarissa hosts a successful party?

One possibility is that, though he is plagued by madness, Septimus and his actions represent what any sane person would do if he or she were forced to live by strict Machian standards. Septimus dies because he is utterly trapped in his isolation; in his mind, the only alternative is to become a mindless slave to social abstraction in the ignorant world of Dr. Holmes and Hugh Whitbread, where personal mind and identity are no longer viable concepts.

Minutes before his death, Septimus emphasizes that “He did not want to die. Life was good” (149), but he cannot drive from his mind that the problem is “Only human beings—what did *they* want?” (149). Unable to abide the imminent risk of becoming yet another disciple of Proportion, Septimus dives out the window to his death. To Septimus, as to Mach, there are only the polarities of isolation and the denial of selfhood, with nothing in between.

Clarissa, on the other hand, does not actually operate in an unequivocally Machian world. Though she is aware of her isolation, she somewhat confusingly still functions as a respected and well-liked member of English society, believing that “one must seek out the people” (153). She simultaneously mocks her attempts to connect with others as “a bad joke” (77) and lauds them as an attempt “to combine, to create” (122). As Clarissa’s astute friend Sally observes, with her parties Clarissa is joyfully making a knowingly futile attempt to share her consciousness: “for what can one know even of the people one lives with everyday? she asked. Are we not all prisoners? She had read a wonderful play about a man who scratched on the wall of his cell, and she had felt that was true of life—one scratched on the wall” (192). Though Clarissa recognizes the same inevitable aloneness that Septimus does, she chooses to “scratch on the wall of her cell” anyway, engaging to some extent in the surrounding social world. She insists that even if we may never fully know what is inside the consciousness of another, we should each “at any rate, do our part; mitigate the sufferings of our fellow-prisoners... decorate the dungeon with flowers and air-cushions; be as decent as we possibly can” (77). And for Clarissa, “her part” is her parties. They are an offering, she says (122). Though she knows isolation to be fundamental and profound, Clarissa nevertheless commits herself to her parties out of enduring hope that she may stumble upon a means of connection: “since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so

momentary compared to the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide,” she muses, “the unseen might survive... perhaps—perhaps” (153).

The subtle differences between Clarissa and Septimus in their relation to Machian theory are further exemplified in Clarissa’s somewhat contradictory emotional reaction to Septimus’ death. On one hand, she understands and relates to his suicide. She, too, prizes her privacy, her isolation, and knows that the inimitable solitude of one’s own mind is something to be protected, something that would be threatened by a man like Dr. Holmes: “A thing there was that mattered;” she declares, “a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This [Septimus] had preserved.” (184). She recognizes that Septimus’ act “was defiance” (184) and is “glad that he had done it: thrown it away” (186). Intuiting that Septimus had made the choice between preserving his privacy or being forced into selfless immersion in social ideology, she understands and approves of his action.

On the other hand, even though she relates to Septimus on a fundamental level—“He made her feel the beauty,” she says (186)—a moment later Clarissa thinks, “But she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter” (186). Though she lives in a predominantly Machian mindset, she clings to the hope that isolation *can* be breached, that two people’s consciousnesses could connect in a true and meaningful way. Though “people [feel] the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them” (184), Clarissa believes that attempting to reach this elusive center—where the wall of isolated consciousness is penetrated—is a necessary and constant goal.

What are we to make of these two variant representations of Machian ideology? We may only conclude that in her first fully committed and interrogative novel on consciousness, Woolf,



like Walter Pater, questions Mach's assertion that we are irreparably walled off from one another's consciousnesses; but instead of art, Woolf raises socialization as a counter to Machian theory. Is it possible that our relationships—the authentic relationships Clarissa desires, as opposed to society's self-dissolving abstractions—are capable of allowing us to penetrate each other's consciousnesses? While Woolf does not appear to settle definitively on an answer, she raises an important point: through intimate socialization, we, like Clarissa, resist our isolation, pounding on the walls of our cells, hoping that perhaps an echo reaches the ears of our fellow prisoners. Without this hope, as dramatized by Septimus' utter withdrawal from society, we would be led only to suicide.

Further, since Septimus exemplifies pure Machian theory, and since suicide is the exception and not the norm, with this novel Woolf implicitly raises the possibility that Mach's theory is incomplete. For if our consciousnesses are isolated from the start, from where do we, like Clarissa, generate this conception of hope for communication?

### ***To the Lighthouse: Questioning Order and Chaos***

If *Mrs. Dalloway* presents an interrogation of the role of isolation in the Machian conception of consciousness, in *To the Lighthouse* Woolf shifts her focus to an even more fundamental aspect of Mach's theory: external chaos and how it is mitigated by consciousness. According to the Austrian empiricist (as well as Pater), the structure and solidity we perceive in the world is a figment of our brains' ordering processes; the stimuli seen by our eyes are in fact fluidly changing, unstable masses of sensations. If this is true, Woolf asks, are our minds truly the only source of the illusory order we perceive? Is there no other order outside of our own personal consciousnesses, no other person or structure on which we may rely?

As in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf uses the basic Machian/Paterian view<sup>3</sup> as a foundational premise: the objective content that meets our filtering minds and generates our perceptions is utterly fluid and unstable. Illustratively, the middle section of the novel, “Time Passes,” is written as if Woolf were directly informed by this concept. Poised between two sections that are composed of the inner thoughts of the characters, in “Time Passes” we are presented with a more objectively-narrated section describing the weather swirling around the seaside home as it deteriorates from neglect. Demonstrated in the following excerpt, the initial parenthetical note “(had there been anyone to listen)” suggests that in this section, Woolf wishes to emphasize the absence of people, providing us with a glimpse of the world unfiltered by human perceptions:

Listening (had there been any one to listen) from the upper rooms of the empty house only gigantic chaos streaked with lightning could have been heard tumbling and tossing, as the winds and waves disported themselves like the amorphous bulks of leviathans whose brows are pierced by no light of reason, and mounted

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<sup>3</sup> At this point it would be useful to acknowledge an important caveat about how Woolf utilizes Machian theory. Mach, in a manner befitting a scientist, is careful to distinguish between reality (comprised of what he calls “substances”) and our “sensations.” As earlier discussed, Mach believed that, for all intents and purposes, reality does not exist; at the very least, we cannot know it. The *only* things we know to be real are our sensations: the disordered, ever-changing stimuli that get filtered in our brains. Whatever creates the stimuli, the stuff that inspires our sensations, is beyond us, and so Mach does not bother with it; he writes off “reality” as functionally nonexistent. This nuanced and subtle division between sensation and reality is one that Woolf, as we will notice, does not make. As we discuss the nature of order and chaos in Woolf’s novel and the way in which she communicates the Machian sense of fabricated, illusory order in reaction to the underlying chaos, it becomes clear that Woolf utilizes the concepts of “sensation” and “external reality” interchangeably to characterize the fluctuating outer forces. Presumably, not having been an empiricist herself, Woolf simply was not aware of or did not concern herself with such a distinction.

one on top of another, and lunged and plunged in the darkness of the daylight (for night and day, month and year ran shapelessly together) in idiot games, until it seemed as if the universe were battling and tumbling in brute confusion and wanton lust aimlessly by itself. (134-5)

This excerpt, characteristic of “Time Passes” as a whole, provides ample evidence of a Machian sensibility. Woolf loads this passage, and the section at large, with highly active verbs (*lunge, tumbling, thrust, slam, lurch*) that communicate a sense of ceaseless movement and perpetual change. She emphasizes the senselessness of the scene by associating the external world with brutish monsters and idiots, and disorders the structure of time by eliminating not only the abstract notions of the calendar year but also blending day and night (“plunged in the darkness of the daylight”).

Moreover, at the occasional moments when a human element does intrude in “Time Passes,” the effect is small, seemingly insignificant in comparison to the unwieldy external forces. The tragic and untimely death of Andrew in the midst of battle, for example, is reduced to a parenthetical aside—“(A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous.)” (133)—as is the death of Mrs. Ramsay. Similarly minimized is Prue’s marriage—“(Prue Ramsay, leaning on her father’s arm, was given in marriage...)” (131)—and the birth of Prue’s daughter, which is parenthetically noted as the same moment as her death (132). We thus find that all the major events around which human life is traditionally structured—birth, marriage, and death—have been systematically trivialized. Woolf records these occurrences, conventionally deemed the most meaningful and significant in any single life, off-handedly, almost flippantly. In this section

communicating the pervading chaos of reality, the ways in which people strive to forge a sense of meaning and structure are explicitly deemed feeble, negligible.

Furthering this concept is Mrs. McNab, the housekeeper and the only human being who appears for the majority of “Time Passes.” She is a weak and pitiable character; old and in declining health, she “clutched the banisters and hauled herself upstairs and rolled from room to room” (130). Barely present in the house despite her persistent efforts to keep it tidy, she relents to its destruction, moaning, “It was too much for one woman, too much, too much” (137). “Time Passes,” then, also demonstrates that in a world that is unstable and chaotic, the meager efforts of those who attempt to impose human structure are dwarfed and futile.

Although not as explicitly as “Time Passes,” in “The Window” and “The Lighthouse,” Woolf similarly communicates a sense of the underlying chaos simmering just below the surface for the summer-home guests, and the novel can arguably be read like a catalogue detailing the ways in which the characters deal with it. As in *Mrs. Dalloway*, critics have often observed that Woolf’s narration in this novel (which, like her previous novel, follows the intimate consciousnesses of her characters) foregrounds not the characters’ dialogue, actions, or interactions, but rather the nature of their consciousnesses and how they perceive the workings of their own minds. As Hermione Lee comments in “*To the Lighthouse: Completed Forms*,” “Perhaps not everyone thinks like this; but everyone in this novel must, because the characters are being used in the service of an abstract argument... This is evident in some of the dialogue, which, like the ladling of soup, is often irrelevant to the flow of consciousness behind it” (15). In these sections of the novel, the free-flowing thoughts of the characters implicitly communicate Woolf’s “abstract argument” in response to Mach’s theory of disorder as they attempt to negotiate and cope with the chaos.

Mr. Ramsay, for one, is terrified by disorder and irrationality. A brilliant philosopher, he cleverly guards himself against the threat of confronting chaos in two subtle but distinct ways. First, Mr. Ramsay, in his own mind, actively constructs a smaller, logical, manageable interpretation of the world with which he can abide: for him, the scope of human intelligence is the alphabet, ranging from A to Z. His intelligence puts him at Q, prompting him to make it his life's only goal is to achieve R (*To the Lighthouse* 33). To keep himself occupied, he often imagines scenarios symbolic of a philosophical theory (like Hume stuck in a bog or the table in a tree) and uses their merit and complexity to judge his position on the alphabet. As a philosopher, Mr. Ramsay views his intelligence and its cultivation as the paramount purpose of his life; therefore, by using his microcosmic ordering process of limited scope, he deliberately avoids confronting reality on a wider scale: whenever he is tempted to think, "Is human life this? Is human life that?" he dismisses the questions with "One never had time to think about it" (89).

It is also for this reason that Mr. Ramsay often seeks solitude. Alone, Mr. Ramsay is free "to go on thinking, telling himself the story how Hume was stuck in a bog" (68). Tellingly, his thoughts are always on his own philosophies, his own theories, his own reductive "stories." When Mr. Ramsay thinks, "He would like a little solitude" (68), and reminisces about how "he used to walk about the country all day long, with nothing but a biscuit in his pocket" (68), it is because he knows that in his thoughts, he may be safely ensconced in his miniature, structured world. As Mrs. Ramsay notes, though his philosophies are difficult (in her mind, they are "all sorts of horrors"), when Mr. Ramsay thinks about his theoretical world it seems "to cheer him" (70). Mr. Ramsay, therefore, essentially augments the process that Mach claims our perceptions do naturally—generate a mollifying illusion that provides the stability and comfort denied by

reality's harsh disarray. Mr. Ramsay creates a second layer, an entirely new level, of illusion which, evidenced by his desire for privacy, he prefers above ordinary life.

This first defense against chaos is generally effective for Mr. Ramsay in solitude, and so his other means of defense is used when Mr. Ramsay finds himself in the company of others. Other people threaten to complicate and disturb his limited worldview, and so Mr. Ramsay needs the constant reassurance and support of those around him to bolster his sense of power, intelligence, and control (the elements which sustain his illusory world and which he calls his "vanity"). He carefully manipulates the people around him—particularly women—to achieve this end: the independent-minded Lily Briscoe complains that he "bear[s] down upon them" (45) with "this enormous flood of grief, this insatiable hunger for sympathy, this demand that she should surrender herself up to him entirely" (151). While in the presence of others, Mr. Ramsay finds that if they do not defer to his needs—if they do not accommodate and fit into his constructed, second-level illusory world—then "[a]ll his vanity, all his satisfaction in his own splendour... [is] shattered, destroyed" (30), thereby undermining his confidence in his constructed world and rendering him vulnerable to chaos.

This fact is poignantly demonstrated during Mrs. Ramsay's dinner party: with no one paying attention to him, Mr. Ramsay is at first "scowling and frowning, and flushing with anger" (95), which in a few moments disintegrates into "extreme anxiety" (108) until Minta "see[s] that he is taken care of, and praise[s] him" (108). Though we never hear Mr. Ramsay's thoughts in this scene, they are vividly communicated by Mr. Tansley, who shares Mr. Ramsay's need for constructed reassurance: "at this moment, sitting stuck there with an empty seat beside him, nothing had shaped itself at all. It was all in scraps and fragments. He felt extremely, even physically, uncomfortable. He wanted somebody to give him a chance of asserting himself" (90).

In another instance, while on the veranda with no woman around him to lend him support, Mr. Ramsay “quiver[s]; he shiver[s]” (30) in terror as his constructed world gets “shattered, destroyed” (30). The interplay of these two methods of defense—the second-level illusion Mr. Ramsay harbors in his solitude and his constant need for sympathy and reassurance to bolster his vanity around company—allow Mr. Ramsay to, for the most part, attempt to foster a sense of constant stability, living a life of intentional ignorance, rarely confronting the disorder that quite evidently lies just beyond his illusions.

By contrast, the two central female characters in the novel, Lily and Mrs. Ramsay, admit the chaotic nature of reality more bravely, with neither of them feeling such intense need for constant order. Lily in particular accepts that reality is fundamentally unstable and, unlike Mr. Ramsay, is willing to acknowledge flux as the natural state of things. Lily spends much of the novel staring at her unfinished painting, actively sensing the constantly shifting stimuli around her and contemplating the ever-fluid impressions that engulf her: “the load of her accumulated impressions of [Mr. Bankes] tilted up, and down poured in a ponderous avalanche... That was one sensation. Then up rose in a fume the essence of his being. That was another” (24). Lily notices the difficulty in creating anything solid or enduring: “impressions poured in upon her... to follow her thought was like following a voice which speaks too quickly to be taken down by one’s pencil” (24). She sees herself as living “in a world of strife, ruin, chaos” (150) which her mind appears to reflect: “her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain” (159). Once again, we see Woolf using Jamesian language, describing the mass of sensations that bombard consciousness with aquatic imagery, like fountains and streams. And while Lily and Mr. Ramsay both feel themselves being tossed around on the wave of disorder around them, and Mr. Ramsay flees, terrified, to his

illusions the moment he senses chaos, Lily lingers on the fluctuating sensations. Her sense of the pervasive, underlying movement often, in fact, contributes to her artistic sensibilities: Lily “screw[ed] up her eyes and [stood] back as if to look at her picture, which she was not touching, however, with all her faculties in a trance, frozen over superficially but moving underneath with extreme speed” (201). Lily, unlike Mr. Ramsay, yields herself to the flux and attempts to capitalize on it for her creative purposes.

In yielding, ironically enough, Lily discovers the key by which, if only momentarily, she may unlock the type of stability which Mr. Ramsay desperately seeks to capture constantly—only this stability is neither unnatural nor forced. Mrs. Ramsay shares this ability: by being sensitive to the ebb and flow of sensation and concentrating on their sensory experiences, these women each discover a remarkable comfort and steadiness. One such vital moment occurs when Mrs. Ramsay concentrates on the swirling activity of her dinner party and thinks,

there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out... in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures.  
(105)

In the discovery of these moments, Pater’s influence vividly enters Woolf’s novel. As Harold Bloom declares, in this novel “Woolf is most authentically Pater’s child” (5). Pater believed that with a subtle enough attention to direct experience, one will feel a “focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy” (Pater 119), an experience equated to “burn[ing] with [a] hard, gem-like flame” (119). Like Pater, Woolf entertains the idea that an openness and receptivity to external chaos can yield a surprisingly rewarding and vividly stable



experience. For Mrs. Ramsay, this experience also allows her to connect with other people. By gathering all her guests together in the same place and fostering a suitable environment, Mrs. Ramsay is pleased to observe that a sense of cohesion is generated among her guests: she notes that though “his way of looking [was] different from hers... looking together united them” (97). The dinner party acts as “their common cause against that fluidity out there” (97).

This dinner-party moment is therefore a crucial one, for not only does Woolf suggest that brief moments of stability are possible, but also that in these moments, some of the isolation of consciousness, so insisted upon by Mach, may be breached. When Mrs. Ramsay experiences this uniting moment at her dinner, she feels as though “her eyes were so clear that they seemed to go round the table unveiling each of these people, and their thoughts and their feelings” (106). Has Woolf, then, contradicted Mach, asserting that though external reality is chaotic, people isolated, this state is neither finite nor irrevocable?

There is stylistic evidence in *To the Lighthouse* that suggests that this is the case. As in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf’s narration in *To the Lighthouse* provides us with the sensation of floating across the top of characters’ consciousnesses, whirling along with their thoughts. More than in her previous novel, however, Woolf drifts between the thoughts of her various characters with little indicative language, even alternating voices several times in a single paragraph. When, for example, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay go for a walk, we hear his and her thoughts in an unbroken stream:

And all the poverty, all the suffering had turned to that, Mrs. Ramsay thought.

The lights of the town and of the harbor and of the boats seemed like a phantom net floating there to mark something which had sunk. Well, if he could not share her thoughts, Mr. Ramsay said to himself, he would be off, then, on his own. (68)

In this passage, we smoothly transition from Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts to those of her husband.

Due to the rapidity of this switch, however, the middle line ("The lights of the town...") becomes ambiguous—we cannot be certain which spouse claims this thought. Possibly they share it. Such indeterminacy and fluidity contributes to Woolf's implication in the dinner party scene: thoughts (and, perhaps, consciousnesses) *can* be shared.

But Lily's experience, while similar, complicates the issue. Like Mrs. Ramsay, Lily uses her sensitivity to sensory experience to construct brief moments of clarity and stability. While Mrs. Ramsay's tool to this end is her dinner parties, Lily's means is the more solitary activity of artistic expression: she uses art to "exchange the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting" (158). Lily struggles throughout the novel to rend a moment of solidity from her art. And though she senses that this goal is possible, for most of the novel, she fails:

She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her... Such she often felt herself—struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: 'But this is what I see; this is what I see,' and so to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck from her. (19)

Eventually Lily, too, finds success in her efforts. Like Mrs. Ramsay's moment at her party, Lily's moment of solidity with her painting is brief and fleeting while simultaneously powerful and vivid. Like Mrs. Ramsay, Lily must first construct the right atmosphere and sensitize herself to the sensations around her before the moment arises: "an odd-shaped triangular shadow [was thrown] over the step. It altered the composition of the picture a little... Her mood was coming back to her. One must keep on looking without for a second relaxing the intensity of emotion"

(201). When the moment finally does arrive, like Mrs. Ramsay at the party, Lily recognizes it as transitory: “Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter?” (208). At the crucial time, “as if she saw it clear for a second” Lily completes her painting, experiences her moment, and thinks, “I have had my vision” (209).

Lily’s moment is as vivid, satisfying, and solidifying as Mrs. Ramsay’s. Yet Lily’s experience lacks the crucial element of social connection fostered in the latter’s. In fact, through the entire process leading to Lily’s moment of Paterian being, Lily is still keenly aware of her impenetrable solitude. “Perished. Alone” (147), she thinks, “The grey-green light on the wall opposite. The empty places. Such were some of the parts, but how bring them together?” (147). Lily never definitively finds an answer to this question when it comes to the relations between people. Against the fluidity of life she feels herself “roused [to] perpetual combat, challenged [to] a fight” (158), but one “in which one was bound to be worsted” (158). While she believes that “[i]n the midst of chaos there [is] shape” (161), Lily distinguishes this belief from the hope for real communion between people, which she does not harbor: “Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave” (161). She wonders: “could it be, even for elderly people, that this was life?—starling, unexpected, unknown?” (180). Lily indeed creates for herself a solidifying moment, but for her it is utterly internal, personal, doing nothing to reconcile the immutable separateness of conscious existence.

We are left at the conclusion of *To the Lighthouse* with the thought that perhaps Woolf herself was undecided on this issue. She appears to be convinced of the Machian notion that what reaches our eyes and ears is a chaotic disarray of sensations, and at least open to the

Paterian notion that in brief, fleeting moments, order can miraculously emerge from the chaos (if we are properly mentally attuned to notice them). Beyond this, Woolf presents two unresolved possibilities. There is evidence in this novel to suggest that, if such moments exist, they act as gateways for communion between consciousnesses; that, in instances like Mrs. Ramsay's dinner, the revealed structure means that the "wall of impressions" (Pater 119) separating us have fallen, and our consciousnesses are revealed. Yet there is also evidence in Lily's experiences that these enlightening moments, while personally monumental, have no bearing or effect on our inability to see beyond the illusion that is our perceptual lives. Complicating the issue as well is the fact that Mrs. Ramsay appears to feel more fundamentally connected than isolated, a sensation that defies fundamental Machian isolation and that her brief, fleeting moments of Paterian vision cannot fully explain. In brief, the conclusion of *To the Lighthouse* leaves us with Woolf's plaguing question still remaining: how do we simultaneously feel that connection to others is possible when we are inevitably isolated? As Woolf moves on to *The Waves*, we find reason to believe that, after three exploratory novels, she found this question incapable of being solved by the current psychological theory of Mach or Pater. In response, in her next novel she tests a divergent theory of her own.

### ***The Waves: Consciousness and the Self***

While contemplating writing *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf noted in her diary that she wanted not "to tell a story" but to communicate "[a] mind thinking... life itself" (*Diary* 3: 232). Given that Woolf had already written several novels that explored the nature of the workings of the mind, the novelist's statement here is illuminating; despite her efforts up until this point, Woolf felt as if she had not yet achieved the goal she had set for herself and other Modern

writers: communicating the unfiltered content of the brain. By the composition of *The Waves*, it seems, Woolf made this issue not simply one of her central concerns, but *the* central concern of her novel. This focus undoubtedly helped to make *The Waves* the most thorough, complete, original, and daring exploration of consciousness of Woolf's career.

Indeed, we are alerted from the first pages of *The Waves* that the novel is a departure from her previous three explorations of consciousness theory. Abandoning all of her past narration styles, Woolf writes *The Waves* in an ethereal prose/poetic/dramatic voice that defies classification. Woolf all but eliminates the third-person narrator whose voice and style seeped into her other novels; *The Waves* is composed of the alternating perspectives of six characters, whose voices are introduced, similar to a drama, with a simple "Bernard said," or "Rhoda said," and no other narration:

‘The leaves are gathered round the window like pointed ears,’ said Susan.

‘A shadow falls on the path,’ said Louis, ‘like an elbow bent.’

‘Islands of light are swimming on the grass,’ said Rhoda. ‘They have fallen through the trees.’ (4)

A vast majority of the novel is communicated through this genre-bending prose style, excepted only by brief, interspersed, italicized passages that separate the major sections of the novel. (In those passages, an unnamed and generally objective narrator describes the sun slowly rising and then setting over an ocean, symbolizing the progression of time in the novel from the characters' childhoods to old age and deaths.) Outside the italicized sections, *The Waves* is essentially without a narrator.

As an apparent blend of poetry and prose sensibilities, the content that appears after each character's "said" is difficult to define in terms of how it relates to the "speaker." Consider the following passage, which is relatively representative of the novel's tone and voice:

'I have won the game,' said Jinny. 'Now it is your turn. I must throw myself on the ground and pant. I am out of breath with running, with triumph. Everything in my body seems thinned out with running and triumph. My blood must be bright red, whipped up, slapping against my ribs.... I see every blade of grass very clear. But the pulse drums so in my forehead, behind my eyes, that everything dances—the net, the grass... There is nothing staid, nothing settled in the universe. All is rippling, all is dancing; all is quickness and triumph....' (31-2)

The language of this passage does not communicate Jinny's self-narrated thought (as the internal narratives in *Mrs. Dalloway* or *To the Lighthouse* communicate Clarissa's or Lily's); at this time Jinny is a young and relatively flighty girl, not prone to solemn meditations or eloquent language, and so were these Jinny's thoughts the diction of this passage would not be befitting to her character. For the same reason, as well as for the practical unlikelihood, we are also disinclined to believe that the words are being spoken aloud, literally "said." The narration is in the present tense, which precludes the possibility that the narrative is a retrospective of an older, wiser Jinny. The language perhaps most closely resembles poetry; it includes Jinny's thoughts intermingled with her emotions, physical sensations, actions, perceptions, and memory—but how do the words relate to Jinny?

As Shulamith Barzilai points out, the narration "is deliberately deflected from mimetic speech and thought presentation in an attempt to reproduce a non-verbal order of reality" (Barzilai 214). And if we take into consideration Woolf's own assertion that she was striving to

communicate “a mind thinking” and presumably found her previous efforts to record the free-flowing conscious thoughts of her characters (like Clarissa, Lily, and Mrs. Ramsay) to be insufficient, then this “non-verbal order” is likely to exist deep within the contents of the mind, at a level that Woolf considered to be even more internal than a self-narrated stream of thought. Woolf now seeks to represent the contents of the mind even *before* it is expressed in thought. Her project is to capture and communicate our conscious but pre-articulated ideas and sensations that course through the mind, in a manner that feels so organic to readers that they are led to believe that what she expresses has not yet been bounded by the conventional language of self-conscious thought. Woolf therefore deliberately created a defamiliarizing prose that her readers would fail to be able to recognize or identify, its elegant poeticism instead conveying the rich, unmediated content of experience.

The fact that the language of the novel develops and advances with the characters as they age corroborates this theory. As in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the novel begins with the six characters in their young childhoods, conveying sensory perceptions and reactions to their external environment, in relatively short phrases, with little or none of the commentary that belies developed brains. In this early section, the six characters’ voices are nearly indistinguishable, as they react to similar stimuli with the unthinking responsiveness of children. As Susan observes that the “leaves are gathered round the window like pointed ears” (4), Louis notes “burning lights from the window-panes” (4), Jinny sees the house “with all its windows white with blinds” (5), and Bernard comments that the “dining-room window is dark blue now” (5). Importantly, as the novel progresses and the characters age, the length and complexity of what enters into their minds—their “said” sections—increase accordingly. The characters develop peculiarities that make them discernibly individualized people—Susan is

frank and rustic; Bernard sociable and articulate; Jinny athletic and capricious. Yet the six characters, who would logically speak and think with widely disparate vocabularies and levels of sophistication later in life, continue to be unanimously represented by the same dreamily poetic prose. What differentiates them comes solely from the content of their minds, not the style in which it is communicated. This odd aesthetic choice makes sense if the language of *The Waves* is indeed Woolf's way of representing unarticulated thought, the contents of a more basic cognitive realm in which, presumably, everyone's "language" is the same.

Woolf's decision to alter the style of her prose reflects far more than simply an aesthetic or technical change: it is indicative of an important shift in how she conceives consciousness as a whole in this novel. Over the course of her previous three novels, Woolf accepted the Machian/Paterian linked premises of external chaos and inner isolation to varying degrees, using them as points of departure to explore other issues. If consciousness is inherently isolating, she wondered in *Mrs. Dalloway*, how are we to regard the social aspect of humanity, and what is its purpose? In *To the Lighthouse*: if everything is disordered flux outside our minds, is there any way to find true stability? Can the isolation be breached? Significantly, from *Jacob's Room* to *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf generally operates by the basic notion, foundational to Mach's and Pater's theories, that there exists a division between the internal, isolated consciousness and the external, chaotic reality. Abundant evidence existing in all three of these novels suggests that Woolf is convinced that a feeling of mental isolation underlies the human experience, as well as that the world that surrounds us is not as stable or ordered as our perceptions lead us to believe.

Yet, as she demonstrates in *To the Lighthouse*, assuming irreparable mental isolation leads to some tricky unanswered questions. At the end of her previous novel, Woolf attempted without evident success to reconcile the isolation of consciousness with the notion that, like Mrs.



Ramsay's, our minds are naturally capable of feeling open and entwined with others.' Woolf appears to have been dissatisfied with how the Machian/Paterian model fails to account for the profound impact other people have on our minds and lives. In *The Waves*, Woolf confronts this issue by, for the first time, abandoning the assumption of isolated consciousness as a foundational premise. Instead of using this Machian sensibility as a starting point, Woolf embarks on *The Waves* with an inquiry that assumes, rather, the opposite: what happens to our theories of consciousness, reality, and the self if consciousness is *not* isolated?

As Woolf explores this query in *The Waves*, she all but disregards conventional narrative structure. With characters often expressing images, thoughts, and ideas that have nothing to do with their immediate surroundings, it becomes clear that, even more than in Woolf's previous works, the plot is not the emphasis in this novel. And so to address her central question, Woolf instead crafts a novel that focuses on creating an incomparably intimate portrait of character, an in-depth rendering of each "voice" as it is created, developed, and maintained over the course of life. To analyze *The Waves* is, largely, to analyze the six people, the six consciousnesses, whom Woolf creates, and how their personalities assert themselves and interact.

Bernard is the most logical starting point in this endeavor. His is the first consciousness we are made aware of in the novel—"I see a ring," said Bernard, 'hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light'" (4)—as well as the last. The entire final section of the novel, in fact, is comprised of Bernard's "voice" alone. As a storyteller and aspiring writer, he more than any other character concerns himself with forging an articulated and coherent sense of identity, relying on his "phrase-making" skills to do so: "I must make phrases and phrases and so interpose something hard between myself and the stare of housemaids, the stare of clocks, staring faces, indifferent faces, or I shall cry" (20). Bernard believes that by using words and phrases to

create stories, the personal self can be made definite. As Neville notes, “[Bernard] describe[s] what we have all seen so that it becomes a sequence. Bernard says there is always a story. I am a story. Louis is a story” (25). Bernard trusts in the ability of words to create identity to the point that he views the product as almost a physical, concrete entity: he sees himself as “wrapped round with phrases” (159) and he carries “a fat book with many pages” in which he “shall enter [his] phrases” (24), an object physically symbolic of the identity he forges. This sensibility, in and of itself, does not question or contradict Machian isolation. Bernard, like Peter Walsh in *Mrs. Dalloway*, “makes up the better part of life” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 54) with his narratives, hoping to create inner, personal coherence against the chaotic external world.

Yet when we dig deeper into Bernard’s character, exploring not only the fact that phrases comprise him but also his phrases themselves, his carefully constructed self begins to dissolve. Periodically, Bernard questions the efficacy of his self-generating method: “A phrase. An imperfect phrase. And what are phrases?” (159). In order to create his phrases, he “need[s] the stimulus of other people” (57); without the company of others he “cease[s] to invent” (57). Slowly, Bernard comes to the realization that his story-telling and phrase-making is not identity creation so much as identity integration, a process that wholly depends on the people around him giving him content with which to describe and define himself: “which of these people am I? It depends so much upon the room. When I say to myself, ‘Bernard,’ who comes?” (57). Alone, Bernard muses, “I do not know myself sometimes, or how to measure and name and count out the grains that make me what I am” (59), yet when he is around others, “I become not myself but [the other person] mixed with somebody—with whom?—with Bernard?” (59). He realizes his personal self is in fact fluid and unstable. Later in life, he wonders, “we ourselves... with this random flicker of light in us that we call brain and feeling, how can we do battle against this

flood; what has permanence? Our lives too stream away, down the lighted avenues, past the strip of time, unidentified” (167). Through Bernard, Woolf makes an important assertion: though we may construct ourselves with stories and self-dictated narrative, the selves that are created by these stories are *not* an ideal, unaffected, true inner “self.” Narratives are inextricably bound to and around other people; the selves we create depend on them, making them contingent and transient. And if this is the case, isolation is no longer a pertinent issue; if Bernard were isolated, walled off from others, discerning the borders of his identity and where they separate him from others should not be problematic. Yet it is: without others, Bernard is “[a] man without a self” (211). The problem, then, is not seclusion, but unavoidable plurality.

Bernard is not the only character who demonstrates an up-ending of Machian theory. Rhoda, too, rather explicitly struggles with self-creation in a manner that complements Bernard’s. For most of the novel, Bernard regards his ability to create a social, constructed identity a positive and admirable quality; others call it his “power” (26) and he himself calls it a proactive means to “run together whatever happens so that instead of incoherence there is perceived a wandering thread” (34). Though he ultimately rejects phrase-making as an effective practice, it operates as an entertaining and sense-making pursuit for a majority of Bernard’s life. Rhoda, by contrast, senses earlier than Bernard the difficulty of maintaining an other-less self, and instead of reacting to the discovery with a spirit of joy at creative construction, she reviles the constant intrusion from the start. “This great company... has robbed me of my identity” (22), she despairs early in the novel. Around other people, she “is broken into separate pieces; [she] is no longer one” (76)—although there is little evidence that Rhoda feels a sense of wholeness in solitude, either. Echoing Bernard’s final lament, when Rhoda is alone she thinks, “I am not here. I have no face” (29). Though she despises the fact that the presence of others forces her to “shift

and change and [be] seen through in a second” (29), she finds that “Alone, I often fall down into nothingness” (30). The words *fall*, *dissolve*, and *nothing* recur rhythmically in Rhoda’s consciousness; she alternately feels “hatred and terror” (170) in the presence of others as she feels herself affected by them, and “the violence of death” (170) and silence in solitude. Like Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*, caught between two irreconcilable and equally unacceptable realities, Rhoda commits suicide. Though she spends her life avoiding the tainting influence of other people, Rhoda despairs that she cannot manage to find a personal self apart from them.

Underlying the six characters’ struggle for self-definition is a character—or rather the absence of a character—who more than anyone else in the novel symbolizes the ultimate futility of the enterprise. Percival, a classmate sometimes regarded as the seventh major character of the novel, haunts *The Waves* from its early pages to its end, in a manner similar to but more acute than Jacob in *Jacob’s Room*. Like Jacob, we are never privy to Percival’s consciousness—his “said”—and he, too, is untimely killed in military service. But while the third-person narrator of *Jacob’s Room* occasionally provides us with insights that seem to glance off Jacob’s mind and inner thoughts, Percival is entirely unknown to us save the influence he extends on others: we only hear how the other six “voices” react to his presence or memory. Significantly, it is extremely difficult for us to discern Percival’s character—what his own voice might be like. Instead, we are presented only with what Bernard might call “Percival mixed with somebody”—Percival mixed with Bernard, or Neville, or Susan.

From Neville’s perspective, we see Percival as an idealized, Adonis-like object of affection: “He is allied with the Latin phrases on the memorial brasses. He sees nothing; he hears nothing. He is remote from us all in a pagan universe. But look—he flicks his hand to the back of his neck. For such gestures one falls hopelessly in love for a lifetime” (24). Percival is an

important and romanticized figure for Neville, who believes that “without Percival there is no solidity” (88). Louis, on the other hand, fails to perceive this entrancing beauty; for him, Percival is defined by his leadership abilities, his natural way of demanding attention and deference:

“Look now, how everybody follows Percival. He is heavy. He walks clumsily down the field... His magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander... Look at us trooping after him, his faithful servants, to be shot like sheep” (25). Each character creates his or her own “Percival,” different from the others’, who operates with more or less influence within his or her life.

Consequently, when Percival dies, we as readers barely notice the difference, since his effective role in the novel remains the same. We never knew the “real” Percival to begin with, only the I-mixed-with-Percival that each character has created, and after Percival’s death we continue to know him through those same means. Rhoda astutely observes how each of her friends uses the event of Percival’s death as a means of accentuating his or her own personality traits. She notes that “Bernard, meanwhile, flops red-eyed into some arm-chair. He will have out his notebook; under D, he will enter ‘Phrases to be used on the deaths of friends’” (116). About the egocentric, vivacious Jinny, she says “Jinny, pirouetting across the room, will perch on the arm of his chair and ask, ‘Did he love me?’ ‘More than he loved Susan?’” (116). Rhoda reports that Louis, who only ever viewed Percival as an indicator of and measuring stick for his own deficiencies and insecurities, will “smooth out the death of Percival to his satisfaction, looking fixedly over the cruet, past the houses at the sky” (116). Percival is an influence, not a distinct and separate self, and as such his pre- and post-mortem presences in the characters’ lives are, for all practical purposes, indistinguishable.

Percival’s presence and function in the novel thus exemplifies what appears to be Woolf’s overriding theory of selfhood in *The Waves*. As Louis observes, “Percival... makes us

aware that these attempts to say, ‘I am this, I am that,’ which we make, coming together, like separated parts of one body and soul, are false” (99). Percival’s selflessness, the fact that his identity is reduced to the piecemeal amalgamation of other peoples’ disparate interpretations, is the reality for us all. Bernard’s obviously socially constructed self, Rhoda’s facelessness and nothingness in solitude, and Percival’s overall lack of definitive identity together comprise Woolf’s strongest and most overt contradiction of the Machian notion that individual consciousnesses cannot be affected by outer influences.

For the other characters in *The Waves* not as explicitly concerned with identity formation, Woolf conveys the lack of a singular self more subtly. Early in the novel, when the characters are young children, their “voices” are nearly identical as they perceive and react to the same surroundings. As the characters grow, they each develop certain individualized “phrases” or patterns of thought that recur, motif-like, in their consciousnesses. In Susan’s sections, for example, the phrase “I love, I hate” floats into her consciousness regularly, appearing for the first time when she sees Jinny kissing Louis in the play area: “‘I love,’ said Susan, ‘and I hate. I desire one thing only. My eyes are hard... Though my mother still knits white socks for me and hems pinafores and I am a child, I love and I hate’” (9). For the rest of the novel, Susan’s experiences are often colored by these words, filtered through the polarities of love and hatred: “I hate the smell of pine and linoleum. I hate the wind-bitten shrubs and the sanitary tiles. I hate the cheerful jokes” (22), Susan complains at school. Later in her life, at a social dinner with her friends, she says, “The only sayings I understand are cries of love, hate, range and pain” (95), and later, “I hate Jinny because she shows me that my hands are red, my nails bitten. I love with such ferocity that it kills me” (96). Again and again it appears: “‘It is hate, it is love,’ said Susan” (99). Other characters are associated with their own phrases or images: Louis senses a beast that

“stamps, and stamps, and stamps” (4); Jinny is a fire that dances and ripples (7); Rhoda is associated with delicate petals and falling (11); Bernard with golden rings (4) and bubbles (34).

And yet, although a particular phrase or image may be most strongly associated with a single character, it is never limited to him or her alone. Inevitably, the phrase or image will recur in the consciousnesses of the other characters. Though love and hatred are demonstrably associated with Susan, Jinny muses about “love, hatred, by whatever name we call it” (105); Neville, like Susan, lists his hatreds, saying, “I hate men who wear crucifixes on the left side of their waistcoats. I hate ceremonies and lamentations and the sad figure of Christ” (130). Rhoda says, “Inwardly I am not taught; I fear, I hate, I love” (163). Similarly, even though falling petals are associated with Rhoda, Neville speaks of “the petal falling from the rose, and the light flicking as we sit silent” (105). Though the forging of rings is associated with Bernard, Louis says he “shall try tonight to fix in words, to forge in a ring of steel” (27) and at a later point observes that “the circle of our blood... closes in a ring” (105). Woolf systematically builds and then periodically undermines the connections between individuals and their associated phrases; the effect for the reader is a sense of overlapping, of the blending of consciousnesses and selves. Nothing, Woolf says, is unique to any single person—all aspects of the self are shared; every part of us (even the most resonant and seemingly fundamental) is also part of someone else.

And so in *The Waves* Woolf declares the nonexistence of the individual self. What we perceive to be our “self,” she suggests, is nothing more than an amalgamation of other people’s influences; as they are fused together in consciousness, we mistake the blend for an individualized identity. The next question, then, is aptly stated by Bernard in the last section of the novel: “How can I proceed now, I said, without a self, weightless and visionless, through a

world weightless, without illusion?” (212). In short: what does this radical declaration of selflessness mean for us, for our lives, for the role of consciousness?

To start, *The Waves* is the first of Woolf’s novels that forces us to acknowledge that identity and consciousness, after all, are not equivalent concepts. By contrast, for her first three consciousness-centered novels, Woolf fails to make a clear distinction between the two. Indeed, in those novels, the distinction was less necessary: according to the Machian view of consciousness (to which Woolf loosely adheres in *Jacob’s Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *To the Lighthouse*), one’s consciousness is a order- and stability-generating illusion that our brain creates in reaction to the chaotic stimuli of the external world. Since this perceptual illusion is *all* we perceive, our entire wealth of knowledge about the world and ourselves is drawn from it. And since our consciousnesses are private, our sensory experiences unsharable, our ordered conscious perceptions thus act as a sort of wall that separates us from others—this is the isolation with which Woolf contends in her novels. According to this theory, then, consciousness and the self are essentially the same: both are solitary, illusory, ordered narratives which our isolated minds create in reaction to the disordered external reality. So in *Jacob’s Room*, when the narrator comments that there “is no use trying to sum people up” (154), it is equally unclear, and equally unimportant, whether she is referring to our inability to discern Jacob’s true self or his inner consciousness. Both are equally impenetrable. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa struggles to even momentarily solidify her identity when presented with “some call on her to be her self” (37); she “[draws] the parts together” and muses about “how different, how incompatible” they are (37). In this passage, too, we may take Clarissa’s struggle to pull together her chaotic outer experiences into a coherent inner self as equivalent to the struggle to create a coherent consciousness from external disorder. When Lily in *To the Lighthouse* thinks “Who knows what we are, what we



feel? Who knows even at the moment of intimacy, This is knowledge?” (171), her query is applicable to both our lack of knowledge of each others’ selves and each others’ consciousnesses.

But in *The Waves*, thanks to the lack of a consistent third party narration, the distinction becomes necessary. Woolf convincingly dismantles the idea of a single or essential self in the novel; her characters all grapple with the concept that their identities are entirely other-composed. Yet the narrative style makes clear that each character does, indeed, have an individual consciousness. It is a significant fact that Rhoda’s “said” is not Susan’s “said” or Jinny’s “said.” Though at the end of the novel Bernard concludes that “I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am—Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs” (205), we cannot deny that Bernard nevertheless experiences an “I.” He has a consciousness that he identifies as “Bernard,” even if he fails to pinpoint a single identity whom that name represents. A distinction between selves and consciousnesses, therefore, is established: consciousness is a fundamental starting point, the basic embodied experience that underlies our perception that there is an “I” who is distinct from “you” or a tree. Anything more than that, however—anything that identifies Bernard’s “I” as a person with traits or thoughts or feelings—is no longer Bernard’s creation, but is a product of the socially-constructed self that exists, as Bernard says, “in the midst of consciousness” (193).

Woolf’s insistence on a socially-constructed, pluralized sense of self has profound, even revolutionary, implications for the dominant theory of consciousness at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As was earlier observed, her idea is incompatible with the concept of Machian isolation: according to Mach, if our minds filter the chaos of the exterior world so that all we see are our illusory ordered perceptions, then our conscious experiences can never be shared—we live in

impenetrable solitude. While Woolf accepts that we confront a fundamentally disordered external reality, throughout previous three novels she found problematic the notion of isolation, constantly struggling with the seemingly incompatible fact that we live undeniably social lives.

In *The Waves*, Woolf creates a reconciliatory counter-theory: she breaks down the wall, dismantling the notion that our conscious lives are filtered and illusory. There is no separation between inner order and outer chaos: all is fragmentary flux, within and without. Outside our minds, external sensations flood us in disarray: it is “confusion, the height, the indifference and the fury” (176), as Bernard says, “something sulphurous and sinister, bowled up, helter-skelter; towering, trailing, broken off, lost, and I forgotten, minute, in a ditch” (176-7). And this same sense of multitudinous forces pressing in and swirling around exists inside the mind as well. Our conscious selves, our conscious lives (everything, that is, except for the basic sense of “being conscious” itself) is similarly fragmented and a product of flooding external influence: “I cannot find any obstacle separating us,” Bernard says of himself and his friends. “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” (214). Our inner minds, in short, are not immune to the fragmentation of the outer world.

So what is consciousness, finally, to Woolf? All but abandoning Mach’s influential theory, Woolf settles on a different conception of consciousness that is decidedly socially-based. Individualized, personal consciousness is drastically reduced, existing at only the most fundamental of levels—the embodied “I am.” What we traditionally think of as “consciousness”—meaning our conscious selves, our thoughts, our emotions, our essences of being—is, like our perceptions, a product of external stimuli, how we collect other peoples’ influences. We are who we are entirely because of the people around us; our brains alone would

be incapable of generating the sense of selves and complex conscious lives that we enjoy. Every day, Woolf says, we must live our lives facing the same question Bernard presents in the last section of *The Waves*: “how describe a world seen without a self?” (213).

### **Woolf and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Consciousness Studies**

By the end of the 1920s, Virginia Woolf had formulated a new theory of consciousness that posed a challenge to the predominating empiricist conceptualization. While not a psychologist herself, Woolf presents in *The Waves* an implicit view of consciousness unique<sup>4</sup> and innovative for its time. Other contemporary scholars—William James among them—had theorized that sociability played a major role in the development of the self, but Woolf augments and extends the role of the social into conscious awareness itself. Not only our self-concepts, she

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<sup>4</sup> Only one turn-of-the-century psychologist, George Herbert Mead, could be said to have formulated a theory similar to Woolf’s, but it falls short of being truly comparable. Mead and Woolf share an ideological kinship; Mead, like Woolf, asserts that “mind can never find expression, and could never had come into existence at all, except in terms of a social environment” (Mead, qtd. in Prus 54). Yet the similarities, for all intents and purposes, end there. Mead was to become associated with the growing Behaviorist movement in psychology, which concerned itself more with the visible, external effects of mental behaviors than with consciousness and the workings of the internal mind. Consequently, Mead, unlike Woolf, based his theory on the behavioral evidence for the self—the crux of his theory being that “the behavior of the individual can be understood only in terms of the behavior of the whole social group of which he is a member” (Mead, qtd. in Prus 54)—and was little concerned with explaining how his notion of the social self related to consciousness as a concept. A functionalist and ultimately more of a founding father to sociology than psychology, Mead focused on the observable products of language as the key to self and mind. Because our thoughts are linguistic in nature, without speech, Mead reasoned, our complex internal lives would not be possible. This concentration, ultimately, took Mead’s research and theorizing in a direction fundamentally apart from Woolf’s.

says, but also our very consciousnesses, the ways in which we are aware of and structure our perceptions, are largely constructed by our social influences.

Though Mach's, James', and other psychologists' theories of consciousness differed from Woolf's in that they were overtly informed by contemporary scientific inquiry, both the theories of the psychologists and of Woolf were, in the early 1900s, largely restricted to the realm of philosophy. The limitations of scientific technologies of the time prevented timely or precise observation of neural activity, meaning that all consciousness theory was more philosophical speculation than hard science. Not until the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in fact, when the Cognitive Revolution occurred, did modern neuroscience develop. With the invention of electro and magnetic computerized imaging techniques, cognitive psychologists were by the 1980s and 90s at last given the tools to make consciousness theory a major, prolifically researched area of study informed by laboratory experimentation.

Consequently, Woolf's theory of consciousness, already progressive and unique for her own time, can in the 21<sup>st</sup> century be tested on an additional, new plane for analysis and comparison. Is her socially-based conception of consciousness as innovative today as it was in her own time? Or have current scholars taken up the idea, and if so, how do Woolf's theories compare to theirs? How well do they hold up against the rigor of modern empirical research?

In addressing these questions, we must remind ourselves that despite advances in technology that have allowed for increasingly technical and accurate study of the brain's processes, the conscious mind still remains a fundamental mystery. Philosophers and psychologists alike still debate the "problem of consciousness," citing different and occasionally contradictory empirical neurological findings to support their theories. Nevertheless, certain scholars and theories have gained more notoriety or credibility than others, and perhaps no single

modern theorist has drawn more attention than Daniel Dennett. His 1991 book *Consciousness Explained* is an audacious work that not only helped to re-ignite the heated debate about consciousness in recent decades, but delineates a specific and detailed theory of consciousness that is still avidly discussed in the field, making it one of the most likely candidates in our search for a work that will allow us to compare Woolf's theory to contemporary consciousness psychology.

Dennett introduces *Consciousness Explained* with the claim that no scholar has yet put forth a truly materialist theory of consciousness, defining *materialist* as a stance that totally rejects the idea that a spiritual or otherwise non-physical substance, such as a soul, is a viable explanation for consciousness. Pure materialists foundationally believe that all cognitive phenomena can be, at the core, explained by the electrical communication between neurons in the brain. Many scholars claim to be materialists, Dennett says, yet all scholarship so far has, at some point within the theory, fallen back on the "Cartesian Theater," which is a dualist (non-material-based) explanation for consciousness. As Dennett explains it, we all feel as if (and thus mistakenly want to believe) there is "some dimly defined imagined 'center' where 'conscious thought' and 'experience' take place" (39) and where "it all comes together"—the Cartesian Theater. Further, our conscious minds give us the sensation that there is some "doer" in our brains that controls and directs us and watches our experiences. This image of the little "doer," the *homunculus*, lounged in a commander's chair, watching consciousness as if projected on a screen in our minds, is the source of the "theater" metaphor, which Dennett claims we all involuntarily use when we think about our conscious lives.

For example, in the Machian theory of consciousness with which Woolf engages, Mach contends that our senses receive disordered and chaotic stimuli that our brains transform into the

perceptual illusion that is conscious experience. To Mach, Dennett would ask, “But how and where does the transformation happen? What, exactly, does the ordering?” By stating that our ordered perceptions somehow become our conscious experience but failing to explain *how* this transformation occurs, Mach therefore relies on the Cartesian Theater and the *homunculus*, who somehow transforms the chaos into order. The Theater, the mysterious and unexamined location in the brain at which the sensations are structured and “made conscious,” underlies every available theory of consciousness, Dennett says, and we are still left without a rigorously mechanistic and empirically verifiable explanation of consciousness.

Logically, then, Dennett believes that consciousness will finally be explained if a theory is produced which does not at its core rely on the Theater, but actively and wholly mechanistically explains how our conscious experiences come about, using specific and non-abstracted language. Dennett dedicates the remainder of *Consciousness Explained* to putting forth his own theory that meets this charge, which he terms the Multiple Drafts Theory of Consciousness. The Multiple Drafts Theory (MDT) is based most foundationally on one crucial premise: that there is no single time or place at which something “enters consciousness” or “becomes conscious.” When one attempts to dissect the elements of a conscious experience, it becomes impossible to draw a line between “conscious” and “not-conscious,” unless one does so arbitrarily (164-5).

Using this insight as a starting point, MDT advances the idea that our consciousnesses are comprised of “parallel, multitrack processes of interpretation and elaboration of sensory inputs” (111). In other words, as our brains constantly take in, process, and react to information, some of this overlapping processing (occurring simultaneously in different parts of the brain) yields what

we experience as consciousness. The conscious effect is comprised of the somewhat arbitrary outcome of the activity in our brains as they take in, interpret, and re-interpret information:

We don't directly experience what happens on our retinas, in our ears, on the surface of our skin. What we actually experience is a product of many processes of interpretation—editorial processes, in effect. They take in relatively raw and one-sided representations, and yield collated, revised, enhanced representations, and they take place in the streams of activity occurring in various parts of the brain. (113)

The constancy of this ever-changing processing activity provides our minds with what we call our “stream of consciousness,” yet Dennett emphasizes that what is actually happening is neither linear nor unidirectional, as the “stream” imagery implies: “It is always an open question whether any particular content thus discriminated will eventually appear as an element in conscious experience, and it is a confusion [therefore] to ask *when it becomes conscious*” (113). Though we experience “something *rather like* a narrative stream or sequence” (113), the underlying process is more accurately described as “continual editing by many processes distributed around the brain, and continuing indefinitely into the future” (113). Even though “at any point in time there are multiple ‘drafts’ of narrative fragments at various stages of editing in various places in the brain” (113), our consciousnesses appear stream-like and narrative-like because we are aware of only one of the many “drafts” in progress at a time.

Revolutionary a theory as it is (*Consciousness Explained* generates heated debate to this day), MDT shares a great deal in common with what Woolf proposes in *The Waves*. First, what prompted Woolf to depart from the Machian mode of thought was her rejection of Mach's presumption that our chaotic external sensory experiences become filtered into an ordered,

isolated, internal perceptive realm. His ideas about the isolation of consciousness and the wall of perceptive illusion rely on the assumption that it is possible to separate what is within and without one's own consciousness. Mach makes it clear that we may never breach the isolating illusion of perceived order. Thus, we logically know that whatever we see and experience belongs to the privileged realm of our own consciousnesses, separate from the chaotic exterior.

Woolf, however, dismantles this notion of definable boundaries of consciousness. Her own theory instead asserts that consciousness is as piecemeal, fragmented, and multitudinous as the outer reality it encounters. By proposing a social conception of consciousness, in which one's own perceptions and self are shaped by people and sensations external to oneself, Woolf problematizes Mach's notion that it is possible to determine the boundaries of one's consciousness. Just as Bernard asks "Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know" (*The Waves* 214), Woolf asserts that it is impossible to define the limits and edges of conscious experience.

This idea, in fact, resonates with Dennett's pointed breakdown of the *homunculus*, for Dennett similarly tackles a reigning notion of singularity and unification in the mind. Like Woolf, Dennett rejects the notion that we can define the boundaries of consciousness, or confirm when something "enters awareness" or falls out of conscious access. Just as Bernard learns that he has no single awareness or self that he can pinpoint as his own consciousness, Dennett asserts that it is a "mistake" to suppose that there is "a single narrative (the 'final' or 'published' draft, you might say) that is canonical—that is the *actual* stream of consciousness of the subject" (Dennett 113).

The fact that Woolf's and Dennett's theories overlap in this respect is significant, for it is Dennett's dismantling of the *homunculus* and the elimination of the boundaries of conscious



thought that distinguished *Consciousness Explained* as a new and important theory in modern cognitive psychology. It would be premature, however, to declare that Dennett's psychology fully validates Woolf's theory, for there are elements of MDT not accounted for by the socially-focused conception of consciousness in *The Waves*. Most noticeably, though Woolf theorizes a type of breakdown of consciousness from a state of unification to multiplicity, the fact that she attributes this breakdown to overlapping social influences is not completely analogous to the concept of multiple drafts—particularly because the former theory is socially-based while MDT is neural in nature. Woolf breaks down the boundaries of consciousness through aesthetically representing our thoughts, identities, voices, and ideas—everything that comprises consciousness—as a product of social influences. Dennett, on the other hand, dismisses the idea of a unified consciousness because neural imaging experiments have so far demonstrated that there is no “consciousness center” in the brain—no Cartesian Theater, no place where “it all comes together.” He uses this scientifically-grounded evidence as his basis for MDT, which is itself a theory that explains how, neurologically, patterns of brain activity overlap to generate a seemingly unified conscious experience. While Woolf accurately proposes that the conglomeration of multiple sources creates the perception of selfhood and consciousness, she fails to take her theory to the depths of physical neural processing itself.

While Dennett's MDT is debatably the most famous theory to come out of current consciousness scholarship, another recent conceptualization of consciousness that has arisen in the last decade shares a closer ideological kinship with Woolf's, in that it, too, emphasizes socialization as the key to understanding human consciousness. Thus, for the strongest psychological equivalent to Woolf's theory of consciousness since turn-of-the 20<sup>th</sup> century psychology we may turn to one of the many scholars who reacted to Multiple Drafts theory:

Merlin Donald and his “hybrid mind” model of consciousness, promulgated in his book, *A Mind So Rare*.

Donald, in fact, actively disagrees with Dennett, particularly objecting to the fact that MDT characterizes consciousness as a fundamentally passive phenomenon. “[W]e have reason to doubt whether we can generalize [Dennett’s ideas about consciousness] to the real mental worlds in which we live” (46), Donald says. As we enact our everyday lives, “human consciousness appears neither passive, nor eternally shallow, nor impotent” (47), as Dennett’s theory assumes: “On the contrary, in most situations, it emerges as the very governor of mental life” (47). It is hard to imagine, for example, how the fortuitous emergence of various conscious states would allow a person to remain attentive while engaged in an intellectual conversation, which “demands extensive controlled processing” and “subsume[s] numerous suboperations, including attentional selection, the maintenance of vigilance, the allocation of priorities, and the upkeep of working memory” (49), along with numerous other subtleties. A theory of conscious passivity does not account for how this complex activity both exists and “usually coheres in memory as a single unified episode” (49).

In response, Donald proposes the hybrid mind theory. Essentially, he splits up consciousness into two systems: the analogue, nonsymbolic system (which is a basic and primitive cognitive system, one we share with other higher-cognizing animals) and the symbolic system (which he claims is an evolutionary advancement unique to humans). Donald accepts the idea that Dennett’s model of consciousness and the brain—limited to short-term and passive processing—may explain the analogue system; it “works well in the study of nonhuman animals” since their mode of cognition “rarely escapes the boundaries of its own embodiment” (150). For such animals, the limited scope of MDT is not a problem, for “[e]ven highly

sophisticated animals, such as apes, have no choice but to approach the world solipsistically because they cannot share ideas and thoughts in any detail” (150).

But on top of and functioning alongside this first system of consciousness is a second system that developed with the human brain as we gained the ability to create and understand symbols. Humans have an expanded cerebral cortex, which evolved rather suddenly thousands of years ago and greatly expanded the range of humans’ neural capabilities. Over time, Donald claims, this second “symbolic system” evolved “to mediate transactions between brains” (150), allowing meaningful social interaction to occur. Most importantly, it gave humans the capacity to deliberately retrieve memories—voluntary recall—an ability unique to humans (158). Voluntary recall combined with the powerful neural potential inherent in the expanded cortex made it possible for isolated individuals to eventually begin to attempt to communicate their recalled knowledge with others. This process began with simple mimetic gestures and ultimately developed into the symbolic and linguistic systems of representation that we enjoy today. Our ability to have complex conscious lives and selves—created by this second symbolic system of consciousness—evolved simultaneously with the creation of language, society, and culture.

What Donald emphasizes throughout his discussion of the second, higher-functioning half of the hybrid brain is that its development and success is entirely reliant on culture—the social aspect of humanity: “Our dependency on culture is very deep and extends to the very existence of certain kinds of symbolic representation and thought” (150). Donald notes that even though their brains are physically capable of voluntary recall, “[s]ocially isolated humans do not develop language or any form of symbolic thought and have no true symbols of any kind” (150); the complexity and activity of their consciousnesses appear not to extend far beyond that of an ape. Donald concludes that, essentially, psychologists have never been able to fully explain

consciousness through studying the brain in isolation because much of our conscious lives depend on our complex interaction with culture and society. A majority of the aspects of human consciousness that mark it as a superior and unique process (e.g., our capacity for language, our ability to think with logic and reason, the ability to intuit one another's thoughts) will not develop in an individual human being unless he or she interacts with other humans in our social structure. The human brain has "[dug] its way out of its solipsistic box and generate[d] a shared cognitive universe" (151). Our rich, complex, and vivid conscious lives are inextricable from the social environment; our interactions with culture teach us how to use our capacity for symbolic thought and then acts as a support system, constantly challenging and reinforcing our abilities to create and maintain the complicated inner world it encourages. Therefore, the brain should not be studied as if it is a detached, isolated entity, for, as Donald explains,

Symbols, our notions of selfhood, and the basics of autobiographical memory originate outside of the monad, in culture. The unique character of human awareness cannot be understood if it is kept in its container [the physical brain], as if all explanations should lie there. We are what we are because of enculturation, plain and simple. This is not true of any other species. (151)

While not as famous as *Consciousness Explained*, Donald's hybrid mind theory even more than MDT echoes the same basic theoretical model of consciousness that Woolf proposes in *The Waves*. In her novel, Woolf essentially splits the conscious mind into two levels: the first is a drastically reduced form of purely sensory/experiential consciousness which I earlier termed "the embodied 'I am,'" and the second is consciousness as we generally understand it—our thoughts, our emotions, our essences of being—which Woolf claims is entirely dependent on social influences. Woolf thus, essentially, makes the same separation that Donald does, between

analogue-type and symbolic-type systems of consciousness, and further, identifies the latter as a social phenomenon. Like Donald, Woolf rejects the idea that consciousness and selfhood can be understood in the context of a single individual: “I am not one person; I am many people” (205), as Bernard explains, and his mind and self must be conceptualized in terms of the external forces that comprise him. In short, on a structural level, Donald confirms Woolf’s theory on a 21<sup>st</sup> century psychological plane.

Digging deeper, however, discrepancies between the theories do appear. In *The Waves*, Woolf privileges the symbolic system of consciousness in a manner and to an extent that is uncorroborated by the hybrid mind theory. As Bernard and Rhoda demonstrate, Woolf asserts that our *entire* conscious selves are generated on the symbolic plane. Rhoda, for example, considers her analogue system—her embodied “I am”—so negligible a part of her that she dismisses it completely. She repeatedly insists, “I have no face” (163) and feels that her physical body is slight enough that it “lets the light through” (31). Further, because she feels such terror at “fall[ing] into nothingness” (30) and being completely robbed of her identity (22) by her socialized consciousness, life seems unbearable and Rhoda commits suicide.

Although Donald agrees that our general “notions of selfhood” (151) are generated by the symbolic system of consciousness, he does not characterize the symbolic system as the be-all, end-all of personhood. While he strongly emphasizes the importance of culture and socialization in shaping human consciousness into what it is today, at the same time he does not de-emphasize the role that the analogue, embodied system plays—they both are essential in creating the conscious mind. Consciousness, as Donald points out, is “physically confined to its embodiment” and “dissolves, on one hand, into the inner spaces of the brain” even while it merges “into a rapidly expanding cultural universe” (151). In fact, Donald provides neurological

evidence that suggests that with an analogue system alone, a being may still be self-monitoring, self-recognizing, have the capacity to learn and teach, and recognize others as autonomous beings (139). Thus, when he claims that “notions of selfhood” are dependent on socialization and culture, Donald likely intends the word *selfhood* to translate closer to *autonomy* than the recognizable fact that one has an identifiable self. Woolf, therefore, overstates the case in believing that *all* conception of the self is dependent on social interaction. Donald would likely argue that embodiment (not to mention genetically- and chemically-based neurological processes) is also significant in generating a person’s sense of self and, to a limited extent, the characteristics that define him or her.

Such discrepancies, however, detailed and nuanced as they are, in some ways only serve to highlight the complexity and relevance of Woolf’s own theory of consciousness. Imperfect though her model may have proven to be, Woolf nevertheless establishes herself, via a progression of thought outlined in four literary novels, as a viable cognitive theorist. She promotes a conception of consciousness that not only interrogates and extends contemporaneous theories like Mach’s, but which holds up with considerable merit against current cognitive theory, developed seventy years after *The Waves*. Perhaps no measure of achievement, however, would be greater than Woolf’s own, and indeed, Virginia Woolf’s astute and rigorously investigative insights into the human mind and self in *Jacob’s Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves* have served to reveal, as she had hoped, the dark places of psychology.

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