

OUR SEPARATE DROPS: A NEUROLOGICAL LOOK AT THE NARRATIVE OF
THE SELF AND MOMENTS OF BEING IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *THE WAVES*

by

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Being in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my Wife and Parents for reasons they already know.

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ABSTRACT

OUR SEPARATE DROPS: A NEUROLOGICAL LOOK AT THE NARRATIVE OF THE SELF AND MOMENTS OF BEING IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *THE WAVES*

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The purpose of this paper is to provide a cognitive literary reading of Woolf's depiction of the developing consciousness of her six central characters in *The Waves*, thereby establishing a plausible neurological explanation for how the individuated sense of self develops through life experience and private interpretation of the external environment. Woolf methodically demonstrates how the body identifies its spatiotemporal relationship to the external world, indirectly describing how the body's sensory systems interpret its surroundings and incorporates the amassed subjective impressions into a narrative structure. The narrative of the self then reaffirms its existence through its episodic memory, which subsequently influences its selective and subjective perception of the external world. It is only by establishing a feasible construction of the self's boundaries that Woolf can illustrate the gulf between the private sense of self and the other, which she then transcends into a state of unity during the brief periods of heightened consciousness she termed "moments of being."

INTRODUCTION

In *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf devised a plot structure comprised entirely within the emerging consciousness of her six central characters – Bernard, Susan, Neville, Jinny, Louis, and Rhoda – as they develop their self-reflective, individuated identities. By inverting the novel’s assumed point of focus, as Julia Briggs identifies, Woolf “reordered the traditional hierarchy of inner and outer experience, and wrote the novel about silence” (238). In doing so, Woolf placed primacy on the intangible world of the mind, granting access to her characters’ private self-awareness as they perceive and experience life. By conveying the characters’ experiences in the present tense, Woolf depicted each moment as it was lived so that it could later be expressed as a memory. In effect, she presented her characters with the opportunity to experience the moments that proceeded to influence the development of each character’s separate sense of self as he or she gradually defined his or her relationship to each other and the external world (Dick 38).

Over the years, Woolf scholarship has explored how memory has performed a critical function in shaping the writer’s fiction.¹ The most pertinent information pertaining to Woolf’s insight on memory can be found in “A Sketch of the Past,” where she draws on her initial impressions and their accompanying emotional quotient. Returning to one of her earliest memories in life, Woolf notes, “I am hardly aware of

¹ See Gordon 1984; Nalbantian 2003

myself, but only of the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy” (*MB* 67). Within this observation lies a sentiment of utmost importance. In Woolf’s recollection of childhood, by her own admission, she does not identify with her sense of self, but rather with a *feeling* that surfaced within the awareness of her body. Woolf turns an inward eye, stating she can “reach a state where [she] seem[s] to be watching things happen as if [she] were there” (*MB* 67). In other words, she conveys her ability to recall her self-referential, episodic memory. This paper intends to explore how such expressions of memory play an integral role in the development of a separate sense of self, akin to the dramatization of consciousness expressed in *The Waves*.

Today, neurological research may assist with providing new insight as it continues to seek comprehension of comparable questions regarding how consciousness and the composition of the self emerge. This field of study has identified, as Woolf recognized over eighty years ago, memory as instrumental to the development of identity and its impact on the subjectivity of perception. Addressing the centrality of memory’s role, neurologist Antonio Damasio, head of the Brain and Creativity Institute at the University of Southern California, stated, “Memory is responsible for ceaselessly placing the self in an evanescent here and now, between a thoroughly lived past and an anticipated future, perpetually buffeted between the spent yesterdays and the tomorrows that are nothing but possibilities” (*SCM* 315).

Woolf diligently sought to observe and recreate that “evanescent here and now” as she reflected on and recorded the moments of her meandering mind. In doing so, she recognized the inherent fallibility of memories and the brain’s capacity for constructing a

linear narrative in order to organize her otherwise discontinuous thoughts: “[M]y memory supplies what I had forgotten, so that it seems as if it were happening independently, though I am really making it happen” (*MB* 67). Thus, as memory assists with orienting the self in its environment, the self assists with orienting consciousness.

In addition to examining Damasio’s research, this paper will look at related work by neurologists such as Joseph LeDoux, Director of the Center for the Neuroscience of Fear and Anxiety in New York City, and Endel Turling, cognitive neuroscientist and professor at the University of Toronto, both of whom have endeavored to comprehend the influential effects of emotions and memories on the development of the autobiographical self.

In order to assist with orienting the self in the external world, this paper will examine research pertaining to the body’s sensory systems and how they interpret its surrounding environment. Research conducted by neurologist Christof Koch, Chief Scientific Officer at the Allen Institute for Brain Science, has contributed to explaining how the brain filters and interprets the external environment, which aids in our understanding of consciousness and the subjectivity of human perception (Koch 2004). The implications of his discoveries present an ontological challenge to our ability to objectively understand our external environment. Reinforcing this understanding, Kandel, Schwartz, and Jassell state in their textbook *Essentials of Neural Science and Behavior*: “[T]he appearance of our perceptions as *direct* and *precise* images of the world is an illusion” [emphasis in original] (Noë 130).

Loaded within the neurological recognition of one's inability to directly experience the external world lies a metaphorical link to what Woolf expressed as a "world seen without a self," which Bernard reflects upon in his final soliloquy at the conclusion of *The Waves*. Beyond Woolf's desire to convey the private consciousness of an "ordinary mind on an ordinary day" ("MF" 160), she believed that an ontological truth was obscured by the tedium of routine, and that "behind the cotton wool [of everyday life, there] is hidden a pattern" (*MB* 72). In Woolf's words, "We are sealed vessels afloat what is convenient to call reality [however] at some moments, without a reason, without an effort, the sealing matter cracks [and] in floods reality" (*MB* 142). This "reality" revealed itself to Woolf during episodes of "sudden shocks" that she experienced throughout her life; moments of "revelation" that granted her access to what could be associated with an altered or heightened state of consciousness; what Woolf termed "moments of being" (*MB* 72). In these moments of being, Woolf believed she was privileged to profound insight, a sense of unity or connection with something larger than the confinements of the self.

For centuries, religious and mystic literature had touched on similar themes involving the loss of one's ego and feelings of interconnectedness or "oneness." While such ancient texts sought to convey these abstract ideas, current technological advancements in brain scanning imagery has created the ability for neurological inquiry into the physiological effects that religious and spiritual practices may have on one's sense of self and the transpersonal experience.

Such research is being conducted by neurologists like Andrew Newberg, Director of Research at the Myrna Brind Center for Integrative Medicine at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, and Patrick McNamara, Director of the Evolutionary Neurobehavior Laboratory in the Department of Neurology at the Boston University's School of Medicine. Their respective research involves the study of brain scans from various devout practitioners engaged in prayer or meditation, which registered data consistent with brain regions that are recognized as corresponding to one's sense of self, and thus permit speculation regarding the verification of religious and spiritual experiences and their potential impact on the self.

As the field of neurology flourishes with new findings related to brain and consciousness research due to technological advancements, so too has literary scholarship advanced in the field of cognitive studies over the last decade. Cognitive literary studies initially emerged in the 1980s from the "investigation of literature in relation to the embodied mind" (Jaén and Simon 13). This approach to research offers a new theoretical framework in which to conceptualize literary texts, prompting reexamination of early contributions from literary scholars interested in further exploring disciplines such as psychology and linguistics. Among the early critics who recognized the nascent field's potential were Reuven Tsur, who began his research in "cognitive poetics," and psychoanalytic critic Norman Holland, who "demonstrated the advantages of attending to the 'more powerful psychology' emerging from cognitive neuroscience" (Richardson 1).

In addition to the promising application of cognitive sciences in linguistics and psychology, conceptual integration, also known as "blending," as well as cognitive

narratology, began to receive attention from cognitive linguists and literary scholars in the 1990s (Jaén and Simon 15 - 6). The 21st century ushered the exploration of narrative and the “literary experience” in relation to neural processes, with interest from studies in neurology, neuropsychiatry, psychology of fiction, literary studies, studies of text comprehension using brain scanning machinery, and work in theory of mind (Jaén and Simon 17). As recently as 2010, the *New York Times* heralded cognitive literary criticism as the “next big thing” (Cohen).

As the field of cognitive literary studies continues to expand, Virginia Woolf’s awareness and construction of the inner mind provides fertile ground for future exploration. Thus far, critics such as Craig Gordon, whose “Breaking Habits, Building Communities: Virginia Woolf and the Neuroscientific Body” (2000), Jonah Lehrer’s *Proust was a Neuroscientist* (2007), and Sowon S. Park’s “The Feeling of Knowing in *Mrs. Dalloway*: Neuroscience and Woolf” (2012), among others, have begun to apply contemporary neurological research and data to the modernist’s work (Christensen 288).

Building upon current cognitive criticism, the purpose of this paper is to provide a plausible neurological explanation for how the individuated sense of self develops through life experience and private interpretation of the external environment in conjunction with Woolf’s depiction of the developing consciousness of her six central characters in *The Waves*. Woolf methodically demonstrates how the body identifies its spatiotemporal relationship to the external world, indirectly describing how the body’s sensory systems interpret its surroundings and incorporates the amassed subjective impressions into a narrative structure. The narrative of the self then reaffirms its existence

through its episodic memory, which subsequently influences its selective and subjective perception of the external world. It is only by establishing a feasible construction of the self's boundaries that Woolf can illustrate the gulf between the private sense of self and the other, which she then transcends into a state of unity during the brief periods of heightened consciousness she termed "moments of being."

THE SELF AND SENSES

In *The Waves*' italicized opening interlude, Nature is presented in an undifferentiated state – “*The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky*” (TW 7) – thereby establishing the juxtaposition of an impersonal Nature existing as set entirely apart from the personal narrative of the six central friends. These interludes of Nature metaphorically frame each section, providing an ambiguous sense of time via the cyclical structure of the sun traversing the day's sky, which foreshadows the characters' stage of life. As the sun casts its light upon the shoreline's vacant features, it begins to highlight distinctions where once sat borderless objects, paralleling the progressive development of the six characters' differentiating sense of self (Katz 247): “*Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually*” (TW 7).

In a similar sense, the external world does not yet exist for an infant (BB 65). Despite beginning life with twice as many neurons than are needed, very few have established their neural connections. As such, newborns have a poorly defined sense of color and barely possess a sense of depth perception. By the third month of life, a baby's visual system begins to develop, allowing for the identification and recall of certain shapes, although their borders are still perceived as fuzzy. Around this same period, a

baby begins to develop its capacity for memory and basic language recognition, which contribute to its ability to orient itself in the world. Throughout childhood and adolescence, neuronal circuits will continue to grow and die off, forming unique patterns of connection (*BB* 65 – 6). According to LeDoux, since all brains are relatively similar, and yet our abilities and personalities are distinctly our own, the sense of self must emerge from the “fine-tuning” of our underlying networks of synaptic connections (36).

However, before private consciousness permits the awareness of being a unique individual, there first exists the fundamental need for a body through which to interpret the external world, and in which a sense of self may emerge. When readers are first introduced to the six central characters of *The Waves*, they are observing their physical environment in abstract terms; or rather, they are internalizing and attempting to articulate and reconstruct a primordial or unrefined interpretation of the external world within the secluded landscape of their young, malleable minds prior to the differentiation acquired by language and social constructs:

“I see a ring,” said Bernard, “hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.”

“I see a slab of pale yellow,” said Susan, “spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.”

“I hear a sound,” said Rhoda, “cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down.”

“I see a globe,” said Neville, “hanging down in a drop against the

enormous flanks of some hill.”

“I see a crimson tassel,” said Jinny, “twisted with gold threads.”

“I hear something stamping,” said Louis. “A great beast’s foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps.” (*TW* 9)

The effect of this opening establishes the work’s immediacy within the unfolding subjective consciousness of the six children as they respectively filter and interpret the external world through their body’s sensory systems (i.e., eyes, ears, nose, etc.). Physiologically, the information obtained about the external environment, such as objects and events, enters the brain through the sensory systems, which relay its signals to the neocortex. The neocortex then creates a sensory representation of the objects and events, which converge in the rhinal cortical areas, where the sensory information is integrated in order to create a coherent mental representation of that which is being perceived (LeDoux 103). According to Koch, you are only conscious of “representations of external objects (including your own body) or internal events by proxy. You are not directly conscious of something in the world, say a chair, but only of its visual and tactile representation in the cortex” (Koch 298).

Stylistically, Woolf depicts the mind’s neural delay when processing the physical world. By conveying a sense of being situated in the present moment through the use of the pure present (e.g., “I see,” “I hear”) rather than the conventional present progressive (e.g., “I am seeing,” “I am hearing”), Woolf creates a sense of experiencing a moment in the absolute present (Warner 44). However, the pure present representation then becomes

complicated by indirect speech's adjustment to the past tense (e.g., "I see...said Bernard"), thereby creating a sense of the depicted perception not as it is, but as it had just been.² As Thomas Metzinger claims, "[M]odern-day neuroscience tells us, we are never in touch with the present, because neural information-processing itself takes time." He proceeds to explain:

Signals take time to travel from your sensory organs along the multiple neuronal pathways in your body to your brain, and they take time to be processed and transformed into objects, scenes, and complex situations. So, strictly speaking, what you are experiencing as the present moment is actually the past. (37)

In addition to the unconventional grammatical structure of the work, the novel is uniquely written in a simplistic, repetitious language that tends to be reserved for poetry rather than prose. Without the distinction of each child's sensory systems' focal point, their impressions are characterized in a very comparable and impersonal style. James Harker observes, "By starting with sensory experience, rather than biological details, Woolf presents 'characters' that are initially virtually indistinguishable" (16). The technique suggests that though our perceptions of the external world may be perceived as different (four of the six children describe the physical environment through their sense of sight, while Rhoda and Louis express their experience via sound), our sense of

³ According to Andrew Newberg, "Any conscious awareness of the maps we are making occurs sometime after the event takes place – between one-tenth and one-half a second...This lag time is additional evidence that consciousness is many steps removed from the brain's perception of reality" (*BB* 28-9).

individuation becomes the product of superficial distinctions. As neurologist V.S. Ramachandran, Director of the Center for Brain and Cognition at the University of California, San Diego, states, “[T]he barrier between mind and matter is only apparent and arises as a result of language” (Lodge 9).

The Waves depicts the barrier between the children and their relationship to the physical environment by way of various sensory interpretations, thereby establishing a contextual body within which a sense of self can emerge. Rhoda and Louis, who initially encountered the environment through their sense of hearing, now express their experience via sight as Rhoda watches a grey-shelled snail cross a path and Louis detects a “flash” of “burning light” reflecting off a window-pane; Neville and Jinny experience tactile sensations as Neville feels cold stones under his feet and Jinny feels the hot sun burn the back of her hands; Bernard hears a crowing rooster while Susan hears birds singing (*TW* 10).

Though the children consciously observe and interact with the world in the present moment, they do not yet possess a sense of self-consciousness or self-awareness to distinguish themselves as engaged within the continuum of time. The first glimpse of a self-identifying consciousness occurs when Louis, thinking that the other children have returned indoors for breakfast, expresses that he is alone (*TW* 11). In his solitude, Louis allows his imagination to expand beyond the physical boundaries of his body into a sense of union with nature while playing in the garden, “I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world.” While Louis sees himself as existing below the earth’s surface, he groups the other children (except for Rhoda) as only “brush[ing] the surface of the

world.” At a young age, though unable to label what sets himself apart, he senses his otherness. Alone, he is unburdened of being confined to the “boy in grey flannels” and can allow his consciousness to wander free of social insecurities (*TW* 12).

However, Louis’ moment is disrupted when he realizes that the eyes of another recognize him. He becomes once more aware of living within the corporeal world as “a boy in a grey flannel suit” (*TW* 13). Upon being discovered and subsequently kissed by Jinny, Louis experiences his “fall from the grace of the impersonal” (Fand 62). Jinny’s kiss places him in the physical world amongst the others as he becomes acutely aware that “[a]ll is shattered” (*TW* 13).

Though the children’s ages are never specified during this stage of life, cognitive neuroscientist Endel Tulving hypothesizes that the neurocognitive episodic memory system emerges in children around the age of four, thus marking the approximate end to the period of childhood amnesia (“EM” 7). Louis’ realization that “[a]ll is shattered” harkens back to Thoreau and the dissolving of his metaphorical mist that enveloped childhood.³ The physical act of Jinny’s kiss affixes Louis to a specific episodic experience, which indelibly impresses itself onto his autobiographical memory, and thus serves as the impetus for his sense of self-consciousness. Post-kiss, Louis’ nascent sense of self possesses an awareness of the social insecurities that accompany his otherness while his semantic memory permits the acquisition of the new language that is necessary for labeling his distinction: “My father is a banker in Brisbane and I speak with an

³ See “Walking”

Australian accent. I will wait and copy Bernard. He is English. They are all English” (TW 19).

A similar moment of self-conscious awareness arises in Bernard. Whereas Louis’ experience emphasized the singularity of the moment’s irreversibility, Bernard’s moment reinforces the novel’s inside-looking-out technique, as it depicts his consciousness responding to the physical sensation of Mrs. Constable giving him his evening bath. Bernard’s awareness awakens not only his sense of experiencing life within a separate and self-contained physical body, but his capacity for self-reflection:

Water pours down the runnel of my spine. Bright arrows shoot on either side. I am covered with warm flesh...Rich and heavy sensations form on the roof of my mind; down showers the day...Pouring down the walls of my mind, running together, the day falls copious, resplendent. (TW 26 - 7)

Prior to a sense of self-consciousness, the children’s actions were immersed indistinguishably in the present moment without awareness or concern for the past or future. However, post-realization, Bernard is forever removed from experiencing life exclusively within the absolute present as “the day falls copious” along the walls of his mind, allowing his consciousness to travel between the past, present, and future. Furthermore, whereas *The Waves* had depicted the children as engaging with the world through the implied bodies of their sensory systems’ interpretations, in Bernard’s moment of self-recognition, he realizes that he exists within his body as a separate individual capable of reflecting on his own being rather than strictly engaging in external action.

Craig A. Gordon, recognizing the importance of developing the body's sense of separateness, asserts:

Woolf [understood] the processes leading to individuation not primarily in visual or linguistic terms but in terms of the physiological mechanisms that produce the 'bright arrows of sensation.' The law to which the children are submitted is not social but somatic, and as a result Woolf's interrogation of individualism takes place in close proximity to the corporeal model articulated by turn-of-the-century neuroscience. (165)

In Bernard's revelatory moment, *The Waves* sought to recreate one's initial experience of distinguishing the physical boundaries of the organism from the world in which it exists. What separates humans from other organisms is not the physical body, but rather the self-awareness to recognize and question the physical boundaries of that body. Gordon is not discounting the influence or importance of social shaping on the development of the self, but is rather addressing and suggesting one's physiological disposition to a somatic sense of separateness, recognizing the body as a necessary instrument for experiencing life.

The physical body thus serves as the "sealed vessel" through which our ephemeral moments are interpreted and subsequently impressed upon our sense of being. However, as Koch explains, whether implicitly or explicitly, the mind only interprets a limited amount of information that it perceives from the "vast flood of data streaming in from the

sensory periphery” (153). Koch states:

[T]ens of millions of bits of information are flowing along the optic nerve into the brain proper each second that the eyes are open. The brain can't process all of this data; it deals with this informational overload by selectively attending to a minuscule portion of it, neglecting most of the rest. (Koch 153)

In other words, “what is convenient to call reality” is in fact, no more than an amalgamation of the mind's selective and subjective interpretation of what it receives from the body's sensory systems, which it then edits into its sense of self, so it may convey its perceptions to others via the approximation of language.

In Damasio's view, it is the mind's ability to form a series of images, a “wordless narrative” before interpretation, which permits the foundation for a self to emerge: “*The self comes to mind in the form of images, relentlessly telling a story of such engagements*” [emphasis in the original] (SCM 216). Lehrer, in *Proust was a Neuroscientist*, recognizes Woolf's ability to identify how the mind establishes a sense of order from the series of images it recreates. In doing so, Lehrer asserts, Woolf depicts how the mind develops our private sense of self: “Woolf's revelation was that we emerge from our own fleeting interpretations of the world. Whenever we sense something, we naturally invent a subject for our sensation...[t]he self is simply this subject; it is the story we tell ourselves about our experiences” (Lehrer 169). In the next section, this

paper intends to demonstrate how the narrative of the self emerges from the moments the mind interprets and arranges into episodic memories, which are then incorporated into the autobiographical self.

THE SELF AND MEMORY

The previous section sought to establish how self-consciousness arises within the body as one becomes aware of the relationship between oneself and one's external environment. Moving forward, the current section will examine how the narrative of the self is constructed from emotions and episodic memories as one develops the capacity to explore one's personal identity. Due to our personal experience of consciousness being unequivocally private and therefore divisive, our individuated sense of self inherently exists in isolation, and thus prevents the sharing of a common interiority (Scheck 208). As Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, wrote, "Each of us is an absolute unit, cut off by an impassable abyss from a direct knowledge of other consciousness" (148).

However, Woolf posits a challenge to her father's declaration by way of her depiction of the six friends' reunion dinners, which ceremoniously honors the past while temporarily dissolving the boundaries of the self in a moment of transcendence. The first of the two dinners is marked by their celebration of life and youthful ambition as they bid farewell to Percival,⁴ the voiceless, external figure whom the six idolize and project their hopes onto; the second takes place in the twilight of life, as they each have become set in their routines and reflect on the time that has passed them by.

Whereas the earlier stage of development emphasized the children experiencing

⁴ See Fand, pages 67 – 68.

life through their corporeal sensory systems in order to orient themselves in the world prior to the emergence of their auto-noetic consciousness,⁵ the children now experience the feelings and emotions⁶ that accompany a sense of self-awareness. According to Damasio, humans experience emotions in one of two types of circumstances:

The first type of circumstance takes place when the organism processes certain objects or situations with one of its sensory devices...The second type of circumstance occurs when the mind of an organism conjures up from memory certain objects and situations and represents them as images in the thought process. (*FWH* 56)

Bernard, arriving at his first day of school, encounters Damasio's first circumstance for potential emotional arousal as he enters a new environment, "Everybody knows I am going to school...for the first time...I must not cry" (*TW* 30). Though the specific feeling Bernard experiences is not specified, provided the context, one can empathetically speculate that he is scared or overwhelmed due to the mystery or absence of familiarity when encountering the unknown. Bernard, who possesses a penchant for turning a phrase and storytelling, seeks comfort within the safe haven of words in order to mask his distress, "I must make phrases and phrases and so interpose something hard

⁵ According to Tulving, auto-noetic consciousness is self-awareness in subjective time ("MC" 5)

⁶ Necessary point of clarification: Damasio defines the term "feeling" as being used for the private, mental experience of an emotion, and the term "emotion" should be used to "designate the collection of responses, many of which are publicly observable." As Damasio states, "In practical terms this means that you cannot observe a feeling in someone else although you can observe a feeling in yourself when, as a conscious being, you perceive your own emotional states" (*FWH* 42).

between myself and the...indifferent faces, or I shall cry" (*TW* 30).

Conversely, when Bernard recognizes Louis and Neville amongst the other children arriving at school, he believes, as he observes them, that "they are composed" (*TW* 30). The narrative perspective then shifts the reader's vantage point into the consciousness of Louis, who, upon recognizing Bernard, believes that it is he who appears calm amongst the unfamiliar, "He is composed; he is easy...I will follow Bernard, because he is not afraid" (*TW* 30). The juxtaposition of the characters' consciousnesses accentuates the widening gulf between their private, subjective perspectives and the reality of their interiority versus their ostensible appearance, gesturing to Stephen's claim of the "impassable abyss."

Having established the discrepancy between appearances and reality, *The Waves* facilitates the necessary contextual space in which the narrative of the self may independently develop. Our sense of self intrinsically relies on the "inescapable subjectivity of the brain's narrative and memory system" (Young and Saver 79). As noted in the previous section, the brain captures very small amounts of information that it filters through its sensory systems, which the mind then briefly holds in its consciousness (*BB* 29). Lehrer asserts that "[e]xperiment after experiment has shown that any given experience can endure for about ten seconds in short-term memory. After that, the brain exhausts its capacity for the present tense, and its consciousness must begin anew, with a new stream." He therefore concludes, "As the modernists anticipated, the permanent-seeming self is actually an endless procession of disjointed moments" (177).

These "disjointed moments" are held in what is termed the "working memory"

(LeDoux 175). Working memory consists of whatever information one is currently thinking of, be it commenting on an event as it occurs, reading a menu prior to ordering, or any other scenario in which one must hold a piece of information in mind in order to complete a task. According to LeDoux, “The stuff we are conscious of is the stuff that working memory is working on” (191). However, working memory is “not a pure product of the here and now,” but rather depends on “what we know and what kinds of experiences we’ve had in the past” (LeDoux 176).

To illustrate the influence of long-term memory on working memory, returning to Bernard, Louis, and Neville’s first day of school, take, for example, when the three children are walking together after initially reuniting. Louis observes their environment as it passes, noting the landscape and a man with a dog and sees other boys firing a gun at pheasants. In this moment, Louis overhears one of the boys boasting about how great a shot his uncle is. As a result, Louis’ working memory conjures into mind an awareness of his past insecurities, which highlights his “otherness”: “I cannot boast, for my father is a banker in Brisbane, and I speak with an Australian accent” (*TW* 31).

Retrieved episodic and semantic memories play a critical role in influencing our day-to-day decision-making skills. As LeDoux points out, “Although the end result of [the retrieval] process...was the representation of [in this case, Louis’ family background] conscious content in working memory, it’s important to recognize that the executive processes that made this possible functioned unconsciously” (191 – 2). Turning his attention to a point initially made by neuroscience pioneer Karl Lashley in the 1950s, LeDoux notes, “[W]e are never aware of processing, but only of the consequence of

processing” (192).

At the physiological level, the working-memory model of consciousness suggests that the prefrontal cortex should contribute to consciousness in some capacity (LeDoux 192). LeDoux surmises, “If the prefrontal cortex plays an essential role in human consciousness, it should be involved in explicit memory, memory to which we have conscious access” (192). He further notes how the prefrontal cortex is activated during episodic memory retrieval and suggests its involvement in encoding memories as well (192).

According to Tulving, episodic memory is a hypothetical neurocognitive system that is oriented to the past, while making possible “mental time travel through subjective time – past, present, and future” (“EM” 5). Tulving contends that mental time travel allows the self to “remember one’s own previous ‘thought-about’ experiences, as well as to ‘think about’ one’s own possible future experiences.” Whereas in the first chapter of this study, the children experienced life fully vested in the absolute present, in the current stage of development, provided their self-awareness and growing reservoir of memories, each new, subjective experience contributes to defining their private sense of self as their minds vacillate between thoughts of the past in the unfolding present.

In essence, memory exists at the crux of understanding one’s sense of self and the self-awareness that accompanies one’s evolving identity. *The Waves* is formatted in such a way that it permits the characters to reflect on the past while existing in the present. As Susan Dick states, “[The characters] relate one moment to another and thus develop an identity which is shaped in part by memories of the past” (38). In “A Sketch of the Past,”

Woolf articulates how “[t]he past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river” (98). She muses that in those moments, she takes great delight in seeing down into the depths below. Her joy is not necessarily derived from the sentimentality of reminiscing, but rather the belief that one is able to experience a more enriched version of the present when colored with the emotional fullness brought forth by the past. As Nalbanian asserts:

[M]emory became the shaping force behind [Woolf’s] fiction. Her work involved a very conscious act of retrieving her personal past...From the point of view of neurological taxonomy, she demonstrated the process of long-term autobiographical memory, produced voluntarily, and depending foremost on visual perception. (79)

Long-term autobiographic memory is central to *The Waves*’ depiction of the developing self as each character’s episodic memories are actively explored within the continuum of the present moment. The characters’ subjective perceptions are influenced by their leitmotifs that function as personality traits, filtering their interpretation of the present moment while their mind retrieves episodic memories from the past. The effect establishes a subjective feedback loop for information retrieval that contributes to a preexisting idea of identity. Returning to Louis’ sense of social insecurity, it is with each stage of development that his behavior gradually adjusts to fit his idea of self that stems

from his self-imposed concerns about belonging: “I repeat, ‘I am an average Englishman; I am an average clerk,’ yet I look at the little men at the next table to be sure that I do what they do” (*TW* 93). While his consciousness is preoccupied with his sense of otherness, his mind meanders to his catalytic moment of self-awareness, reliving his episodic memory in the present: “I woke in a garden, with a blow on the nape of my neck, a hot kiss, Jinny’s” (*TW* 95 – 6). In the present moment, Louis sits in London, yet his internal world is in flux as it travels in time to his initial sense of self-awareness while perpetually reevaluating and shaping how he behaves and interacts with the external world.

LeDoux traces our memory’s ability to coherently arise within us to the cohesive ability of the rhinal areas, or what he calls “convergence zones.” Convergence zones are “brain regions that integrate information across sensory modalities and create representations that are independent of the original modality through which the information was processed” (LeDoux 105). Convergence zones, in LeDoux’s theory of the self, establish order, thereby playing a critical role in developing a cohesive impression, which aids in shaping one’s personal history:

As a result, sights, sounds, and smells can be put together in the form of a global memory of a situation. Without this capacity, memories would be fragmented. Convergence zones...allow mental representations to go beyond perceptions and to become conceptions - they make possible

abstract representations that are independent of the concrete stimulus.

(105)

According to Damasio, the memories that constitute our autobiographical self depend on recall from these convergence zones. He notes that the “key elements to our autobiography that need to be reliably activated in a nearly permanent fashion are those that correspond to our identity, to our recent experiences, and to the experiences that we anticipate” (*FWH* 221). Physiologically, he asserts that these key elements arise from a “continuously reactivated network based on convergence zones which are located in the temporal and the frontal higher-order cortices, as well as in the subcortical nuclei such as those in the amygdala” (221). While these personal memories play a critical role in identity, Damasio’s theory of the self speculates that a person’s memories will temporarily arise in working memory, where the information is treated within the mind’s network just as any other objects (221).⁷

The implications of Damasio’s conclusion suggest that memory, *despite* its critical role in how one’s sense of identity develops, is not treated with a sense of primacy within the body; our mind’s networks merely function as facilitator, stemming from a line of evolutionary adjustments. Therefore, one’s sense of self could be viewed as a byproduct of our consciousness’ need for a narrative structure, sharing features frequently found in storytelling, such as “coherence, consequence, [and] consecution,” in order to efficiently navigate its landscape (Young and Saver 78-9). In other words, the

⁷ The term “objects,” according to Damasio, is used in a broad and abstract sense to represent a person, place, or thing, as well as a specific pain or emotion (*FWH* 323).

human brain, along with the consciousness that arises within it, is hardwired for storytelling, and the narrative of the self is its creative consequence. Woolf's writing suggests that we are actually "composed of ever-changing impressions that are held together by the thin veneer of identity" (Lehrer 171).

Woolf briefly lifts the "thin veneer" at several points in *The Waves* in order to suggest that there is more to life than appearances: revealing "cracks" in the "sealing matter" of our "vessels," in order to permit "reality" to enter. Having examined recent neurological research to assist with establishing the proper context to speculate about the nature of the individuated self and its relationship to the other, it is important to turn to the textual evidence pertaining to the tenuous boundaries of the self as suggested at when the friends reunite.

The first of the two reunion dinners occurs when the six friends are young, independent adults in their early twenties, joining together to celebrate Percival before he departs for India. Bernard, having crossed the threshold of adulthood, continues to serve as the novel's philosophizing storyteller who grants the reader access to Woolf's predilection for ontological inquiry. Bernard muses about existence and the external forces that influence the individuals we become as he situates himself in the present moment against the backdrop of what is to come:

[W]hat am I? There is no stability in this world. Who is to say what meaning there is in any thing? ...To speak of knowledge is futile. All is experiment and adventure. We are forever mixing ourselves with unknown

quantities. What is to come? I know not. But, as I put down my glass I remember; I am engaged to be married. I am to dine with my friends tonight. I am Bernard. (118)

After an adolescence of self-discovery and imitation in pursuit of identity, Bernard declaratively asserts, “I am Bernard.” The moment serves the dual purpose of signaling awareness of his personal identity in the present moment (taking into account his personal history), while acting as a precursor to the moment that is to come among the reunited friends as they enter a new stage of life. Elaborating on the latter point, the six friends have aged; no longer viewing themselves as innocent children, but rather seeing themselves as mature adults who ambitiously embrace whatever challenges life may offer: “Emerged from our tentative ways, the obscurities and dazzle of youth, we look straight in front of us, ready for what may come” (*TW* 141).

However, while life continues to carry their “sealed vessels” down their respective tributaries, when reunited, they are momentarily removed from the current of their independent lives. Reunited, the friends return to their youth through their shared experiences, as they collectively engage in Tulving’s notion of “mental time travel.” Sitting around the dinner table together, the friends conjure the episodic memories of their earliest moments of self-awareness and reflect on the experiences that have shaped the individuals they have become:

“Now let us issue from the darkness of solitude,” said Louis.

“Now let us say, brutally and directly, what is in our minds,” said Neville. “Our isolation, our preparation, is over. The furtive days of secrecy and hiding, the revelations on staircases, moments of terror and ecstasy.” “Old Mrs. Constable lifted her sponge and warmth poured over us,” said Bernard. “We became clothed in this changing, this feeling garment of flesh.” (123 – 124)

Within their communal experience, an interesting interplay occurs. While each friend wishes to define his or her separate sense of being in the world (“We have tried to accentuate differences. From the desire to be separate we have laid stress upon our faults, and what is particular to us” (*TW* 137)), they each simultaneously submit to the shared moment’s transcending effect of returning them to childhood before their present sense of self arose. In the present moment, they are afforded the dual perception of reflecting with awareness upon the past while interpreting and applying significance from the vantage point of the moment they are in. As Neville recognizes, “After the capricious fires, the abysmal dullness of youth...the light falls upon real objects now. Here are knives and forks. The world is displayed, and we too, so that we can talk.” (*TW* 127).

Reveling unconcerned of their mortality, they believe they will leave a permanent mark on the world and that Percival will emblematically stand at the forefront of their generation. At the dinner table, each character brings with him his private point of view as influenced by his experiences, which contributes to the totality of the moment. This abstract idea is beautifully articulated by Bernard’s metaphor of the flower vase on the

table:

We have come together (from the North, from the South, from Susan's farm, from Louis's house of business) to make one thing, not enduring—for what endures?—but seen by many eyes simultaneously. There is a red carnation in that vase. A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven-sided flower, many-petalled, red, puce, purple-shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves—a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution. (*TW* 127)

In a moment of heightened awareness, they seek to strip away the boundaries that divide and define them. Louis acknowledges, “We differ, it may be too profoundly...for explanation. But let us attempt it” as he recognizes his desire to “look like the rest of you” while understanding that he cannot (*TW*127). Bernard expresses that “had [he] been born...not knowing that one word follows another [he] might have been...anything. As it is, finding sequences everywhere, [he] cannot bear the pressure of solitude” (*TW* 132). In attempting to strip away the traits that contribute to their identities while engaging in their “mental time travel,” “one thing melts into another” as their senses widen:

Membranes, webs of nerve that lay white and limp, have filled and spread themselves and float round us like filaments, making the air tangible and catching in them far-away sounds unheard before. (*TW* 135)

Katz contends, “Percival exposes the falsehood of separate individual identity as it is formed by language; he allows the others to realize instead that there is a coherent wholeness” (242).

However, no sooner does the experience of interconnection occur – a moment of being – than they return to everyday awareness when Bernard informs the group of his engagement, and with the change, “a chain is imposed. We shall never flow freely again” (TW 142). Bernard’s announcement forever alters the group dynamic as it represents the first of life’s changes that tether individuals to the complexities of the outside world.

In the characters’ early stages of development, the novel structurally unfolded at a deliberate pace, comparable to one’s personal sense of time moving at a slower speed when in childhood. While a child is unable to comprehend the abstract notion of time, he is able to view events in relation to one another via memory retention (LeDoux 2002), and provided the newness of each experience, time *feels* as though it is moving slower. With semantic memory’s gradual ability to comprehend and retain how instruments such as calendars and clocks work, “in time,” a child can quantify an event. What Woolf recognized, and what most experience, is as we age, “time flies.” Since adulthood is often marked by habit and routine, demarcations tend to dissolve as “Tuesday follows Monday” and days becomes inseparable due to sameness: “How swift life runs from January to December!” (TW 216). In that vein, the latter stages of life are represented as jumping over larger blocks of time following Percival’s uneventful death in India (e.g.,

earlier chapters moved, for example, from late teens to early twenties (a few years); latter chapters moved from thirties to middle-aged (a few decades)).

For the six friends, Percival's death marked not only an awareness of life's finite nature, but it also marked the end of the friends' sense of magnificence as their lives fall into the monotony of daily routine. Louis, the businessman, typifies a life dependent on schedules, "This is life; Mr. Prentice at four; Mr. Eyres at four-thirty" (*TW* 169). Bernard, the phrases-turning raconteur, sees his routine in the morning mirror, "I, standing with my razor in my hand, became suddenly aware of the merely habitual nature of my action," realizing that he had lost his youth (*TW* 184). Bernard, having "filled innumerable notebooks with phrases to be used when [he finds] the true story," now wonders: "Are there stories?" (*TW* 187)

The second reunion dinner occurs when the six characters are middle-aged. They have grown apart and have settled in to the humdrum of their lives behind the "cotton wool" of habit; "wedged into [their] place in the puzzle" (*TW* 216). Bernard recognizes, "It was different once...once we could break the current as we choose" (*TW* 216). Their sense of self, circumstances, and outlook are now all defined as they are set in their ways: "[W]e could have been anything. We have chosen now, or sometimes it seems the choice was made for us" (*TW* 214). If the first reunion dinner was defined by a youthful spirit ready to take on life's challenges, the second dinner is defined by a pragmatic contentedness: "We are ready to consider any suggestion that the world may offer quite impartially" (*TW* 225).

When reunited, they see how their bodies display the tangible effects of time, serving as a physical reminder of how long it has been since their last encounter. Each character reflects with a keen sense of awareness on the personality traits he defined himself by and recognize its insignificance. Reunited, they possess the proper perspective to value the meaningfulness of their relationship and embrace the present togetherness in a moment of quiet understanding. Bernard, no longer concerning himself with connecting to others through phrases, allows himself to be absorbed: “As silence falls I am dissolved utterly and become featureless and scarcely to be distinguished from another. It does not matter” (*TW* 224). In this moment, Woolf emphasized our self-imposed boundaries and insufficiencies of language when attempting to connect to the external world. Returning to the words of Ramachandran, “[T]he barrier between mind and matter is only apparent and arises as a result of language” (Lodge 9).

In silence, the group senses the magnitude of time while coming to terms with each individual’s own insignificance and temporality: “Our separate drops are dissolved; we are extinct, lost in the abysses of time, in darkness” (*TW* 225). Together again in the present moment, their episodic memory once more emerges as they are enriched with the past: “[I]t is difficult not to weep, calling ourselves little children, praying that God may keep us safe while we sleep. It is sweet to sing together, clasping hands, afraid of the dark, while Miss Curry plays the harmonium” (*TW* 228). While life experiences solidified their separate sense of self and with it, their private, subjective perspective of the world, when reunited, their boundaries dissolve as memory returns them to an earlier place and time before they were aware of differentiations, thus permitting them to relive the

moments and experience the emotions that have indelibly impressed themselves upon their being.

A WORLD WITHOUT A SELF

Thus far, this paper has aimed to present a feasible explanation of how *The Waves* corresponds to current neurological understanding of the emerging sense of self. Next, this paper will demonstrate how it was only by way of Woolf establishing a sufficient representation of the individuated self that she could properly convey the “token of some real thing behind appearances” that revealed itself during moments of being (*MB* 72).

Woolf wrote, “[E]vents mean very little unless we know first to whom they happen” (*MB* 65). In the final chapter of *The Waves*, an elderly Bernard, having spent a lifetime “fill[ing] innumerable notebooks with phrases to be used when [he] found the true story” (*TW* 187), sits with a silent companion at a café and announces: “Now to explain to you the meaning of my life” (*TW* 238). By virtue of the novel’s structure, the reader has been granted access all along to the same consciousness that is to provide its account of the events that unfolded over a lifetime, thus provided the proper context to appreciate the retroactive application of meaning. As Kierkegaard said, “Life can only be understood backwards; but must be lived forwards.”

Bernard, the man who once took pride collecting his perfect phases and sought to “draw the veil off things with words” (*TW* 84), here in the twilight of his life, recognizes the inadequacy of words and stories to properly convey or connect the full breadth of meaning behind one’s intention:

How tired I am of stories, how tired I am of phrases...how I distrust neat designs of life that are drawn upon half sheets of notepaper. I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words. (*TW* 238)

Bernard no longer aspires to create the aesthetically pleasing, perfectly contrived narratives he adored formulating in his youth, guilty of, as Neville said, “[Telling] our story with extraordinary understanding, except for what we feel most” (*TW* 70). Instead, Bernard now recognizes that his stories were simply conveniences or carefully crafted representations of the thing, rather than the thing itself. He explains:

Let us pretend that we can make out a plain and logical story, so that when one matter is dispatched – love for instance – we go on, in an orderly manner, to the next. (251)

Bernard acknowledges to his silent listener his awareness of stories as artificial creations that are developed to assist with meaning making. It is in this same sense that the narrative of the self is a construction. One’s life story is but a macro level presentation of what occurs on a momentary basis at the micro level of the self as it assembles “disjointed moments” into an accessible, linear story.

Despite acknowledging his developed distrust for language, he understands its

necessity through the very act of employing it when sharing the meaning of his life. While Bernard reexamines his life through the act of storytelling, he simultaneously depends upon his body's episodic memory system to provide him with the retained information. When providing the meaning to his life, Bernard shares his first impressions to his anonymous listener, "In the beginning, there was the nursery...I saw something bright" (*TW* 239).

Bernard understood his body as a separate being after Mrs. Constable squeezed her sponge and the water ran over him – "And so, as long as we draw breath, for the rest of time, if we knock against a chair, a tale, or a woman, we are pierced with arrows of sensation" (*TW* 239). Thus, Bernard is able to associate himself with his mental memory and yet, despite this understanding, acknowledges, "Sometimes indeed, when I pass a cottage with a light in the window where a child has been born, I could implore them not to squeeze the sponge over that new body" (*TW* 239).

Since Bernard is reflecting upon the moment as opposed to experiencing the moment in the present, he is able to draw from it a clearer understanding; he possesses the knowledge that once becoming a separate being, one will inevitably endure suffering. In other words, due to hindsight, Bernard is in a position to share what he has learned in life. That once one obtains the capacity of self-awareness and the recognition of one's self as an independent entity, one will undoubtedly be subjected to emotional pain that comes with self-discovery and the pursuit of understanding one's identity. Bernard reflects, "For I changed and changed; was Hamlet, was Shelley, was the hero, whose name I now forgot, of a novel by Dostoevsky; was a whole term, incredibly, Napoleon;

but was Byron chiefly” (TW 249).

Bernard sought to discover himself through external ideas of what he longed to be, yet what he ultimately discovered was that he was not one person, but rather the cumulative effect of his shared moments with friends; the aggregate of his interfused experiences stemming from his first moment of awakening in childhood: “We exist not only separately but in undifferentiated blobs of matter” (TW 246).

In Bernard’s effort to present his listener with a concrete impression of life, he establishes the necessary context to introduce his moment of being. Jeanne Schulkind, in her introduction to Woolf’s collection of autobiographical writings, *Moments of Being*, states:

During moments of being, [the] self is transcended and the individual consciousness becomes an undifferentiated part of a greater whole. Thus, just as the outer limits of personality are blurred and unstable because of the responsiveness of the self to the forces of the present moment, so the boundaries of the inner self are vague and, at moments, non-existent. (18)

Schulkind understood Woolf’s moments of being as a mystical experience, one that suggests that the self is but a boundary between daily existence and a unity with “reality.” While life is predominately lived in the comfort of routine, for a moment, Bernard experienced a clearness of mind, perhaps comparable to the meditative practice of “silencing one’s mind,” and after which, “[He] saw through the thick leaves of habit”

(TW 283). In this moment, Bernard “addressed [himself] as one would speak to a companion” (TW 283); he spoke of himself in the third-person when he experienced the moment, suggesting a distance between his sense of self and his body: “This self now as I leant over the gate looking down over fields rolling in waves of colour beneath me made no answer. *He* threw up no opposition. *He* attempted no phrase...I waited. I listened. Nothing came, nothing” [emphasis added] (TW 284).

Bernard explains to his listener that he experienced life as a “man without a self”: “But how to describe the world seen without a self? There are no words. Blue, red—even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting the light through” (TW 287). Bernard, once the man of words and phrases, is left with the quandary of how to articulate the ineffable. Such moments could be thought of in comparable terms to what Maslow called a “peak experience.” Maslow states, “It is quite characteristic in peak-experiences that the whole universe is perceived as an integrated and unified whole.” According to Maslow, “In the peak-experiences, we become more detached, more objective, and are more able to perceive the world as if it were independent not only of the perceiver but even of human beings in general” (Appendix A).

From a neurological standpoint, the self emerges from the body’s interpretation of the external world through its sensory systems, which then organize the internal images in a sequence that permits the construction of a narrative; the narrative is then selectively stored into memory, which assists in developing the self’s subjective filter that influences future sensory system interpretations of the external world. According to McNamara, “brain data demonstrates considerable overlap between brain regions implicated in Self-

construction with regions implicated in religious experiences” (McNamara 6); both rely on the limbic and right-sided anterior temporal and prefrontal networks (McNamara 146).

Newberg suggests that it is the superior parietal lobe that plays an important role in establishing the self’s sense of separateness in world. He explains that this region’s relationship to the external world corresponds with the spiritual experience of oneness, stating:

There [are] several studies that have suggested that this region is involved in orientation changes during religious and spiritual practices. Evidence has suggested that a decrease of activity in this region may be associated with the sense of a loss of orientation and a blurring of the boundary between the self and the rest of the world. The blurring of this boundary might contribute to the experience of wholeness...Thus, all things might be considered unified. (95)

Though Bernard questions how to describe the world seen without a self, as he attempts to convey his experience, his café listener (and the reader) is left to trust the story’s recreation of the events as told by a man who has confessed to his own distrust of storytelling. Moreover, at the risk of solipsism, everything is a manifestation of the mind. The only way that one could truly grasp “reality” without the fear of subjectivity would require being entirely removed from it:

To understand the external world requires the brain to process information which necessarily obstructs any absolute understanding. The only possible way around the uncertainty principle would require an individual observer to eliminate all barriers between themselves and the external world. (*PN* 250)

From a character standpoint, Bernard is irrevocably changed: “I begin now to forget; I begin to doubt the fixity of tables, the reality of here and now, to tap my knuckles smartly upon the edges of apparently solid objects and say, ‘Are you hard?’” (*TW* 288).

Interestingly, as Bernard sits in the present moment in the café after an undetermined amount of time has lapsed since he experienced the moment of being he described to his silent listener, he seems to exhibit a lasting effect from the experience as he “doubt[s] the fixity of tables.” Despite the application of a neurological understanding of Bernard’s spiritual or heightened state of consciousness, based on his recounting of the event rather than the immediacy of the experience, the aforementioned quote regarding his incredulousness about the solidity of objects suggests that the experience forever changed how he perceives the physical world.

From a neurological perspective, having demonstrated how the emerging sense of self permits questions of reliability, one recognizes how the self is invented in order for an individual to develop within the finite experience of existence. By Bernard’s second-guessing of the fixity of the table, one could posit a challenge and explore the viability of one’s confidence in the permanence of the external world. According to Metzinger, the

external world is but a perceptual interpretation:

Out there, in front of your eyes, there is just an ocean of electromagnetic radiation, a wild and raging mixture of different wavelengths. Most of them are invisible to you and can never become part of your conscious model of reality. (20)

Thus, the narrative of the self, the collection of moments amassed over the course of one's life that become interwoven into one's personal worldview, is not only a construct, but is assembled from unreliable information. Metzinger states:

What we see and hear, or what we feel and smell and taste, is only a small fraction of what actually exists out there. Our conscious model of reality is a low-dimensional projection of the inconceivably richer physical reality surrounding and sustaining us. Our sensory organs are limited: They evolved for reasons of survival, not for depicting the enormous wealth and richness of reality in all its unfathomable depth. Therefore, the ongoing process of conscious experience is not so much an image of reality as a tunnel *through* reality. (6)

Having metaphorically tunneled through the surrounding landscape of consciousness, Bernard arrives at an awareness of the superficiality of differentiation via the primacy of

identity (*TW* 289). Bernard, the man who only felt himself when engaged in conversation, lands on the revelation, “How much better is silence”: “I would willingly give all my money that you should not disturb me but let me sit on and on, silent, alone (*TW* 295). In casting attention on his personal desire for silence, Bernard draws the reader’s attention to the novel’s structure, which, returning to Briggs’ acknowledgment, “reorder[s] the traditional hierarchy of inner and outer experience, and [thus became] the novel about silence” (238).

Furthermore, within the novel’s structure, there exists a macro level characterization of what Bernard expressed as the characters existing not only as separate beings, but also as “undifferentiated blobs of matter.” Stylistically, the six characters’ independent soliloquies are constructed using a similar language and sentence structure, while the brief interludes of Nature are set apart by their italicized typographical emphasis. The juxtaposition of these two exclusive elements of the novel’s construction establishes the distinction between the comparable compositions of the six characters’ internal experiences versus the external world of Nature.

The confining boundaries of the characters’ individuated selves are textually designated by the dialogue tags that specify “who said what” within the present moment. Without such qualifying signposts as “said Bernard” or “said Susan,” the characters would become indistinguishable due to the common language used to depict their subjective experiences, thus merging into an “undifferentiated blob.” As such, through the novel’s simplified language, its continuous repetition, it becomes imbued with a poetic quality, a profundity within its depths of awareness, and perhaps, if one were to

hypothetically remove the demarcation imposed by the dialogue tags, a structural moment of being.

CONCLUSION

The neurological description of the narrative of the self, the subjective human experience of consciousness, which permits a sense of experiencing life as a separate, self-aware individual, may have more in common with the novel than commonly considered. Interestingly, as science pursues empirical data to assist in comprehending the nature of the self and the private experience of consciousness, the gulf between the two worlds of art and science appear closer. While consciousness places us in the world, the construction of the self serves as the guiding compass to assist with navigation. Of course, the inherent problem in all of this is that the subjective nature of reality cannot be examined unless experienced through an individuated sense of self, which is prevented from engaging in a direct understanding of its external environment. Thus, at the crux of both the study of consciousness and artistic expression – indeed all communication, from casual conversation to literary criticism – we are left with the undeniable, overlapping difficulty of attempting to convey the ineffable: “We can never be sure if our communication was successful; there is no certainty about what actually it was we shared” (Metzinger 51).

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BIOGRAPHY

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