

## “But who makes it? Who thinks it?”: Rethinking Form in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*

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### I. Introduction

Throughout her life, Virginia Woolf hardly seemed to stop thinking about life and art in terms of form. In her diaries, essays, memoirs, and novels she frequently mentions form or its elements such as pattern, structure, shapes, lines, and colors. Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, for example, thinks “beneath the colour there was the shape” (22). Woolf’s “moments of being” are “a token of some real thing behind appearances,” or manifestations of “a pattern hidden behind the cotton wool” (72). In her modernist manifesto, “Modern Fiction,” she argues that “a different outline of form becomes necessary, difficult for us to grasp, incomprehensible to our predecessors” (108). In *A Room of One’s Own* the narrator likens the new form of fiction to “a structure leaving a shape on the mind’s eye, built now in squares, now pagoda shaped” (71). As these instances show, Woolf’s notion of form designates such divergent things—ultimate reality, the aesthetic (con)figuration of reality, or an artistic effect on the mind—that it would almost seem to make a

categorical mistake if we address it as if it were a single definite term.<sup>1)</sup>

Many scholars have addressed Woolf's concern with form by focusing on the modernist and/or feminist formal experiments and their aesthetic and/or political implications, while some others have connected it to the tradition of Western philosophy from Plato/Aristotle to Kant. To risk oversimplification, critics who approach Woolf's notion of form in philosophical terms tend to reduce it to an abstract and static structure, unwittingly oscillating between what Karel Kosík calls "the extremes of mathematical formalism" and "of metaphysical ontologism" (21). On the other hand, those who seek to replace the legacy of Western metaphysics with Hegelian/Marxist materialism are inclined to either reduce Woolf's concept of form to a version of formalism or dismiss it altogether. Despite their differences, these critics commonly assume the division between the dialectical tradition and the philosophical tradition concerning the concept of form.<sup>2)</sup>

The purpose of this paper is neither to establish the accuracy of the complex concept of form nor to put forward a new perspective on formalism.<sup>3)</sup> This paper

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- 1) The concept of form has been one of the most complex and controversial ones in Western philosophy. Plato introduced the concept of form but never provided a full account of it. The relation of form to matter has been considered particularly ambiguous and inconsistent. See, for example, Gail Fine, R. M. Dancy, Samuel C. Rickless, and William A. Welton, among others.
  - 2) Fredric Jameson and many others have contended that the Hegelian and Marxist notions of form should be distinguished from "the older idea of form which dominates philosophical thinking from Aristotle to Kant" (qtd. in Ziarek 124). Indeed, as Ewa Ptonowska Ziarek notes, "the dialectical tradition replaces the older, Aristotelian form/matter distinction with the dynamic, historical notion of material forces of production seeking expression in new social forms" (124). As is well known, challenging the Platonic idealism which believes ultimate reality to belong to noumenon/form, the 'dialectical tradition' has claimed to relocate truth in the changing realm of history, providing one of the fundamental grounds for the long-standing debates concerning realism versus modernism.
  - 3) The newly revived attention to formalism also reminds us of the vast and contested geography of the question of form. See, for example, Marjorie Levinson's article, "What Is New Formalism?" which reviews "a resurgent formalism" claimed by numerous

focuses on Woolf’s concept of form by relating it to a seemingly most distant or even opposing notion of what Karel Kosik termed “concrete totality.” By connecting this rather old and familiar terminology to Woolf’s concept of form in unfamiliar ways, this paper proposes that Woolf’s notion of form anticipates and even moves beyond the notion of totality put forward by the dialectical tradition at its best. In order to undertake this task, this paper begins by challenging the commonly believed connection between Woolf’s concept of form and Clive Bell’s notion of significant form, and then proceeds to examine the ways in which *The Waves* proposes a new way of thinking about form. Critics concerned with the question of form in *The Waves* have largely attended either to the formal aspects of the novel or to its philosophical significance.<sup>4)</sup> Hardly any has noted, however, the fact that the entire novel—both the interludes and the episodes—is literally preoccupied with various forms.<sup>5)</sup> The novel begins with a character seeing a ring

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post-2000 scholarship in relation to materialism, (new) historicism, etc. While largely endorsing the critical efforts—tracing back to Adorno’s theory of aesthetics—to see the dialectical relation between formal analysis and historicist/materialist critique, this paper is distinct from the recent turn to new formalism in that its focus falls more on Woolf’s concept of form itself rather than the formal dimension of her writings, although I believe that these two are interrelated as I suggest at the end of this paper. For the debates concerning the advent of the new formalism, see Brzezinski as well.

- 4) To name but a few examples that examine the formal aspects of the novel, Patrick McGee’s 1992 article on “the politics of modernist form” explores the political implications of the formal aspects of *The Waves* from a postmodern theoretical perspective. While McGee’s focus lies on the instability and undecidability of the narrative frame, Julia Briggs discusses the ‘H’ structure of *To the Lighthouse* and the “pyramidal form” of *The Waves* in terms of a modernist search for form to “find meaning” in reality (110) influenced by Bloomsbury formalist aesthetics. On the other hand, such critics as Ann Banfield and Lorrain Sim, as I will discuss further later, approach Woolf’s concept of form in philosophical terms.
- 5) I have briefly discussed the ways in which *The Waves* deconstructs the ideology of home/nation in *Here and Now: The Politics of Social Space in D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf*. This paper is a heavily revised and expanded one as it examines the limits and possibilities of the dialectical notion of totality in explicating Woolf’s concept of form.

in the air and ends with the image of foam on the waves, and in between, it persistently mentions walls, chains, lines, loops, oblongs, squares, and bubbles. Far from turning each of them into a free floating signifier or a symbol of an abstract principle of reality, this paper contends, the novel dramatizes the ways in which these forms reflect and refigure reality by drawing our attention over and over to the diverse characters living in the concrete social reality.

## II. Clive Bell's 'significant form' and Woolf's 'pattern'

Clive Bell's notion of 'significant form' is commonly understood to "separat[e] and elevat[e] the concept of form above content in works of art" (Head 87). D. H. Lawrence famously mounted a relentless attack on Bloomsbury aesthetics as dehumanized, self-glorifying, and irresponsible elitism. Lawrence's accusation was avidly endorsed by F. R. Leavis, who contended that Bell's theory of significant form is vividly captured by Loerke in *Women in Love*, a degenerate sculptor shamelessly claiming that a work of art "has nothing to do with anything but itself" (430). Many critics, particularly those who share the Leavisian perspective, have applied Bell's theory to Woolf's aesthetics and viewed her writings in terms of modernist formalism that separates form from content, and ultimately, art from reality. Woolf's concern with form, they argue, is no more than typical evidence of modernist turning away from social reality.

Interestingly, however, a notable attempt to correct the Lawrentian/Leavisian view of Bloomsbury formalism has been made by a Lawrence scholar, Anne Fernihough. She contends that Lawrence's attack on Bloomsbury aesthetics and the Leavisian accounts of a Lawrence-Bloomsbury opposition are largely misguided because Roger Fry and Bell were as much critical of "totalistic thinking," which reduces individual elements or phenomena to an organizing principle as Lawrence was (42). Although Fernihough's overall assumption of Bloomsbury as being homogeneous needs some modification, her analysis of Bloomsbury formalism in

terms of the relation between an organizing principle (whole) and the individual elements (parts) is relevant to this study; it opens the possibility to look at Woolf’s form not as an escape from but an engagement with life/reality.<sup>6)</sup>

It is true that Woolf, particularly in her early career, often echoes Bell’s theory of significant form. In Bell’s words the significant form refers to the essential quality of a work of art such as “lines and colors combined in a particular way” (8). Similarly, Lily is preoccupied with lines and colors and constantly ponders upon “how to connect masses” (56). According to Bell, “we catch a sense of ultimate reality . . . revealing itself through pure form” (54). The artistic vision for him enables us to be aware of the “essential reality, of the God in everything, of the universal in the particular, of the all-pervading rhythm.” “The thing that I am talking about is,” he continues, “that which lies behind the appearance of all things—that which gives to all things their individual significance, the thing in itself, the ultimate reality” (69-70). In *The Voyage Out* (1915) Terrence Hewet’s belief in “an order, a pattern which made life reasonable,” something that enables us “to understand why things happened” (299), sounds akin to Bell’s concept of form and reality. In a sense, Bell’s idea that “the ultimate reality” determines the

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6) As a matter of fact, the question of the part and the whole relation is integral to the concept of form since Plato. As William A. Welton observes, form for Plato is the whole in which particular things participate: “[p]articular changing things in the world around us are said to ‘participate in’ or ‘partake of’ forms, so that, by virtue of that relationship, the particulars become all that they are and take on that character by virtue of which we can refer to them with general terms” (5). As Welton notes, however, the very notion, ‘participation,’ “has been mystery from the very beginning” and “the focus of a great deal of controversy,” since it raises numerous questions such as “what kind of relationship” does particulars have to form?, “[d]o the forms themselves possess the general property they give to particulars, and if so, in what sense?” (5) to list but a few. When Aristotle explained that the species/whole is not an aggregate of individuals/parts even if the latter are parts of the former (Sally Haslanger 142), I think that he already detected a crucial seed of controversy planted in Plato’s concept of form, concerning how (much) form/general/whole can(not) determine its parts; if form is not a total of its parts there could exist a fundamental gap between part(iculars) and form/whole which enables us to conceive the relation between the two complex and dynamic.

“individual significance” reveals some affinity with what Kosik calls the “idealist trends of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (18) which “petrifie[s] the whole in an abstraction superior to the facts” (23). In Kosik’s view, such an idealism is a kind of “reductionism” which subsumes the diversity and variety of phenomena under the abstract (13).

Woolf again seems to have Bell’s notion of significant form in mind when she recalls that she encountered a “revelation of some order; a token of some real thing behind appearances” in the moments of being (*Moments of Being* 72). A close reading of the following passage, however, suggests that Woolf in fact significantly modifies Bell’s aesthetic formalism.

Sudden shocks; a revelation of some order; a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole. [ . . . ] ; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this [the pattern]; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock. (*Moments of Being* 72)

Whereas Bell separates reality from form (of art) through which the former reveals itself, Woolf does not; for her, reality is itself a pattern, a form, rather than being something preexistent to be revealed in an artistic form or discovered through an artistic vision. For Bell, the ultimate reality is “the God in everything, the universal in the particular” and the artistic vision is a blissful realization of the essential reality which “gives to all things their individual significance.” The pattern/whole/reality for Woolf, however, is not conterminous with the all-determining creator/God. Unlike Bell’s artistic vision, Woolf’s revelatory moments disclose the absence of God; far from being determined by the whole, the part turns into the whole itself (“we are the words; we are the music; we are the

thing itself”). Hence the seemingly contradictory view of “some order,” “some real thing,” or a “pattern” in Woolf, as something that simultaneously precedes (“hidden” behind the cotton wool) and comes after (“ma[de] real” and “whole” by being “put into words”) artistic creation.

Never being an unreflecting follower of any other thinker, Woolf challenges Bell’s concept of form predicated upon a static, idealistic, or even totalistic notion of reality (*pace* Fernihough). As a philosopher in her own right, she sets forth her own idea of form/reality as changeable and dynamic, anticipating Hegelian/Marxist theories of totality. Indeed, the way in which Woolf deviates from Bell has some affinity with G. W. F. Hegel’s critique of the Kantian distinction between phenomena and noumena. According to Hegel, the distinctions between knowledge of the world of appearances (phenomena) and of the world of essences or things-in-themselves (noumena), between the sensible and the intelligible, etc. are illusory; they can be reconciled by “dialectical thought, with its appreciation of the importance of totality” (Jay 54). A detailed discussion of Kant’s and Hegel’s philosophy in relation to the idea of totality in general is necessary, but it is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that, as we have seen in Woolf’s recollection of the moments of being, her idea of form/order/real thing is similar to Hegel’s notion of the Absolute Spirit which is “both creator and created” (Jay 54). Neither Woolf’s concept of a ‘pattern’ or ‘order’ assumes its predetermined, totalistic power, nor is Hegel’s statement, “the true is the whole,” predicated upon the belief in “the static and objective” vision of totality (Jay 54). For Hegel, the Absolute Spirit is “essentially a result.” “[O]nly at the end is it what it is in very truth” (qtd. in Jay 55). As Martin Jay notes, “[b]ecause of the importance of the dynamic nature of reality for Hegel, history [. . .] was given central importance. In a sense, it was [. . .] a kind of *Bildungsroman* of the Absolute” (55).

At this point, Kosik’s notion of “the dialectics of the concrete totality” (19) deserves our attention as it provides a useful vocabulary to explicate Woolf’s line of thought concerning form/reality. In this view, reality is conceived to be a concrete totality which “evolves” and “is in the process of forming” in opposition

to the false totality which violates the individual facts in the name of a higher reality (Kosik 19, 27). According to Kosik, unlike “uncritical reflective thinking” (6), dialectics is a type of critical thinking that actively strives to grasp the “relationship between the world and the essence.” The “authentic reality,” that is, “the structure of the thing” is “the unity of the phenomenon and the essence” (3). In a similar vein, unlike the moments of “non-being” immersed in conventional ways of thinking and living (70), Woolf observes, the moments of being are accompanied by the awareness of the whole/pattern and of the relation between the part and the whole (“we are . . . connected with” the pattern). Both Woolf’s notion of form and the dialectical concept of totality assume the dialectical connection between the part and the whole—not in the sense that the latter as an *a priori* principle determines the former but in the sense that they are mutually constructive. For both the whole/reality “are not inert and passive” (Kosik 2). Entwined with the concept of reality, both Woolf’s notion of form and Kosik’s concept of concrete totality bring changeability and historicity into the otherwise static and ahistorical notion of form, differentiating itself from totalistic thinking.

Kosik’s frequent reference to the cognitive capacity of man to conduct dialectical thinking, the ability to see things and events “adequately and without distortion”, however, is problematic as it tends to presuppose an ahistorical and abstract human subject (25). The subject who seeks to grasp the concept of concrete totality does not seem to be ‘concrete’ enough; as an abstract being, she/he threatens to turn the concept of totality into an equally abstract principle. This is arguably a common, and sometimes fatal, weakness in different proponents of dialectical thinking that is likely to make their intellectual endeavors *un*-dialectical. Woolf, however, suggests the possibility to push the concept of totality one step further by asking a very important question that hardly any theorist of form has ever raised before: ‘who’ thinks the form/whole.



### III. "more forms, and stranger": Rings and Bubbles in *The Waves*

In her important project of illuminating Woolf's connection with Cambridge philosophical discourses, Ann Banfield explicates Woolf's search for form in terms of Fry's "intellectual scaffolding" or Russell's "mathematical formulae" (279).<sup>7</sup> According to her, the interludes in *The Waves*, for example, place a Post-Impressionist clarity at the novel's literal center (noon) surrounded by Impressionist vagueness of morning and evening, and trace the history of painting from Impressionism to Post-impressionism. The sunlight at the zenith at the center of the novel, she contends, draws the world from the surrounding fluidity and renders it with clarity and logic. In other words, the interludes illustrate the ways in which the novel achieves the aesthetic qualities created by the logical relations as Post-Impressionist paintings do, and such aesthetic qualities generate "pleasure in the recognition of order, or inevitability in relations" which "come very near to the pleasure derived from the contemplation of intellectual construction united by logical inevitability," in other words, "the aptness of formal relations" (282). Banfield's overall argument that the problem of knowledge is at the center of Woolf's art, in my view, applies more to her own project than to Woolf's work. Due to the constant focus on the "epistemology of modernism," her discussion tends to collapse the entire novel into epistemological terms, leaving out its political

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7) To some extent, this paper is in line with Ziarek's important attempt to "rethin[k] the Form/Matter divide" (123). As Ziarek rightly suggests Woolf's concept of form cannot be addressed in terms of the static binary between form and matter, or art and reality. Largely drawing upon feminist theories, Ziarek argues that the "notion of passive and formless matter," embedded in the age-old schism between form and matter, has served to eclipse violence of the political formalism (or the abstraction of social forms) inflicted upon the "particularity of bodies" (or 'formless' matter in Luce Irigaray's words) (126). Her ultimate goal is to illuminate a new possibility of the feminist aesthetics by analyzing the interconnection among "damaged materials, violated bodies, and literary forms" (127). By focusing on the ways in which Woolf restores the thinking subject to the concept of form, however, I will propose Woolf moves beyond the violence of formalism in its very act of thinking and of reformulating the form/whole itself.

and historical concerns. Let us look at the description of the noontide sunlight Banfield quotes: “The sun fell in sharp wedges inside the room. Whatever the light touched became dowered with a fanatical existence. A plate was like a white lake. A knife looked like a dagger of ice. . . .” (*The Waves* 109-10). As we shall see, this passage is not only about clarity and logic. Within the seemingly innocuous depiction of the landscape lurks a “dagger” indeed that foreshadows the sharp demarcation between ‘us’ and the other that constructs the ultimate limit of epistemological, psychological, and physical *topos*—in the sense of the Greek word, meaning where people live—of the “fanatical” subjects in the episode immediately following. In addition, Banfield’s observation regarding the intellectual and aesthetic pleasure comes dangerously close to Bell’s declaration accused of being dehumanized elitism that the aesthetic emotion brings us “the austere and thrilling raptures of those who have climbed the cold, white peaks of art,” “the thrill that answers the perception of sheer rightness of form” (145).

Lorrain Sim’s contention that Woolf’s idea of ‘pattern’ is in line with Plato’s concept of form has a similar blind spot. Taking a scene from *The Years* (1937) where Eleanor thinks about a pattern and feels “extreme pleasure” as an example—“If so, is there a pattern; a theme, recurring . . . a gigantic pattern, momentarily perceptible? The thought gave her extreme pleasure, that there was a pattern” (369)—Sim argues that Woolf’s persistent use of the word ‘pattern’ reveals “her belief in the existence of an objective, non-material principle that provides order and meaning to life” (46). In this respect, she argues, Woolf’s pattern “resembles the logos,” that is, “a rational, intelligible principle, structure, or order that pervades something” (39). Sim’s argument is problematic in that it basically assumes a unilateral relation between form/pattern and empirical reality with the former determining the latter, thus coming close to what Fernihough called ‘a totalistic thinking’—a thinking on the basis of “a totalitarian identity principle which reduces phenomena to its own pattern” (42).

More importantly, Sim completely dismisses the fact that Eleanor’s discovery of a pattern and a sense of pleasure are immediately followed by the questions

about “who makes” and “who thinks” the pattern: “But who makes it? Who thinks it? The mind slipped. She could not finish her thought” (369). The passage she quotes, in fact, suggests that Eleanor’s thought fails to reach any conclusion. Eleanor’s musings begin with a discovery of a pattern and end with a self-reflexive inquiry about ‘who’ makes and thinks it. In other words, Woolf asks a question about a thinking subject here, shattering the age-old assumption of a supposedly objective thinker/theorist of form. By introducing the question of ‘who’ thinks the form, logos (in Sim’s view), or intellectual scaffolding (in Banfield’s view), Woolf challenges the concept of form as an abstract, objective one to be conceived of by a supposedly objective, universal thinker/philosopher.

The famous scene in *To the Lighthouse* where Mrs. Ramsay reaches a sense of unification with the lighthouse is another example. Although Mrs. Ramsay is not directly concerned with form as Lily the artist/painter is, she, as an artist in her own way, develops a line of thought which has some affinity with Eleanor’s idea of pattern and Lily’s search for form:

Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking [. . .] until she became the thing she looked at—that light. [. . .] It will come, it will come, when suddenly she added, We are in the hands of the Lord. But instantly she was annoyed with herself for saying that. Who had said it? Not she; she had been trapped into saying something she did not mean. (66)

As Eleanor’s momentary ecstasy in discovering a pattern is shattered by the immediately following self-reflexive questions about who makes and thinks the pattern, Mrs. Ramsay’s sense of unification with the light is disturbed by a sudden realization that she was unwittingly using the words which are not her own, a language that forcefully binds human beings together in the name of a common destiny designed by God. Mrs. Ramsay’s reveries are accompanied by a fight against a generalizing trap which seeks to subsume the particulars. Nor does Lily’s concern with “how to connect” and to achieve “the unity of the whole” aim to impose a preexistent principle on reality. It is impossible to have “the relations of

masses, of lights and shadows” explained; Lily would not reduce her work of art to an object of “scientific examination” as Mr. Banks wishes (56). As the pattern/order comes to be real by being put into words at the moments of being, Lily’s form is neither explicable nor visible even to herself until she paints the picture: “She could not show him what she wished to make of it, could not see it even herself” “without a brush in her hand” (56, 57). Form comes into being through her artistic creation.

To examine the various forms in *The Waves* in relation to ‘who’ thinks them does not mean to dismiss the novel’s challenge to the conventional notion of the self and the literary character. As often noted, this “eyeless book” (in the author’s own words) seeks to be ‘I-less,’ and the three male and three female characters of the novel are allied across gender, sharing too many sensory experiences to be clearly differentiated from one another. Furthermore, considering the imperial sentiments that permeate this novel, the blurring of self could carry dangerous political implications. Indeed, Woolf’s self-questioning of “[w]ho thinks it? And am I outside the thinker?” (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 3: 257) during the composition may suggest her awareness of possible complicity with imperialism. And yet, it is also true that these characters are increasingly individuated and socially sorted as the novel proceeds. The novel constantly makes us aware that the various forms are not simply static metaphors for different visions of society but are something imagined or invoked deliberately or unconsciously by the characters with divergent social backgrounds, sexual orientations, and desires, thus illuminating the mutually constructive relations between the whole/society and the part/individuals.

In a sense, the exclamation of the narrator in *Orlando* (1928) sounds like a curious guide to how to read the various forms that *The Waves* evokes. She cries, “[h]ail! natural desire! Hail! happiness! [. . .] and anything, anything that interrupts and confounds the tapping of typewriters and filing of letters and forging of links and chains, binding the Empire together. [. . .] Hail, happiness! [. . .] [H]ail! in whatever form it comes, and may there be more forms, and stranger” (294). Sharing this daunting spirit, *The Waves* persistently interrupts and compounds the “forging

of links and chains, binding the Empire together,” and hails in a sense happiness “in whatever form,” “more forms, and stranger” such as oblongs, squares, foam, and bubbles while having us look at who makes and thinks them. By dramatizing who, in what contexts, thinks form the novel resists the ideological ossification that frequently accompanies the concept of form and seeks to open up a possibility to imagine “more forms, and stranger,” that is, more inclusive, anti-imperialist models of community coming into being.

Among the six characters, Bernard, Louis, and Rhoda particularly reveal a near obsession with various forms. The novel begins with Bernard’s soliloquy, “I see a ring” and throughout the novel he keeps calling the images of smoke rings, threads, and lines to his mind. Following Bernard, Louis also thinks about (steel) rings and chains, while Rhoda is more drawn to edges, loops, foams, and bubbles. This typical insider (Bernard) and two prominent outsiders are at times united with, at times divergent from one another along with their varying evocation of similar, and at times different forms.

Bernard, who virtually opens and closes the novel, thinks constantly about rings and other related images from his childhood to old age. Bernard’s ring evoked in this childhood reflects a prelapsarian state of unification between self and other: “[W]hen we sit together close [. . .] we melt into each other with phrases.” He describes his friends and himself as living “in the ringed wood with the wall,” “a ring of wall” (23). As he is awakened to a growing sense of differences between self and other (“what is the difference between us? 49), the images of link and thread not so much mirror the world he perceives and lives as are deliberately evoked: “I must . . . let out,” he says, “these linked phrases.” “[I]nstead of incoherence there is perceived a wandering thread, lightly joining one thing to another” (49). This will to join things together fuels his penchant for making stories. As Neville rightly senses, making stories for Bernard is an act of imposing order on reality; his stories do not have room for private feeling or compassion for others. Neville is left with solitude when Bernard’s story is over; he is unable to tell Bernard his passion for the fear that Bernard might simply make use of his

private feeling. Neville senses the ominous affinity between Bernard's storytelling and the educational institute that seeks to "skillfully organiz[e]" all to "prevent feeling alone" by means of "games and tradition and emulation" (51). Although Bernard's story fails to "follow people into their private rooms" (51) and to convey what others "feel" (70), he insists how words make "smoke rings" and "we are one" (68) as if to cover up the lacuna and to justify his own rather dubious "method" of storytelling (69). As Bernard's evocation of a ring as a principle of unification rings untrue to Neville's ears, his self-claimed compassion for all human beings ("I am . . . complex and many" 76) cannot so much as win his lover's mind, for she, as Bernard himself is aware, is suspicious of insincerity in his "posing as a literary man" (79). Even his claim of an androgynous mind—which some critics would take at face value and consider him as a proponent of Woolf's idea of a creative mind—is in fact tainted with patriarchal discourses; he expresses it in terms of a combination of the "sensibility of a woman" and "the logical sobriety of a man" (76), assuming a gendered division between woman's emotion and man's logic which Woolf cannot have shared.

Bernard's patriarchal language culminates in the fourth episode where the characters gather for a farewell dinner for Percival who is about to leave for India as an imperial agent.<sup>8)</sup> In this setting, Bernard obsessively chants the sense of uniformity in tune with the imperialist-patriarchal language. He is willing to be carried away by the "general impulse" (113) and feels the "impossible desire to embrace the whole world" (114). Bernard is not the only one who reveals his

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8) For example, in the eyes of Bernard, recently engaged to be married, London is unambiguously feminized and sexualized. "She [London] folds the ant-heap to her breast." Identifying himself with masculine landscapes such as factories and domes which "erect themselves" amongst the "maternal" body of London, or the train which is "hurled at her [London] like a missile," Bernard says, "[w]e are about to explode in the flanks of the city like a shell" while the masochist London, "humm[ing] and murmur[ing]" "awaits us" (111). Anticipating Woolf's explication of the common roots of the patriarchal psychology and imperialism/fascism in *Three Guineas*, Bernard's patriarchal language is united with his evocation of "a splendid unanimity" and "uniformity" among the subjects (111).

imperial desire; all the characters in this episode mouth their imperialistic sentiment more strongly than elsewhere. The characters seem to be united like “conspirators” in their admiration of Percival who “lives in complete unconscious conformity with his culture” (Lee 184). In her ground-breaking analysis of *The Waves*, Jane Marcus also argues that the characters of this novel are the homogeneous participants of the violent narrative of English national identity, namely, “fascist characters” (228). A close reading, however, indicates that their sense of unification is disrupted from within as it is enunciated by the characters divided across gender, sexual orientation, and nationality; their language of unification constantly discloses the outsider within. To list but a few examples, Jinny’s casual statement, “I am native here” (103), obliquely interpolates Louis the Australian as an outsider, and Rhoda never overcomes her sense of alienation and loneliness. I agree with Marcus’s contention that the novel is anti-imperial, not in the sense that it “enclose[s] Western narrative in an Eastern narrative” as she observes (228), but in the sense that it renders the imperial narrative unstable and unsustainable through its own self-contradictory logic delivered through the divergent characters.

It is important to note that the image of a ring that Louis obsessively evokes is not so much a mark of his fascism as a most ironic, poignant indicator of himself as being an outsider within. Louis, an Australian, with a hopeless wish to be an insider, makes an effort to “copy” Bernard the insider (19) and tries to “fix in words, to forge in a ring of steel” (40). Some critics have regarded Louis as one of the most conspicuous imperialist/fascist figures who displays “a broad kinship with fascism” (Phillips 163) or has an ambition to “produce some vast totalisation” (Minow-Pinkney 160). These readings of Louis are rather simplistic because the novel demonstrates that Louis’s imperial/fascist impulse is cultivated within the society where he, a former colonial subject with a foreign accent, should live with the indelible marker as an outsider. He deliberately imitates Bernard’s language as a way of compensating for the insecure sense of identity. “The circle is unbroken; the harmony complete. . . . Yet I am not included. If I speak, imitating their accent, they prick their ears, waiting for me to speak again, in order that they may place

me—if I come from Canada or Australia, I . . . an alien, external,” he says (94). His appropriation of the insider’s language thwarts, rather than fulfills, his desire to be an insider because his language is a borrowed one which brands him as an outsider in the first place. The novel registers the cruel irony that Louis is persistently alienated from the very language and culture that he desperately seeks to appropriate. Louis mimics the language that is not his own, a language that never keeps its promise of embracing all. His mimicry does not and cannot successfully reproduce or reinforce the ideological implications of the insider’s language. His language contains a critique of the dominant discourse it draws on. His mimicry operates a very condition to dismantle the dominant discourse by exposing the cracks and crevices within the latter, and by unmasking its motivations. It is no wonder therefore that he, far from being a blind follower of the cultural hero, is keenly aware that “[i]t is Percival” “who makes us aware that these attempts to say, ‘I am this, I am that,’ are false.” The “chain” he sees in “a steel-blue circle beneath” (137) is as an ominous variation of Bernard’s ring, a ring which seeks to conceal its exclusive impulse under the rhetoric of uniformity that “we are one.”

As Louis’s professional career as a businessman reaches its climax, his language discloses even more explicitly the dark underside of Bernard’s language—the virile, patriarchal, and imperialist one that stigmatizes Louis as an alien. Signing his name over and over again Louis desperately tries to be assured of his “firm, unequivocal” self (167). In order to “expunge certain stains, and erase old defilements,” he, as a successful imperial agent, works to “mak[e] order from chaos.” He puts forward his totalitarian belief that he needs to master to survive in a society where he should prove his own relevance to the society. For him, nothing or nobody “should be irrelevant” (168); everybody’s journey “should have an end in view” (168). Trying to gloss over the profound fractures within his life, he professes to “assemble a few words and forge round up a hammered ring of beaten steel” (169). “[W]e assemble different forms, make different patterns. But if we do not nail these impressions to the board and out of the many men in me make one . . . then I shall fall like snow and be wasted” (170), he says, as if



mocking Bernard’s forceful imposition of order and unity on life.

Louis does not, in fact, copy Bernard as faithfully as he claims to. On the contrary, he is preoccupied with fissures and breaks as much as with rings and continuity. While confirming to himself “I am an average Englishman,” Louis wonders “[w]here then is the break in this continuity? What the fissure through which one sees disaster?” His desperate incantation, “[t]he circle is unbroken. . . . Here is the central rhythm,” is constantly interrupted by his bitter awareness that “I am not included . . . an alien, external. I who, would wish to feel close over me the protective waves of the ordinary” (96). His childhood sense of isolation from “their” order turns into his youthful search for compensatory will to “reduce you to order” (96), which aptly anticipates Bernard’s barely covered doubts and anxiety in his self-questioning, “why impose my arbitrary design. . . . Why stress this and shape that?” (188).

Louis’s self-claiming as a legitimate inheritor of the Western tradition deserves our attention as well. It reveals his desire to reformulate his identity by connecting himself to the distant past (tracing back to the age of Plato) that far precedes the British imperial history. He, however, neither retreats to the remote past nor blindly acquiesces to the dominant culture. Strong as his desire to claim his rootedness is, he tries not to lose a keen sense of history. For “[i]f I now shut my eyes,” he says, “if I fail to realize the meeting-place of past and present, that I sit in a third-class railway carriage. . . human history is defrauded of a moment’s vision. Its eye, that would see through me, shuts—if I sleep now, through slovenliness, or cowardice, burying myself in the past . . . or acquiesce, as Bernard acquiesces, telling stories; or boasts, as Percival, Archie, John, Walter, Lathom, Larpent, Roper, Smith boast—the names are the same always, the names of the boasting boys” (66). The acute sense of the chronotope of his self helps him neither to bury himself in the past nor to participate blindly in the process of identification. He even squarely opposes Bernard who “do[es] not believe in separation” (67) and insists “we are one” (68), by stating, “[w]e differ” (127). He is aware that “a steel ring” is “mad[e]” by those who differ (128). He knows that it is not so much an innocuous

trope of a unified society as one deliberately evoked and copied by those who need such an ideology.

In a similar vein, the bodiless, fatherless, lesbian or bi-sexual Rhoda exposes the patriarchal, imperial impulse to subjugate and exclude the other under the rhetoric of 'us.' She does this particularly by drawing on another variation of Bernardian ring: a loop. The loop for her signifies not so much (forcefully imposed or not) bondage and connection as exclusion and division; however, "the world is looped in it [a loop] and I myself am outside the loop" (21). Unlike Jinny who "enters" everywhere freely, Rhoda "edges" behind people all the time. Unlike Bernard's celebratory declaration of his multiple selves ("I am many people" 276), Rhoda's sense of having many selves signifies the lack of any possible self: "I am broken into separate pieces; I am no longer one" (107). Rhoda's language does not seem to be completely immune from the imperialist one as we have seen in the farewell dinner scene, and yet, her soliloquy gradually takes a different turn. The sudden, pointless death of Percival, the hero, terrifies her by forcing her to face the horrible sense of the flimsiness of reality: "The houses are lightly founded to be puffed over by a breath of air" (159-60). The devastating loss of Percival brings the following thought to Rhoda's mind:

'Like' and 'like' and 'like'—but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing? . . . Percival . . . has made me this gift, let me see the thing. There is a square; there is an oblong. The players take the square and place it upon the oblong. They place it very accurately; they make a perfect dwelling-place. Very little is left outside. The structure is now visible. . . . This is our triumph; this is our consolation. (163)

To some extent, this rather enigmatic line of thought is reminiscent of Roger Fry's formalistic analysis of Cézanne's painting. According to Fry, Cézanne sought to 'realize' form. "Realizing for him [Cézanne]," Fry notes, "did not mean verisimilitude . . . but the discovery in appearances of some underlying structural unity." In his desperate search for "the reality hidden beneath the veil of

appearance,” Cézanne made the discovery, which was “the construction of clearly articulated plastic wholes” (qtd. in Banfield 278-79). Rhoda’s revelatory moment also rejects verisimilitude, and the “thing” or the “structure” she sees at this moment reminds us of the “quality of immediacy, of a thing that was actually seen and seized by the imagination in a single ecstatic moment” that Fry finds in Cézanne’s picture (qtd. in Banfield 286).

Rhoda’s visionary encounter with squares and oblongs, however, does not lead to a discovery of some underlying structural unity. The structure of the world which is now “visible” to Rhoda curiously echoes yet radically modifies the seemingly all-encompassing yet in fact exclusive social structure that appeared in the image of an all-inclusive wall in the farewell party episode. The death of the hero brings to her a new vision of the world where “very little is left outside.” Later, Rhoda, standing “on the verge of the world” again sees “the square stan[d] upon the oblong,” “the house which contains us all” (205). Rhoda’s words such as “structure” and “square” bring us back to the passage from *A Room of One’s Own* that I quoted at the beginning of this paper where the narrator compares the new form of fiction to “a structure leaving a shape on the mind’s eye, built now in squares, now pagoda shaped” (71). As Woolf’s famous fight against the patriarchal tyranny of the plot by means of the truth of life (“Modern Fiction” 106), a novelistic form for Woolf is inseparable from a form of life/reality. Far from being an abstract, static organizing principle of life, the structure leaves various shapes in the mind’s eye, inviting us to imagine a different dwelling place. It is no accident that oblongs and squares in Rhoda’s mind turn into “a perfect dwelling-place.”

Posited on the verge of the world—which symbolizes both her alienation and her vantage point—Rhoda confronts two possibilities: either falling (“falling off the edge of the earth” 223) or encountering the “moments when the walls of the mind grow thin; when nothing is unabsorbed, and I could fancy that we might blow so vast a bubble that the sun might set and rise in it” (225). The bubble could symbolize an imperial bubble to be punctured but it could also point to an entirely different order of things. Rhoda, the potentially subversive outsider, does not

survive but kills herself. But her vision of the world does not completely perish along with her. It survives in Bernard's words in the final "summ[ing] up." In his language the image of a ring turns to something strongly reminiscent of Rhoda's bubble: "[T]his orderly and military progress [is] [. . .] a convenience, a lie. [. . .] The crystal, the globe of life [. . .] far from being hard [. . .] has walls of thinnest air" (255-57). He realizes that "Louis and Rhoda . . . both contradicted what was then so positive to me" (259). This is not to say that the novel records a rather abrupt transformation of Bernard into a proponent of outsiders nor is he a perfect representative of an androgynous mind. Realistically enough, Bernard the old man still relishes the imperialist fantasy of "assum[ing] command of the British Empire" (261) and maintains a male-centered world view ("I strode into a world inhabited by vast numbers of men" 261).

Imperfect and fallible as he still is, he is not a hopeless patriarch/imperialist but an ordinary man with a capacity to learn new things and to think differently. For instance, when he ponders over Percival and his death, Bernard brings up a rather surprising—perhaps repressed up until this moment—memory of Percival's limited sights. Bernard remembers that one day in the morning he saw something that "he [Percival] would never see"; he saw "things without attachment, from the outside" and that he realized "their beauty in itself" (263). This is close to Woolfian moments of seeing things in themselves—the moments of dissociating things from their conventional or ideological significance and thinking them in relation to reality. "And then," he recalls, "the sense that a burden has been removed; pretence and make-believe and unreality are gone" (264-65). At this moment Bernard's mind comes close to a novelist who would not alter his/her vision "in deference to external authority" but "think of things in themselves" (*A Room* 74, 111). Sitting in a restaurant, Bernard says, "[l]et me sit here for ever with bare things, this coffee-cup . . . things in themselves, myself being myself" (295).

To go back to Bernard's memory of Percival's defective vision, it is, aptly enough, at this point when he takes out another blasphemous memory of disobedience. "Then comes the terrible pounce of memory . . . that I did not go

with him [Percival] to Hampton Court. . . . I did not go. In spite of his impatiently protesting that it did not matter; why interrupt, why spoil our moment of uninterrupted community?—Still, I repeated sullenly, I did not go” (264). One day Bernard unbosoms this painfully nagging memory to Jinny. Her consolation that it is always painful to realize that there are things impossible to share hits the mark, suggesting that she has reached a similar realization as Bernard has. Painful as the memory of disobedience is to this moment, Bernard resolves not to perpetuate the hero-making (“we compared Percival to a lily”) but to “commit any blasphemy of laughter and criticism rather than exude this lily-sweet glue; and cover him with phrases” “interrupt[ing]” and “spoil[ing]” the “moment of uninterrupted community” (265).

Finally, Bernard renounces the idea of a ring: “How can I reduce these dazzling, these dancing apparitions to one line capable of linking all in one?” (219). In place of time as the “orderly and military progress” he envisions a different one. He even moves beyond the anthropocentric temporality and locates human history in relation to the cosmological time scale. “[T]he light of the stars falling, as it falls now, on my hand,” he says, “after travelling for millions upon millions of years” (268). In the previous chapter, Bernard already develops an idea of the earth in cosmological terms: “the earth is only a pebble flicked off accidentally from the face of the sun and that there is no life anywhere in the abysses of space” (225). He is not the only one to think in this way. In a sense, Bernard’s view of the stars corresponds to that of Louis who says, “listen . . . to the world moving through abysses of infinite space. It roars; the lighted strip of history is . . . our civilization. . . . Our separate drops are dissolved; we are extinct. Lost in the abysses of time. . . . But how strange it seems to see against the whirling abysses of infinite space. . . . Our English past—one inch of light . . . This Palace seems light as a cloud set for a moment on the sky. . . . [W]hat has permanence?” (227). While relentlessly pointing to the palpable weight of human history of exclusion, exploitation, and violence carved in Louis’ bitter sense of isolation and anger and Rhoda’s insurmountable loneliness, the novel guides us to a humble realization of

the triviality and transience of human life as well. Louis asks himself, “[W]ho are you? Who am I?” and Bernard feels that “[w]e have destroyed something by our presence . . . a world perhaps” (232).

As Bernard rightly senses, the destruction of the world that we have known, or to put it differently, the replacement of rings with bubbles, is double-edged; it could mean either “death,” or “a new assembly of elements,” or, “[s]ome hint of what was to come” (279). Rhoda’s moment of discovering the “structure,” like many other Woolfian moments of being—the moments of encountering with form/order/pattern—is painfully disturbing or even terrifying rather than bringing about an ecstasy and a sense of pleasure (as in Bell), since it hints at a strange new world surrounded by all-inclusive, thinnest air, not by solid, protective walls. Reminiscent of the narrator’s cry quoted above, *The Waves* hails any thing that “interrupts and confounds” the “forging of links and chains, binding the Empire together,” hails “in whatever forms it comes.” The novel wishes, “may there be more forms, and stranger.”

#### IV. Conclusion

Woolf was keenly aware of and intrigued by “totality’s appeal” (Jay 22), yet never compromised with any kind of totalitarian thinking. Thinking of form was, for her, her own way of “spiritual and intellectual reproduction of reality” (Kosik 9), an act of rethinking and reconfiguring the ideologically fabricated structure/whole that would threaten to subsume its parts. Woolf constantly reminds us that the concept of form cannot and should not erase the thinking subject; she renders both the form/whole and the part open and dynamic, and their relations dialectical. Woolf’s form as reality or reality as form is at once a product and a producer of the incessant waves of reality. As such, it suggests that the ‘damaged materials’ and ‘violated bodies’ can move beyond the violence of formalism in the very act of thinking, rethinking, and reformulating the form/whole itself. *The Waves* thinks of

form as a way of resisting formalism that endangers particulars. And it is no accident that *The Waves* does not end by giving Bernard the final words, as commonly believed, but by calling Rhoda back to the narrative by evoking the image of foam: “The waves broke on the shore” (297).<sup>9)</sup>

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9) Throughout the novel Rhoda has identified herself with the foam on the waves: “I am to be cast up and down among these men and women, with their twitching faces, with their lying tongues, like a cork on the rough sea. Like as ribbon of weed I am flung far every time they door opens. The wave breaks. I am the foam that sweeps and fills the uttermost rims of the rocks with whiteness” (107); “I am like the foam that races over the beach” (130).

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## Abstract

“But who makes it? Who thinks it?”:  
Rethinking Form in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*

Youngjoo Son

Challenging the age-old assumption of the division between the concept of form in Western metaphysics from Plato to Kant and the Hegelian/Marxist notion of the term, this paper argues that Woolf’s concept of form anticipates and even pushes one step further the dialectical notion of totality. A close reading of Woolf’s observations concerning form enables us to see that Woolf in fact significantly deviates from Bloomsbury art critic Clive Bell’s notion of significant form and his overall aesthetic formalism, far from incorporating his views as commonly believed. Unlike Bell’s theory Woolf puts forward an idea of form that assumes the connection between the part and the whole—not in the sense that the latter as an *a priori* principle determines the former, but in the sense that they are dialectically related and mutually constructive. In its resistance to a static, idealistic, or even totalistic notion of reality, Woolf’s notion of form has some affinity with what Karel Kosík terms “concrete totality.” Woolf even moves beyond the dialectical concept of totality or any other theories of form as she constantly raises a very important question of ‘who’ thinks the form. The near obsession with various forms in *The Waves* is a case in point. The novel illustrates how Bernard’s evocation of rings and lines, Louis’s steel rings and chains, and Rhoda’s loops and bubbles at once disclose and undermine the sense of social unification tied up with imperial sentiment by constantly inviting us to look at who, in what context, think these forms. In this way, the novel fights against the ideological ossification that frequently accompanies the concept of form and opens up a possibility to imagine a more inclusive, anti-imperialist model of self and community coming into being.

not by means of telling us what to think, but by means of illustrating us how to think of form – form as reality and/or reality as form.

■ **Key words** : form, concrete totality, reality, Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*  
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