Intimacy in Isolation and the Amplitude of Reality: Virginia Woolf’s Tense Intimacies

Rebecca Thorndike-Breeze, Northeastern University
Abstract

Virginia Woolf identifies four “dimensions” of human life: “I mean: I: & the not I: & the outer & the inner” (Diary 4: 353). The permeability of these dimensions is at the core of Woolf’s experiments in “re-form[ing]” the novel (Diary 1: 356). Woolf’s novels represent the simultaneously unavoidable isolation and permeability of self, other, internality, and externality; Lacan would later characterize this permeability with the figure of the Mobius strip and his concept of “extimacy,” the simultaneous position of the Other external to, yet at the core of the self. Through analyses of affectively intense representations of consciousness and intimacy in *The Voyage Out, Mrs. Dalloway*, and *The Waves*, this paper argues that Woolf’s novels emphasize how the amplitude of “the reality behind appearances” permeates everyday life and individual consciousness, and thus creates feelings of profound intimacy within isolation ("A Sketch of the Past" 71-2). The stylistic experimentation of these novels conveys intimacy among strangers, as well as the alienation inherent in the intimacy between friends. Woolf’s work stresses that though the old ways of conceiving and representing personal relationships needed “re-form[ation],” the surfeit of feelings surrounding intimacy would remain inextricable from aesthetic representation.

Intimacy in Isolation and the Amplitude of Reality: Virginia Woolf’s Tense Intimacies

In a diary entry from the 18th of November 1935, Virginia Woolf gestures toward some new ideas about her conception of “human life”:

> It struck me tho’ that I have now reached a further stage in my writers advance. I see that there are 4? Dimensions; all to be produced; in human life; & that leads to a far richer grouping & proportion: I mean: I: & the not I: & the outer & the inner — no I’m too tired to say: but I see it: & this will affect my book on Roger. Very exciting: to grope on like this. New combinations in psychology & body — rather like painting. This will be the next novel, after *The Years*. (*Diary IV* 353)

Woolf looks forward to making conscious use of this new insight, both in her biography of Roger Frye (the prominent art critic, fixture of Bloomsbury, and Woolf’s close friend,) and in her final novel, *Between the Acts*, but her phrase “I have now reached a further stage in my writers
advance” implies that she is now fully realizing something that has gone into her writing for quite a while: the intimate intensity that underlies human existence and human relationships, which crisscrosses one’s experience of the world and the continuous reconstitution of one’s sense of self. Woolf’s interest in the tensions pervading inner and outer life and human relationships is well established, both through her own manifestos on character and fiction and in the vast body of Woolf scholarship.¹ This paper will focus on the relationship among the four key dimensions Woolf identifies in this diary entry, and how in her fiction they work together to represent “moments of being” that access what she calls “some real thing behind appearances,” and thus create intense scenes of simultaneous intimacy and isolation (“A Sketch of the Past” 72). The interaction of thought, feeling, and the body excites Woolf as she writes the above diary entry, but throughout her life she intuits this relation among the self, the other, and the outer and the inner. Her stylized, metaphorical representations of the otherwise ineffable interaction of these dimensions permit readers also to intuit her conception of the intimacy and isolation inherent in reality.²

Because the concept of “intimacy” is such a complex knot, some clarification about it is necessary. Lauren Berlant argues that intimacy involves “an aspiration for a narrative about something shared […] that will turn out in a particular way […] set within zones of familiarity and comfort: friendship, the couple, and the family form” (1). The OED defines “intimacy” and “intimate” as “Close connection” through family, friendship, “or knowledge”; “very personal” relationships “characterized by familiarity.” Intimate connections like this pertain “to the most intimate thoughts or feelings” and impact “one’s inmost self” in “closely personal” ways.³ In this kind of intimacy, one feels connected to and known by another. However, as Berlant and many others have shown through examinations of intimacy and the public/private divide, such
liberal idealizations of intimacy are shaped by a number of public institutions. These grand narratives over-simplify and even ignore numerous, often contradictory, instantiations of intimacy that, as Berlant argues, “can be recognized in psychoanalysis, yet mainly they are seen not as intimacy but as a danger to it” (4). In *Intimate Revolt*, Julia Kristeva argues that psychoanalysis recasts “the soul/mind dichotomy” and its relation to the body in the intimate, based on the Latin root, *intimus*, “superlative of interior” (43). I find Kristeva’s view of the intimate as a point of intersection among the consciousness, feeling, and the body to be a useful way to think about those ambiguous instantiations of intimacy that dominant narratives leave out. 

Likewise, I think that this view of “intimacy” and “the intimate” approximates what Woolf was getting at in her 1935 diary entry, “New combinations in psychology & body” (*Diary IV* 353).

I see a connection between the simultaneity of intimacy and isolation and the persistent threat of abjection inherent in the desire for recognition by another, what Kristeva calls the “massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which […] now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that” (*The Powers of Horror* 2).

4 Lacan calls this inner experience of uncanniness “intimate exteriority,” or extimacy (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 139). For example, Mrs. Dalloway’s feelings about Miss Kilman approximate this kind of intimacy and extimacy: Miss Kilman’s politics and sexuality deeply threaten Mrs. Dalloway, and though she does not specify how, she recognizes that her intense hatred “had gathered in to itself a great deal that was not Miss Kilman; had become one of those spectres with which one battles in the night; one of those spectres who stand astride us and suck up half our life-blood, dominators and tyrants” (11). However, later we see in a passage from Mrs. Dalloway’s party that the friends who surround her fail to touch her heart the way her hatred for Miss Kilman does: “She hated her: she loved her. It was enemies one wanted, not friends […]” (176). Thus,
through the hatred provoked by her feelings of abjection, Mrs. Dalloway feels connected to the absent Miss Kilman, and thus soothes her sense of alienation from her party guests.

Four years after Woolf wrote in her diary about the intimate relations of the I, not I, the outer and the inner, she began composing what would become her memoir essay “A Sketch of the Past.” This essay anchors her life experience from infancy to early adulthood in her newly articulated insight, which stitches the self into the pattern underlying “the cotton wool” of the everyday. Woolf roots this perspective in one of her earliest memories:

> If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills — then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory. It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive.

> I should spend hours trying to write that as it should be written, in order to give the feeling which is even at this moment very strong in me. But I should fail (unless I had some wonderful luck) […] (64-5)

Woolf often has great luck in her novels of conveying such sensations as she experienced in that moment. Of the impact of this memory upon her work, she writes, “Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what […] 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; that the whole world is a work of
In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf claims that her memory of the waves, the breeze, and
the blind is the basis for her modernist project: creating a style that uses metaphor to convey
what is otherwise ineffable – the intimate permeation of inner and outer life.

Though she had only just theorized this “philosophy” of the pattern behind the everyday,
Woolf writes that the moments of being that inspire it have frequently “come to the surface
unexpectedly” throughout her life and her writing (71). In The Voyage Out, her first novel,
published in 1915, Woolf invokes her early, half-wakeful memory repeatedly. She focalizes the
experience through Rachel, linking consciousness to a piece of thistledown as she dozes, or
conveying Rachel’s increasingly complex sense of her life through melting indoor and outdoor
sounds together with Rachel’s consciousness: “The sounds in the garden outside joined with the
clock, and the small noises of midday, which one can ascribe to no definite cause, in a regular
rhythm. It was all very real, very big, very impersonal, and after a moment or two she began to
raise her first finger and to let it fall on the arm of her chair so as to bring back to herself some
consciousness of her own existence” (131-2).

Though it was written twenty years before Woolf’s insight about how the four
dimensions of human life connect “psychology & body” to the world, The Voyage Out layers
representations of that intimate permeability throughout its otherwise more conventional
narrative structure. Her intuition reaches its fullest expression in The Waves, her most
experimental novel. This late novel shares with The Voyage Out scenes in which inner and outer
life merge, creating ecstatic feelings of intimacy within isolation. The Waves also invokes a great
deal of what Woolf calls “non-being,” or mundane sequences that do the work of illustrating
both the characters’ everyday life and the major organizing institutions of empire and privilege.
A full exploration of these important issues is unfortunately beyond the scope of this conference
paper, but *The Waves* makes clear that such things as moments of being and feelings of intimacy are inextricable from external, material, and social inequality and oppression.

Woolf conceived *The Waves* less as a novel with characters than as a sort of mosaic that conveyed “a mind thinking,” because, as she wrote in her diary, “I am not trying to tell a story” (*Writers Diary* 153, 139). She is a bit oblique on this point of story, however, because in the same diary entry she suggests, “Autobiography it might be called” (139). It might be, but by whom? Indeed the six voices of the novel correspond in their outward appearance to several of Woolf’s friends, and it is tempting to read intimacy in *The Waves* in terms of friendship, as Bernard seems to do when he compares himself and his friends to a flower with seven petals, organically united. Though *The Waves* possesses numerous instances of rich intimacy and union, the novel also insists upon the persistent separation of its component parts, much like the tiles of a mosaic.

The novel is split into two separate narratives: the frame narrative, which depicts the passing of a single day in a garden somewhere near the sea, and which is typeset in italics; and what Woolf calls the “play-poem,” which is comprised of soliloquies from six different perspectives (*WD* 107). The frame narrative establishes the novel’s dominant metaphor of the relationship between union and separation – the waves, which emerge individually from the same vast source, rush to shore, one upon the next, break, crash, and then draw back into the original source. In addition to the waves, the frame narrative conveys union and separation through the behavior of the birds living in the garden:

> Sharp stripes of shadow lay on the grass, and the dew dancing on the tips of the flowers and leaves made the garden like a mosaic of single sparks not yet formed into one whole. The birds, whose breasts were specked with canary and rose, now
sang a strain or two together, wildly, like skaters rollicking arm-in-arm, and were suddenly silent, breaking asunder. [...] Everything became softly amorphous, as if the china of the plate flowed and the steel of the knife were liquid. Meanwhile the concussion of the waves breaking fell with muffled thuds, like logs falling, on the shore. (*The Waves* 29)

We can see the world in bits and pieces here: separate stripes of shadow and individual dancing dew drops “made the garden like a mosaic of single sparks not yet formed into one whole.” Yet the pieces originate from common sources: in the case of the shadows it is the sun, and for the dew drops, it is the air. Even the birds’ bodies present bits and pieces, their “breasts specked with canary and rose,” like the tiles of a mosaic. The birds sing their separate songs on their separate boughs, fly this way and that, but then merge together singing or flying in unison, but “wildly, like skaters rollicking arm-in-arm” then “suddenly silent, breaking asunder” (29). The voices of these birds join together, but not synchronously; rather they buck and jolt here and there. In the frame of a later chapter, the birds “swept and soared sharply in flights high into the air, twittering short, sharp notes, and perched in the upper branches of some tree […] Now and again their songs ran together […] like the interlacings of a mountain stream whose waters, meeting, […] hasten quicker and quicker down the same channel […] But there is a rock; they sever” (109).

These birds, with their individualized attempts at union – like amateur skaters and mountain streams converging and diverging in rivulets, or perching on separate branches of the same tree – mirror the figure of the waves concussing upon the shore “with muffled thuds, like logs falling” (29). Woolf draws the images of unity and separation, intimacy and isolation, in the frame narrative from her early memory of the sound of waves crashing (“one, two, one, two”)
and the breeze blowing the blind in her nursery. She also uses these images as figures for the six voices that speak the play-poem narrative.

I want to conclude by focusing on the tense relation between Woolf’s pattern uniting the world as a work of art and Bernard’s perspective in *The Waves*, which shares this view of life yet is undermined by the staunchly individual perspectives of his friends. Bernard insists that “we are not single, we are one” through a series of attempts to merge with others through the stories he tells (68). With regard to this tendency, Neville reflects, “Bernard says there is always a story. I am a story. Louis is a story. There is the story of the boot-boy, the story of the man with one eye” (37-8). In this way Woolf and Bernard are similar, as we know from her professed interest in creating the stories of strangers in “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” and other writings. Also like his author, in his aesthetic moods Bernard relishes the instability of existence: “There is no stability in this world. […] To speak of knowledge is futile. All is experiment and adventure. We are forever mixing ourselves with unknown quantities” (118).

As his perspective matures, Bernard persists in believing that through such experimentation and storytelling he can merge with the unknown quantities, unite with the world, and become one with his friends. However, his friends’ perspectives frequently refuse this merging. In the first section of the novel, Bernard attempts to merge with Susan by transforming their play into an adventure story, telling Susan that though she sees and feels separately, “when we sit together, close […] we melt into each other with phrases” (16). But Susan’s perspective refuses Bernard’s adventure tale, insisting upon her separateness from him and all the others, and their difference from each other: “‘Now you trail away,’ said Susan, ‘making phrases. Now you mount like an air-ball’s string, higher and higher through the layers of the leaves, out of reach. […] You have escaped me. Here is the garden. Here is the hedge’” (18).
Bernard shares Woolf’s rapture in writing, where she “seem[s] to be discovering what belongs to what” (72). Still, Woolf uses Bernard to critique the writer’s faith in the sequencing of being through symbol, story, and plot. In *The Waves*, Woolf demonstrates that though the world may be united as a work of art, that work is never static or settled, but rather continues to vibrate and flow, separating and uniting in a multitude of intimately intense combinations.

Notes

1 Much scholarship considers the impacts of affect on the self, as well as the tense relations between the individual and the group. Scholarship clusters around Woolf’s own relationships, with Bloomsbury (e.g., Jesse Wolfe, Simon Joyce, and Christine Froula), with women (e.g., Martha Vicinus, Katherine Sproles, and Barrett and Cramer’s collection *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*), and with “the Victorians,” (e.g., Simon Joyce and Steve Ellis.) Many scholars also focuses upon the tensions between self and other in Woolf’s work, such as Susan Dick, Gabrielle McIntire, Julia Briggs, Anna Snaith, Laura Doyle, Tamlyn Monson, Rachel Bowlby, and Martha Nussbaum. On narrative intimacy and representations of group communion in Woolf’s work, see Gillian Beer. For a reading of *The Waves* according to “Kristeva’s theoretical framework,” see Chloë Taylor (61-77). On Woolf and tensions of internality and externality, see Ann Ronchetti (2) and Alison Booth (102). On the ways in which the friends’ language represents both individual consciousness and connectedness to a group in *The Waves*, see Allison Hild (69).

2 In *Intimate Revolt*, Kristeva defines the intimate as “the superlative of interior,” without “corresponding to an instinctual inside that would be the opposite of an outside of external excitation or the abstraction of consciousness” (43). She compares the intimate to both “the life of the mind” (as theorized by Descartes, Kant, and Hegel) and the classical Greek conception of the soul as the innermost proximity of the body, and thus casts the intimate as a merger among categories that had long been theorized as separate entities. Kristeva argues that psychoanalysis “scandalously rehabilitate[d]” the mind and the soul, bringing affect and intellect together in the psyche and demonstrating their relation to the body (44).
On the aesthetic representation homosocial friendship and attraction in Victorian conceptions of government, see Richard Dellamora (23). On the tense emergence of idioms of cross-sex friendship in the Victorian and modernist period, see Victor Luftig (2-7). On how Victorian women writers employ literary structures to carve spaces for female freedom, offering the woman writer a position from which to negotiate “with and between the dominant images of female identity,” see Tess Cosslett (4). On the “complexities and contradictions” of a “multiplicity of same-sex desires [that have] always existed,” between women, and the metaphorical vocabulary these women employed to describe their intimate lives to themselves, see Martha Vicinus (xxiii). On the “history of sexuality and gender” present in Victorian material culture and literature that demonstrates the simultaneous operation of various kinds of “relationship between women […] work[ing] in tandem with heterosexual exchange and patriarchal gender norms,” see Sharon Marcus (21).

On recognition in the mirror stage and the split subject, see Elizabeth Grosz Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction. Also, Christopher Lane’s The Burdens of Intimacy explores the ambivalence attendant to intimacy, but casts that ambivalence as separate from intimacy, rather than a differently inflected intimacy, as I do here. His work directly informs my own construal of the ambivalent recognition inherent in intimacy.

Works Cited


Hild, Allison. "Community/Communication in Woolf's the Waves: The Language of Motion."


