Chapter Three

"By what name are we to call death?" : Death as Community

The problem of mourning has been considered a central motif for modernist writers. As Sandra Kemp argues, "The modernist exploration of narrative incoherence and ambiguity, the modernist pursuit of the problems of identity and authority, was founded, then, in anxiety about creativity, in doubt that art is life-giving…From this perspective the key metaphor for writing is not making but mourning" (3). Beginning with the premise that all writing is of the nature of "mourning," a way of acknowledging and recapturing someone who is not there, this chapter will examine the various relations that *The Waves* establishes between the six characters' responses to Percival's death, and more importantly, the death of the other characters outside this group. As Woolf said, "I meant to write about death, only life came breaking in as usual" (*Diary*, Vol. II, 211), given the interruption of life, the only possible language about death is one that conceals its artificiality in an illusion of death as it *is* there. Her rhetoric of death in this novel overall manifests both subtlety and ambiguity when considering the way all the other characters' deaths align the living themselves with the ultimate fate of human mortality. Hermione Lee presents his version of what appears to be Woolf's idea of death in her works: "Though almost all her novels are dominated by a death," writes Lee, "in almost all the death is not written in" (qtd. in Rose 8). It is tempting to associate this generalization that "the death is not written in" with the indirect representation of Percival's death in *The Waves*, which "occurs offstage" (Dick, 70). In large measure, however, Woolf would refuse such an association indirectly as she wrote, "[T]he modern had never written anything one wanted to read about death… 'and now can never mourn, can never mourn…From the contagion of the world's slow stain'…for there are moments when it seems utterly futile…simply one doesn't believe, thought Clarissa, any more in God" ("Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street," 155). In a sense this passage brings home to us the fact that Lee's

statement has never ever been about anything but mourning. For Woolf, such a refusal to mourn—death *not written in* as it is, death as "the absent presence" (Rose, 6)—results variously in distortion, idealization, or insensitivity.

In the relation between being "not written in" and being "offstage," between absence and presence, we see repetitively a relation to all the others' deaths that we understand as mourning. In a tangent manner, ranging over a wide array of topics and cultural spheres, Christine Froula's essay which reads *Mrs. Dalloway* as "a communal postwar elegy" (126) serves as an illuminating example of Woolf's effort to counteract the modernist "refusal to mourn." Thus recognizing this novel's "aspiration to public elegy" (130) writ small in its characters' private lives, the discussion here might culminate in some reflection on whether modernist mourning as "a communal grief" (Froula 129) offers viable strategies for responding the public culture of mourning following the First World War. In doing so, Froula attempts to endorse and lay claim to positive practices of modernist mourning which "embraces the world as it is" (158). Indeed, Woolf herself does not remain passive in the face of these tragic versions of the modernist period. As Tammy Clewell makes a point of emphasizing in his reading of *Jacob's Room* and *To the Lighthouse*, the war's legacy has prompted Woolf to articulate a "positive reinvention of mourning" (198). And these critics have cogently synthesized the ways in which the association between War's impact and Woolf's engagement with mourning is formed. However, this is an argument that requires a rethinking of the tendency to bring in a postwar context to guarantee the mourning project. Such approaches tend to falter when confronted by Woolf's *The Waves,* as Susan Dick indicates, whose historical context of the narrative is not told (68).

The Waves ultimately will not sustain such an interpretive approach that demands historical immediacy. To focus on the psychological states of these characters in the postwar moments, I suggest, may bypass this novel's own tendency to foreground the practice of

mourning that cannot be accounted for in such narrow historic terms. Within the terms of Woolf's diachronic horizon, this novel's relation to mourning bespeaks the profound way in which what Paul Sheehan calls "a doublecoded concern with diachrony, registering history even as it attempts to transcend it" (13). Jacqueline Rose has explored in a sustained way what it means to posit a form of mourning *per se* in Woolf. To recite Rose, "Private and public trauma, death for Virginia Woolf is, one could say, *more than* elegy, *more than* mourning, *more than* a fear or pull to which she finally succumbs" (6; emphasis mine). Rose's argument thereby reveals that a lot is riding on this excessive moment of "more than." More relevant still: to what extent shall we imagine this "more than" beyond our current conception of mourning and death in *The Waves*?

In developing this reading of *The Waves*, I propose to show how the characters' mourning about Percival's death not simply ponders over the loss, but allows themselves to be haunted by the specter of *those* departed. In this sense, their regret over their ontological absence from the moment of death of the other, evidenced in the recurrent refigurings of the moment when death occurs, may be understood as the connecting thread beneath the seemingly random juxtaposition of those "meaningless deaths" (110). Percival's death thus functions as a key structuring device, its aftermath confirming not only their rapport with him but, most importantly, their rapport with the others outside and beyond this group. It is therefore an initiating event rather than a culminating theme. Following the argument of the Levinasian subjectivity as responsibility in the previous chapter, I would like to read this call for responsibility for the others' deaths as the call for a certain kind of community. Moving through a reconsideration of the politics of their friendship, notably their ability—and inability—to come together, this chapter will emphasize the dialectical ambiguities between the subject and community. With its theoretical route through Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of "a community of finitude" (27), a central question raised by my reading of *The Waves* is whether

Woolf's attempt to integrate an ethical dimension into the practice of friendship successfully and credibly achieves an alterative ideal of death as community. As Woolf never fails to underline the restrictive aspects of communal identity and institutions, I suggest, *community* shall be read as a term that allows her to move away from any sentimental or moral rhetoric without ceding the ethical sphere entirely to those social and political reforms which employ such rhetoric.

I. Politics of Friendship

In *The Waves* Virginia Woolf illustrates an ambivalent engagement with the issue of friendship.[16] The reconfiguration of belonging and resistance within the friendship among this group gives the reader an access to understanding a complex relation of difference and its even more complex ethical implications. Looking at Woolf's strategies for maintaining separation within the union of friendship, we find patterns of compromise and cohesion as well as betrayal and subversion of control. This situation is especially acute when the friendship is mostly presented both as pitched battle and as passionate love. This landscape of

[16] For an analysis keenly attuned to the "formative function" (170) of friendship between Percival and the six characters, see Robert Kiely, *Beyond Egotism: The Fiction of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and D. H. Lawrence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980). Yet, for my reading, the sketch provided in the following passage tends to bypass the challenge posed by Percival's death—an event which occasions these characters' recognition that "their pictures of him are not identical" matters a lot:

> Like most modernists, Woolf was all too convinced by Romantic subjectivist psychology. And though she could depict characters reveling in their freedom to invent their worlds, she had a horror, rooted in devastating experience, of losing touch with the world beyond self. It is no joke, therefore, to say that Percival is like a god, since he possesses the power, momentarily, to draw his friends out of their isolation into a world of meaning—that is, *shared* experience. *That their pictures of him are not identical does not matter*; he provides them with a reason for gathering, a release from themselves, an occasion for talk. Their conversation is like prayer: its meaning is to be found not in its contents but in its form as an act of faith in the presence of the another. (179; emphasis mine)

For this reason, it does not fully make sense to read this novel, as Kiley has done, simply as the narrative exposition of these characters' friendship. In an explicit way, their friendship proves intimately connected with alterity of death. Through the case of Percival's death, my reading aims to reconstruct Woolf's distinctive understanding of the possibility of a community of exposure to death. This statement thus reflects upon Jean-Luc Nancy's sense of death as community in general. The theoretical juncture is reached since community, for Nancy, is something to be explored in the experience of seeing a friend die. This is why I believe friendship is an important theme for *The Waves* in the sense that it introduces the issue of death as community.

ambivalence has an ethical and political bearing[17] when the significance of the silent character, Percival, is brought to the fore. On one level, friendship for these characters is capable of a self-overcoming that enables attention to others, and thereby lays the ground for a Levinasian response to the call of the others. Interestingly, however, the revolving relation of the six characters around Percival is seen as illusory, pretentious, hierarchical, and even violent. By and large friendship in *The Waves* is a fearsome and violent exchange, but it is also a transition into interdependence and solidarity. As we shall see, this doubleness of attachment and sundering might be best glimpsed in their responses to the centripetal force of Percival.

For the characters friendship functions as a powerful "magnet" (149), a centripetal force, to bring them together. The very horizon of a totalized or communal identity is thus protected by their apotheosis of Percival, or, according to Neville, "mystic sense of adoration" (37) of him. The insistence on maintaining ties to Percival as their shared past, derives from the fact that a center is needed as a primary condition for this group. Louis speaks of the unifying force of Percival as the following: "It is Percival…who makes us aware that these attempts to say, 'I am this, I am that'… are false" (98). What is important to recognize here, insofar as it characterizes Woolf's approach to friendship more generally, is that the I as the locus of power or privilege within this relationship is not static and hence illusory. Rather, the I is largely in response to an underlying anxiety of friendship to be divorced from what it used to be, as Bernard says, "Here am I shedding one of my life-skins" (134). Both Louis's and Bernard's statements help articulate this crucial affirmative moment of the reconciliation of the otherness. Without Percival, then, these characters would have been obliterated by a brutal world. Revealingly, Bernard suggests, "we who yelped like jackals biting at each

[17] Judith Lee has made the related argument that in *The Waves* "…the consistency and resolve with which Woolf insisted upon the politics of individual existence and private life suggest that even this most personal and lyrical narrative is important to understanding the often problematic connection between here ethics and aesthetics." See Judith Lee, " 'This Hideous Shaping and Moulding:' War and *The Waves*," *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth*, 180.

other's heels now assume the sober and confident air of soldiers in the presence of their captain" (88). Rhoda also notes, "Like minnows, we who had been shooting this way, that way, all shot round him when he came. Like minnows, conscious of the presence of a great stone, we undulate and eddy contentedly" (98). The ambiguous negotiation of contradiction in the passages moves in a centripetal direction toward Percival. For these characters, the significance of Percival breaks down their individual alienation and thereby fosters a sense of kinship and reconciliation between the world and them. To the extent that "[Percival] has imposed order" (88), as Neville is acutely aware of: "But without Percival there is no solidarity. We are silhouettes, hollow phantoms moving mistily without a background" (87). Against the colossal Percival as illuminating background, by means of which they attempt to define themselves, the presences of these characters are made possible by Percival.

Yet another reading of this silhouette effect implies that the solid shadowy silhouettes tend to interrupt the background of brightness. In this sense, their apotheosis of Percival has everywhere tried to maintain, rather than compensate for, the imprecise boundaries that surround each of them. This reading also proposes to see in *The Waves* no more unity than a conflicting field of relations. Even among this group, it appears that there can be no creation of an "us" without the designation of a "them," which can slip easily into enemy or "conspirators" (101), as Louis and Rhoda posit themselves. Their secret asides occur only in the parenthesis: "Look, Rhoda," said Louis, "they have become nocturnal, rapt. Their eyes are like moth's wings moving so quickly that they do not seem to move at all" (100). And Rhoda replies, "The procession passes. And while it passes, Louis, we are aware of downfalling, we forebode decay" (101). Woolf's use of a dialogue enclosed in the parenthesis paradoxically amplifies the ostensibly subordinated relationship of the dyad of Louis and Rhoda to the rest of the group. This moment may seem arbitrary but indicative of the process by which the individual character hesitates before being fully integrated into their friendship.

Bernard's insistence on the theatrical and plastic nature of identity also testifies to this tendency: "We are not simple as our friends would have us to meet their needs. Yet love is simple" (65), or, "...then it becomes clear that I am not one and simple, but complex and many. Bernard, in public, bubbles; in private, is secretive" (55).

Given the complexity of the silhouette effect, it is important to note that their friendship is a bond that is always changing, always other to itself. We must not presume that these positions will remain constant. These disparate articulations invite the possibility that their friendship might be based not on achieved immersion but rather on enduring difference and distance. As Bernard inquiries, "…Rhoda and Louis, desiring company, certainty, contact. I wondered…what was their relationship? What did they say alone?" (195). While the characters have been stressing the possibility of friendship as union held out by Percival's unifying force, their desire for union in may ways ironically make sure that we would never lose sight of the internal difference and resistance. By this reading, despite the knowledge that "There is always somebody, when we come together, and the edges of meeting are still sharp, who refuses to be submerged" (150), Neville seeks to disavow Susan's defensive gestures through an attempted direct address, "I talk to impress Susan. Listen to me, Susan" (150). The negative effects of such a desire to connect, to "submerge," threaten Rhoda profoundly. Always on the outside of this group, Rhoda accuses these characters of abandonment, "I shall fall alone through this thin sheet into gulfs of fire. And you will not help me. More cruel than the old torturers, you will let me fall, and will tear me to pieces when I am fallen" (159). Rhoda later chooses to refuse her troublesome emotions with this group by invoking her "Empresses dream. She even imagines to announce, "'I am your Empress, people'" (40). Rhoda's defensive imagination is, however, permanently marked by that illusive sense of belonging: "It is not solid; it gives me no satisfaction—this Empress dream. It leaves me, now that it has fallen, here in the passage rather shivering" (41). This is

for her the only form of human alliance, when she could be “fearless,” and “conquer” (40).

In the same vein, Louis’s direct and binding recourse to “the depths of the world” (8) or the “Nile” (91) thousand years ago derives from the fact that alienation is perceived as a primary condition, one which he must try to mitigate through privileging imaginary associations with botanical “roots.” Particularly troubled by his origin: “My father is a banker in Brisbane and I speak with an Australian accent” (14), his own frustrating experience with the “neatness” and “Australian accent” (14) lights up this tendency to imagine his origin to be somewhere otherwise than “up here”: “My root goes down to the depths of the world” (8). While Louis in his hiding is clearly meant to be associated with aloof moments of observation, his attempt to dissociate himself from this group is often thwarted. It is important that we first encounter Louis in the company of the group when he hears the call, “‘Louis! Louis! Louis!’ they shout. But they cannot see me” (8) and he says, “[Jinny] has found me” (9). And there he is. This episode reflects Louis’s anxiety that friendship poses a threat to his ideal form of belonging as hiding under cover of grass and tress—“some order…which makes reason everlastingly” (28). His distanced observation shall therefore never “endure” (28), or quench the desire for his self-divisions of this circle. Louis says, “But while I admire Susan and Percival, I hate the others, because it is for them I do these antics, smoothing my hair, concealing my accent” (91). He can only connect only with those who are seen to occupy a similar or opposite position: Susan who feels uncomfortable with her “shabby clothes, [her] square-tipped finger-nails” x(87), and Percival who feels nothing of “these antics.” Similarly, Neville once admits the distance between him and these friends: “To whom can I expose the urgency of my own passion?” (37). Unable to cross this distance especially between Bernard and him, Neville adds: “…I feel my own solitude. He sees everyone with blurred edges. Hence I cannot talk to him of Percival” (37). Indeed, being deeply frustrated, he ends up concluding: “Nobody guessed the need I had to offer my being

to one god; and perish, and disappear" (37). Ultimately, their friendship proves once again suspended between their need for a love based on symmetrical and reciprocal relations, and their equally sincere desire to break away from it.

It is my view that Woolf's concern with the politics of friendship is played out most extensively and tellingly through her delineation of a friendship that draws together and tears apart. The passages quoted above thus identify their relation to Percival as a concentration or centripetal deepening of their participation in the world, whereas this relation contracts and compresses. This is never an easy and completed process, and the novel is ruthless in its portrayals of the straining relationship to which Jinny refers as "[b]ut our hatred is almost indistinguishable from our love" (98). Any friendship they cultivate or may wish to cultivate must thus be a delicate mixture of love and hate, consolation and opposition. In this light, Bernard's inquiry is worthy of a closer consideration: "We are drawn into this communion by some deep, some common emotion. Shall we call it, conveniently, "love"?… No, that is too small a name" (91). With their multiple demands that cannot be brought into agreement, but in which each of them has a stake, Bernard's statement clearly testifies to a genuine tension shaping their different responses to Percival. His recognition that "love" is too small a name ultimately reveals the true depths or expanses of *friendship*, one with ramifications for Woolf's immense ethico-political investment. As we will see, their ambivalent *friendship* will further inform and interrogate their responses to Percival's death, and, ultimately, to the deaths of the others outside this group. The challenge Woolf poses for the six characters, in the realm of friendship, then, is to imagine the death of the other in a way that does not allow the death to be assimilated for the purpose of this community. The six-faceted responses to the death of the other thus allow the reader publicly to imagine their inherently private experience of death. And having taken on this ethical responsibility, Bernard is able to see clearly that for their friendship, "No, [love] is too small a name"—which Woolf reflects in the

face of *death*. Accordingly, Friendship in *The Waves*, for Woolf, illuminates the (impossible) basis of death as community.

Into Percival's Death

The death of the God-like Percival in *The Waves* is the charged site for disparate articulations informing Woolfian criticism, which is always trying to negotiate the challenges or disruptions caused by his unceremonious death. Percival's silence not merely comes to give expression of the cloaked difference hidden within this circle of friends, but registers their utter inability to accommodate his identity. Percival's ambiguous condition is reflected in the extent to which each of the six characters maps his or her desires onto him, assuming understanding of her experience, motivations without specific knowledge. Indeed, the presence of Percival is always affirmed in the negative, or is, as Jessica Berman suggests, "missing before the fact [of his death]" (148). By refusing to accept his death, "no it is not Percival" (56), the characters bring up every possible scenario to establish the disavowal of Percival's presence. Here the question of Percival as a figure of the centralization of authority reaches its limit. We might say that from the start his charismatic leadership is counteracted by the "communal misapprehension" of the rest of the group (Berman 148). As Berman unfailingly introduces the six characters' capacity to undercut his presence, the character Percival with his extreme risk-taking, beloved yet unknown to all, cannot stand synecdochally for a fascist ideal of a charismatic leader[18] against the context of the 1930s

[18] My understanding of *The Waves* has been influenced by Jessica Berman's trenchant treatment of Woolf's anti-fascist sensitivity in *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism and the Politics of Community* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). In her analysis of this novel, Berman proposes that *The Waves* resists fascism through imagining a community apart from the hegemonic models of family or nation, through rejecting a charismatic leader around which any possible totalitarian community revolves, through enlisting "gendered images of active natural power to contradict the ordered might of fascism" (141). Berman traces in particular Woolf's relation to the Women's Co-operative Guild to frame the political context in the 1930s. My reading will pursue the implications of Woolf's ambivalence toward community (as distinct from the broader concept of a unified body of individuals) as well as her more nuanced treatment of death in *The Waves;* these two elements of the novel are left largely unexplored by Berman, who argues that "the group of characters that make up *The Waves* ultimately construct their community without [Percival]" (149). As my discussion will show, it is not

when the fear of fascism was widespread. Berman's sensitive reading thereby orients us toward "the possibility of community not only without charismatic leaders but also without any structure like that of state, nation, or party" (149).

Such a view, unfortunately, misses one of the most important underlying investments of Woolf's thought: Percival remains a remarkably empowering identification for this group. Acknowledgement of this affective aspect is crucial to any comprehensive understanding of Woolf's conception of a community in this novel. As is made clear, if the ascendancy of Percival is only meant to quench their rage for order—a view that informs Berman's analysis—one is impelled to ask: why is Bernard's knowledge that Louis's "ascendancy was resented, as Percival's was adored" (173)? How are we supposed to read this, while Louis offers the promise as well? What difference would result from our reading of the *community* if what binds this group is more than the "monolithic" (5) quality of Percival? Would we be inclined to read the "communal misapprehension" of him as more than the negation of Percival? What holds them together if this apparent center is illusory or "empty" (111)? That is, perhaps Percival's death does not so much provide the basis for a reassuring communal cohesion as simply uncovers intimations of shared morality painful to contemplate. So understood, Berman's argument still confines itself to the negative rhetoric of these characters, bypassing the recognition that Percival's death is crucial in heightening the threat to this group that "All deaths are one death" (121).

In the following, I begin with the assumption that Woolf's vision of community principally looks to something broader than their communal mourning over Percival's death. If Percival's death threatens to shatter the solidarity of this group, I argue, instead of what Berman argues, "their common experience… of [Percival's] absence," it is indeed "their common feelings with death" (189), that dissolve separate "sorrows" in an evocation of

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accurately to place Percival wholly outside the community that Woolf has in mind.

ethically inclined plural “we.” Insofar as Percival’s death shadows the characters who survive him, his death elicits the communal thoughts on all past and future death of the other which coalesce to expose the mournful foundation of this community. This is not the same, of course, as claiming that the cohesion of *this* community of the six characters is defined by its particular bereavement of Percival. Rather, as we will see, to Percival’s death, this community can only express itself through “the mind’s eye” that sees beyond the self and between oneself and another. I would like to suggest with Jean-Luc Nancy that the community in *The Waves* reveals itself through death. To quote Nancy, “Community is revealed in the death of others; hence it is always revealed to others. Community is what takes place always through others and for others” (15). That is, the vision of community Woolf conjures in *The Waves* does not eradicate death; it is sustained by death.

II. “Death and again death” (101) : “All Deaths *Are* One Death” (121)

The ontological dilemma to be absent from the death of the other, as an aporia each character must tolerate, proves an overriding theme in this novel. Almost all the characters in *The Waves* may be defined in relation to such a singular moment of absence as that which fundamentally problematizes the common experience of death. As Nancy puts it, “I recognize that in the death of the other there is nothing recognizable. And this is how sharing—and finitude—can be inscribed…” (33). In other words, these characters are shown to be engaged in the subjunctive mood of the imagination as ethical practices *as if* they *were* there. Through the ever belated refigurings of the singular moment of death, on the one hand, the characters are dawned by the impossibility of any shared communication of the other’s death. Woolf is on this point careful to offset the suggestion of hubris of imagination, as these characters can never be bound in a form of communion, for the impossible communication of the singular death. On the other, their imperative to continually interpret and re-impart to themselves this

ontological absence has an ethical implication. This imperative, for Woolf, might serve as a basis for a rethinking of community—committed to a redemptive inscription to register death, singular and private, which may pass into nothingness. Woolf's vision of community therefore grows out of that very insight, and out of the belief that death both divides and shares, in the double sense of *partager* in Nancy's work: namely, death both splits members of the community apart from one another and gathers them in their being together with exposure to it.

To illuminate more clearly the broader set of claims I advance above, I turn now to a reading of Louis's words, "All deaths *are* one death" in the sense of its dynamic immediacy. That is, death for Woolf must be understood in terms of events and movements rather than in terms of structures and meanings. For this reason, it does not fully make sense to read *The Waves* simply as a narrative reckoning or record of death *as* reality in everyday life. The key subtleties to our discussion of death in its immediacy are writ large in the "death among apple trees" (17), well before Percival's death by the mid-point of the novel. The character Neville finds himself exposed to the proximity between life and death, hence prompted to "recover" the story not so much of the death of the other as the story of his absence. In his evocation of the plural "we," Neville gives the community the proofs of sharing, and of the impossibility of sharing.

The uncanny and disturbing proximity between life and death is to be detected in Neville's encounter with "death among apple trees" (17). His encounter with the alterity of death is an example of those potent moments in Woolf, the moments when death as reality is forced up close to the surface, when something representational like "this stricture, this rigidity," is most likely to arise. At first Neville's response appears to limit the reader's attention to an exclusive world visible in his naming of "death among apple trees": "I shall call this stricture, this rigidity, 'death among apple trees' for ever. There were the floating,

pale-grey clouds; and the immitigable tree; the implacable tree…" (17). But the impassable passage of the difference between the living and the dead cannot be bridged: "...I was unable to pass by. There was an obstacle. 'I cannot surmount this unintelligible obstacle,' I said" (17-8; emphasis mine). In other words, "death among apple trees" conjures not so much an image as a conceptual blockage or difficulty. For the problem of which I shall be speaking now is Neville's felt need to "recover, *if I can*…what I felt when I heard about the dead man through the swing-door last night when cock was shoving in and out the dampers" (17; emphasis mine). On the one hand, Neville is assured now that this grotesque juxtaposition is in every manner real, as this dead man is "fixed" (17) in the innocence of the context where nothing in the objective landscape has apparently changed. Whereas everything in the background remains entirely regular and intact, Neville's conditional "if" in the very phrase, to "recover, if I can" further witnesses Woolf's adamant refusal to allow any concretized illustration of the death of the other even thus named: "'death among apple trees' for ever." Ceding to the conditional "if I can," the confidence with which Neville holds the belief in the recovery of the event of death has already been shaken. The death of the other thus forestalls Neville and the plural "we" from ascribing to it any common nouns. As is made clear, the death of the other befalls Neville and he can only speak thereafter of what he loses, of how he cannot "pass by," even as he would render it communicable as "'death among apple trees' for ever."

On the other hand, how far can we get toward explaining Neville's use of the plural "we," and "all of us," when he muses, to repeat, "'I cannot surmount this unintelligible obstacle,' I said. And the others passed on. But *we* are doomed, *all of us*, by the apple tress, by the immitigable tree which *we* cannot pass?" (17-8; emphasis mine). It will become clear in due course that in affiliating himself with the plural "we," Neville is up to a certain point of engaging in the act of sharing. It is worth considering in what way precisely Neville's

imperative to “recover, if I can” resembles Bernard’s mourning over Percival’s death: “What torments one is the horrible activity of the mind’s eye—how [Percival] fell, how he looked, where they carried him…” (187). There is certainly an apparent paradox embedded here. For if it is simply not possible to retrieve or recover the singularity of death, because death as an event has either already happened, preceding the narrative as its dubious and distant cause, or else is perennially on the verge of occurring (as the premonitory death sign of “cold urn” that Louis and Rhoda lean over), how might these characters’ belated gesture to re-enact or rehearse the scene of death be understood? Indeed, their mourning over the death of the other involves a tense negotiation between proximity and distance when they tell of an occurrence that happened to them and to them alone –to an experience they have traversed or that has traversed them. From start to finish, these characters have already found themselves “in between” life and death. What are the implications of being “in between” and how is this liminal position burgeoning with meaning, or precisely with the meaning of *community*? Bernard’s utterance, on this score, has both a direct and an oblique referent: “But the silence weighs on me—the perpetual solicitation of the eye” (112).

Part of these characters’ urge to “do penance” (113) over the death of the other emerges with full force to unmask their life as ultimately an alibi-story. The overriding tension in their world “ransacked to its uttermost ends” (126) follows not so much from their imperfect representation of death which they will never be able to bring to presence as from their absolute *absence* from the scene of death. In a very explicit way, for instance, Bernard has made every effort to compensate for the singular moment from which he is absent: “Those are the thoughts that will wake me leaping in anguish in the middle of the night—the crimes for which one would do penance all the markets of the world bareheaded; that *one* did not go to Hampton Court that day” (113; emphasis mine). The “mind’s eye” in and out of the picture of how Percival loses his life notwithstanding, Bernard realizes the singularity of Percival’s

death when he associates the death with something in the possession of Percival: “Into this crashed death—Percival’s” (186). Most importantly, Bernard’s statement bespeaks the impossibility of sharing in the other’s death. In an attempt to articulate what cannot be shared, however, his recourse to this indefinite and anonymous pronoun, “one,” instead of “I,” is not gratuitous. “One” is a pronoun which is used to refer to “anyone” —an identity on behalf of any individual. This pronoun shift nonetheless opens up the possibility of locating a common space for what these characters all *share* in their absence or separations from the death of the other.

Paradoxically, what is held in common here is not an experience of death that could be shared by other individuals. Death, by definition, does not belong to them nor be shared even if they are kept by company as witnesses. For all these reasons, before death of the other, these characters, as D. Diane Davis interprets Nancy, “find communion across the exposition of their own *unsharable finitud*e, which becomes the very condition for their commonality” (“Pre/Text”; emphasis mine). As Nancy advises us, it is from “the experience of finitude” (31) that each individual of this community is further separated and yet brought together. As I have exposited, this experience of finitude is made possible, for Woolf, only because of the characters’ having seen death in others, when they see their own “unsharable finitude” mirrored in others’ present condition. And that is when Bernard walking on the street concludes it with the observation, “Men clutch their newspapers a little tighter, as our wind sweeps them, *envisaging death*” (80; emphasis mine). Death envisaged is therefore always *of* the other; as Adam Wasson succinctly explains, “it is not our own death, and we can share it only insofar as our death is not our own either” (183). Hence death divides and gathers. As Neville evokes “we” rather than “I” in recalling his experience of “death among apple trees,” it is first and foremost meant to recall this unsharable death as community to which he and the others might be said to belong. For its arbitrary interruption, death thus exposes

community to itself, to its interrogation regarding its members who are not completely themselves.

III. What Is (Lost) Between us?[19] : All Deaths Are *One* Death

I have been stressing the possibilities of the sense of being-in-common held out when Neville reaches the limit of his knowledge of "mortal truth" (Nancy 15) that all deaths *ar*e one death. I argue the central concern behind Woolf's elaboration of the mortal truth is how to conceive community as emerging around the experience of finitude. That is, Woolf's attitude toward community in *The Waves* must partly be reconstructed in light of her concern with death of the other, as these characters repeatedly inquire: what is between us; or rather, what is lost between us? A number of critics have explored Woolf's attitude toward community. In general, this line of reading provides a more comprehensive understanding of "common consciousness"[20] that informs Woolf's ideal of community. As Douglas John Hewitt points out,

> Throughout, surfacing in various forms, there is a Protean consciousness which weaves the whole together...Virginia Woolf seems to be implying that there is a shared experience, a collective awareness, which breaks down the barriers between individualities, so that in solitude powers for which we hardly have names can move us. She implies in *The Waves* (1931) that there is some kind of *common consciousness* which can make people feel that they are all parts of some larger, undifferentiated being. (118; emphasis mine)

[19] This subtitle is borrowed from Laura Doyle, "Introduction: What's Between Us?" in *Modern Fiction Studies* 50. 1 (2004).

[20] For a similar discussion of the variant "common consciousness" or "group consciousness" arising in Woolf's novel, see Allen McLaurin, "Consciousness and Group Consciousness," in *Virginia Woolf, A Centenary Perspective*, ed. Eric Warner (London : Macmillan Press, 1984), 28-40.

But one would not want to overemphasize Woolf's communal leanings and consequently fail to register an underlying investment in these characters' "common feelings with death" (189). The reading of *The Waves* I will offer might be summed up in a more systematic explanation by Brenda R. Silver: "There is, however, some question as to whether her affirmation of community is social as well as cultural, and if so, in what way" (297). It is precisely this line of argument that I will be pursuing hereafter. The discussion proceeds as follows. First, I examine the way in which the characters attest to their being exposed to the "being-finite itself" (Nancy 26) that would allow them to invoke the community to which they are called. As we shall see, they find themselves to be implicated always already in a different world that cannot just be conceived but is, for better and for worse, a re-presentation of Nancy's claimed ontology of "being-with," being-with-one-another. In this sense, secondly, the entire community is not read as one enclosed within their mourning over Percival's death. Rather, through Louis's saying "All deaths are one death" (121), Woolf expresses her own deep belief that our "mind's eye" helps overcome, *however partially,* the vast distance implicated in such nearness of our finitude in the being-together. This attention both to the death of Percival and to the death of the others can therefore be read as instantiating a Levinasian ethics of responsibility which offers a passage to the political. Ethically, it is not enough to give one's responsibility to the beloved Percival. Rather, the Levinasian others need to be conjoined with Nancy's call for a certain kind of community as that which carries responsibility toward, or to quote Nancy, "the way we exist together" ("Finite History," 168). As I see it, the challenge for these characters exposed to the deaths of Percival, Rhoda, the stranger, and those anonymous, is to allow this sense of death as community to inform their practice of mourning. Ultimately, this community comes to occupy the place of the unrepresentable, hence outside of the order of representation, and thus exposes the death of the other as the ground of the political—it lies deeper than all reconciliation of differences or memory.

An underlying issue will be the understanding of the political as it relates to our topic. Such a community nonetheless requires that these characters exist in a disjunctive relation to, as we shall see in Jinny's case, the commonality of a community that would protect and maintain something artificially shared. The dimension of the political will be seen in the irresolution of differences and resistance, or as Todd May puts it, "what makes people's lives worthwhile" (22). That is, if we are to configure the special demands of the community in *The Waves* in this way, and as Woolf suggests that this community demands more than any concrete political constructions, then this community demands a politics of "nonforgetting," as Lyotard terms it, which I will elaborate more later. For this community of finitude to rearticulate itself, the absence or the non-present that eludes memory must be taken into account in its political engagements. In making this argument, Nancy's exposition of the community can significantly be brought to bear on Woolf's *The Waves* in order to illuminate further what the "mind's eye" says—or does not say—about the thought of community and its excessive relation to the political.

A primary example is the passage when Neville looks at a boy on the street: "That boy almost lost his footing as he leapt on the bus. Percival fell; was killed; is buried; and I watch people passing; holding tight to the rails of omnibuses; determined to save their lives" (108). This passage can be read as Woolf's most forthright espousal of Neville's capacity for "the mind's eye," the imaginative vision. This imaginative eye is an ethical eye in the sense that the subject is *forced* to[21] acquire an attitude of openness toward the other/s other than Percival. Neville's wider vision is, then, juxtaposed with the boy and the man's "death among apple trees": "I will stand for one moment beneath the immitigable tree, along with the man whose throat is cut" (108). This is, I take it, quite a Levinasian political moment fraught with

[21] When writing the passive "is forced to," I have in mind Bernard's bemoaning: "*What torments one* is the horrible activity of the mind's eye—how [Percival] fell, how he looked, where they carried him…" (187; emphasis mine). The passive in Bernard's case assimilates him to the narrative activity precisely through a figure of neutrality ("What torments *one*…") that also allows him the long view.

the difficulty with the entrance of the third onto the scene. As the third person, namely "another other" (RB 205) intervenes into the original ethical relationship with the other, for Levinas, "the self-sufficient 'I-Thou' is displaced" (TI 213). William Paul Simmons brings to the fore the implication of the third in Levinasian ethics: the I "must respond to more than one Other. It must decide whom to respond to first. This decision leads the ego from the an-archical, ethical realm to the realm of politics" (83). Otherwise, "the ego can become infatuated with the Other to the point of ignoring all others" (92).

Levinas's insistence on the priority both of the other and the third, the other Others, is inspiring, if ultimately somewhat arrested in its self-division. The self-division ultimately produces a too-stark opposition, or as Simons puts it, "oscillation" (83), between the needful myopia of face-to-face relationship and the diachronic attention[22] to the third party who is "*next to* the one who is an other to me" (RB 205; emphasis mine). A way beyond such a dilemma is perhaps most suggestively hinted in *The Waves* at these characters' responses to Percival's death—"All deaths are one death" (121). As we have seen, their capacity for sympathy and awareness of their "impossible communion" (Nancy, 15) becomes the basis, not the limit, for a larger understanding that remains open to the *communal nature* of the experience of death. In a community as such, Bataille suggests, "If it sees its fellow-being die, a living being can subsist only *outside itself…*" (qtd. in Nancy 15). This statement is realized in Bernard's remark as if they would continue to proceed under partial reprieve from death:

> He was thrown, riding in a race, and when I came along Shaftesbury Avenue to-night, those insignificant and scarcely formulated faces that bubble up out of the doors of the Tube, and may obscure Indians, and people dying of famine and disease, and women who have been cheated, and whipped dogs and crying

[22] For a symptomatic attempt to finesse this diachronic attention to the other and the third, see Robert Bernasconi, when he interprets Levinas's idea of the third as "…the third already looks at me in the apparition of the Other" (85) in "Third Party. Levinas on he Intersection of the Ethical and the Political," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 30 (1): 76-87.

children—*all these seemed to me bereft*. (172; emphasis mine)

The viewpoint of "the mind's eye" is something more than the aggregate of perspectives that combine to render a full range of experiences. Beyond this, Woolf appeals to the wide and diachronic view in her conception of a community *per se*, where to share with "those insignificant and scarcely formulated faces" is always already to be dislocated. Rather, it is "a sharing of exposure in which the borders of the individual are neither clearly drawn nor completely effaced" (May 33). The borders are neither clearly drawn, for Bernard's remark is read thus, "It is strange that the dead leap out on us at street coroners or in dreams" (194), nor completely effaced, otherwise "the dead" can only refer to Percival, hence the redundancy of "the mind's eye."

Yet in *The Waves* the moments of a response to "the dead" are persistently rendered illegible by the social forces that make "the dead" unlikely to emerge except as "shells, bones and silences" (81). Given their responses, the following question must be asked with awe, respect, and a recognition of the vital relevance of the political: "If the concept of community is central to any viable approach to understanding what makes people's lives worthwhile, then how shall we conceive community?" (May 22). By Bernard's account, it is certainly the case, as I will confirm, that any full treatment of Woolf's conception of community, then, must take into account the dimension that brings the political ("what makes people's lives worthwhile") to bear upon the question of death of the other. Such an attempt to bring their private mourning over death within the orbit of the political is evident in Woolf's notion of community. The preliminary point made about Woolf's imagining of community is found in Julie Robin Solomon's argument, in its terminologically and conceptually unsystematic determination. To quote Solomon: "Woolf wants to preserve a space of anonymity and indefiniteness within institutional structure from which new notions of self and society will emerge continually" (345). While Woolf's ultimate conception of the "new notions of self

and society" at issue here may be unclear, Solomon's statement testifies to a genuine tension shaping these characters' responses to what binds them together as it tears them apart.

IV. Community: "A Purely Physical Statement"[23]

What Bernard's wider vision takes in are therefore those "fabulous presences" (202)—lost to view in the social institutions, as Jinny conceives it:

> Thus, in a few seconds, deftly, adroitly, we decipher the hieroglyphs written on other people's faces... Between us, you say, we *could* build cathedrals, dictate policies, condemn men to death, and administer the affairs of several public offices. The common fund of experience is very deep…Life comes; life goes; we make life. So you say. (125; emphasis mine)

It is precisely this kind of self-definition or legitimation that Nancy's rethinking of community precludes. Despite the catalogue invocations of an experience of social community, Jinny immediately retracts the totality of institutional embodiment with the comment: "*But* we who live in the body see with the body's imagination things in outline" (125; emphasis mine). For her, this communal experience is founded not in the institutions of tradition or the life of the polis, an eminently civic experience. This "between-us" statement also reflects upon Woolf's sense of the communal nature in general: it is to imagine a community *not* based on relationships of power and domination. As Neville protests, "We are not judges. We are not called upon to torture our fellows with thumbscrews and irons; we are not called upon to mount pulpits and lecture them on pale Sunday afternoons" (140). One of the perceptive critics has established this similar tendency in Nancy's work: "a community's nature cannot be straightforwardly signified. That is to say, one cannot say what the

[23] My contention is that such a subtitle does not imply that there is a common "body" of community, or any organicist notion of a community that is absorption into oneness. The community of our concern here is rather a community that lives to share the absence of any a common being. In this respect, the community as such also bears witness to how it "shares" the physical finitude of the other among itself.

communal nature of the community *is*. To say what the communal nature of a community is, to signify it, would be to ascribe to it a common substance, which is exactly what Nancy seeks to avoid" (May, 31; emphasis mine). Rather, "Community, then, must lie either beneath, beyond, or in the interstices of signification, but it is not susceptible to a straightforward accounting" (Ibid.), that is, not susceptible even to Jinny's catalogue invocation of any social entity.

Defined against the stated attempt to comprehend a social whole, Berman writes, "Woolf's focus on the mosaic of interrelationship can be read as an attempt to create a political community without resurrecting a suffocating unity" (122-3). By this reading, community in *The Waves* comes to occupy the place of the unrepresentable, or according to Solomon, "a space of anonymity and indefiniteness," and ultimately exposes human mortality as the ground of the political. Lyotard elsewhere speaks of the unrepresentable as "the very thing" that is in no way driven by the vicissitudes of cultural make-up:

> all politics is *a politics of forgetting*, and that nonforgetting (which is not memory) eludes politics…What cannot be treated, what is not manageable once and for all, and what is forgotten by political treatment in its constitution of a "commonality" of humans by dint of their belonging to the same polis, is *the very thing* that is not shareable among them, what is not communicable or communal or common at all. Call it birth and/or death, or even singularity. (42-3; emphasis mine)

To this Lyotard adds, "it has no place, not having taken place and being 'present' only outside representation: in death, in birth" (44). Discovering a manner of politics outside of the order of representation is important to Lyotard. Note that this curious conception of "the very thing" which "political treatment" cannot give voice is purely futuristic. For its nature of being "not having taken place," we see that Lyotard significantly refrains from calling it community. Since the politics of "nonforgetting" in question is not equal to the politics of

memory, I suggest, Woolf would formulate this "nonforgetting" in the concrete reality as that which *cannot be forgotten,* thereby establishing an immemorial "memory" prior to the buildup of memory and forgetting as ordinarily understood. This is how we should envision the community via the "politics of nonforgetting," as Bernard tries to explain, "We saw for a moment laid out among us the body of the complete human being whom we have failed to be, but at the same time, cannot forget" (196). In this sense, it is clearly no accident that Nancy stresses the impossibility of the community: "To say that community has not yet been thought is to say that it tries our thinking, and that it is not an object for it. And perhaps it does not have to become one" (Nancy 26). At this point, a larger question needs to be raised: under the circumstances, what is it, then, to be part of this community that undermines, rather than simply sustains, its own unity? In particular, what is the value or import of a community that finally cannot be held in common as Jinny and Neville reject? Do these characters envision it, as that futuristic matter of coming toward, in a way at all different? In the course of the narrative in *The Waves* all these questions ultimately ground in a single one: does there exist (in their world) a community, if there is only, as Louis puts it, "Death and again death?" (101).

It is commonly noted, of course, that Woolf always writes about death with "a callous indifference," as Sally Minogue argues, namely in "[her] inclination to answer death's indifference with her own" (284). What has been insufficiently explored is the extent to which the attitude toward death that Woolf advances in *The Waves* involves the attempt to enact, through the "mind's eye," the ethical promise of the community as "a purely physical statement" (186) of their "being *in* common." In light of such a perspective, perhaps Lyotard's exposition of the community begs to be read in the context of modernist conception of life and death, to which Rose directly addresses: "Modernism—we might say, as a way of refusing the appropriate relations of presence and absence which should hold between the

living and the dead" (9). The point of convergence between the thought of Lyotard and Woolf lies in their refusal to represent a closure, or indeed a finite totality of what is between us, or precisely, what is lost between us. As I have discussed, the characters in Woolf's novel are prompted to remember that there is always something other which might yet need to be named or recalled. Where Woolf's reservations about community translate into the refusal of institutional embodiments or illusory unity, as in the case of Jinny, they become the basis for a profound meditation on both the possibility and need for a rethinking of a fate given to all to assume—mortality.

It is possible to arrive at a richer, more nuanced understanding of these characters, the plural "We," that compose Woolf's community. Consider first Woolf's determination in her diary to discuss all literature

> in connection with real little incongruous living humor: & anything that comes into my head; but 'I' rejected: 'We' substituted: *to whom at the end there shall be an invocation*? 'We'…composed of many different things…we all life, all art, all waifs & strays—*a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole*—the present state of my mind? (*Dairy V*, 135; emphasis mine)

The question Woolf posed to herself "to whom at the end there shall be an invocation?" is also the question she posed to us. Without predicating what or who constitutes the "we" she refers to, Woolf speaks of the being-together of the people, and of the attention people are offering to each other. The potential commonality to constitute the "We" of Woolf's ideal of community is not necessarily seen as relying upon "a recognizable common identity" (May, 35), as the word "capricious" attests, but instead on the multifarious experience of being-in-common in this space. To borrow, again, Woolf's own phrases, "Life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worth while…whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer

in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide" (*Collected Essays*, vol. II, 166). This passage in large measure bespeaks Woolf's quest for a proper form of this impossible community that cannot be adequately specified through the generalized assertion that shared social practices is constitutive of it. As I have shown, Woolf shares with Nancy the tendency to see our shared relation to finitude, which she faults the social commonality for closure, as something which discloses and hence reinforces a basis of the community.

Lamenting over "the perpetual solicitation of the eye," Bernard says, "There are others suffering—multitudes of people suffering" (112). Yet the fear that it may be impossible to recover in language as in the case of Neville, or as Bernard constantly protests, "Nothing that has been said meets our case" (112) and "But for pain words are lacking" (187), also lies behind the compensatory insistence that they would be beside those who suffer. Insofar as those who survive their fellow beings in this community of finitude cannot find the right words, their experience remains trapped in a body that can never narrate, the impossible community proper, at most, can only be "a purely physical statement." Ultimately, Bernard can only raise the question without affirming the factuality of the community which, indeed, they may have touched: "Was this, then, this streaming away and mixed with Susan, Jinny, Neville, Rhoda, Louis, a sort of death? A new assembly of elements?" (186). In light of Woolf's trajectory, for the community in *The Waves* to come into being, it can only be so in its appeal on Bernard that "[t]he illusion is upon me that something adheres for a moment, has roundness, weight, depth, is completed" (168). The "illusion," or what Nancy terms, "incompletion" of this community through which their practices find expression, to reflect on Nancy, is "its 'principle, taking the term 'incompletion' in an active sense, however, as designating not insufficiency or lack, but the activity of sharing, the dynamic, if you will, of an uninterrupted passage through singular ruptures" (35). As I am suggesting here, the moment Bernard raises the question is the moment community could come into being—that

is, only invisibly, in questioning.

Death "Showed Me How Life Withers When There Are Things We Cannot Share"(188)

The force of Woolf's investment in death as community is rendered more vivid when we consider that in *The Waves*, as she would concur with Nancy, death lets "the singular outline of our being in common expose itself" (Nancy, 41). What is equally prominent in Jinny's saying, "But we who live in the body see with the body's imagination things in outline," and "My imagination is the body's" (156) is that her interrogations are conducted with a presentation of "their mortal truth" (Nancy 15). In stark contrast to her enjoyment of free movement: "I have run violently like a whip flung out to the extreme end of my tether" (137), the shadow of death lurks all around: "I admit for one moment the soundless flight of upright bodies down the moving stairs like the pinioned and terrible descent of some army of the dead downwards …made me cower and run for shelter" (138). In a world larger than their own destiny, it is therefore not death that obsesses Woolf and her characters in *The Wave*s so much as their finitude in common. At the heart of this rethinking of community is not death per se but their prior sense of "being in-common" with others which is desperately tied to their knowledge of mutual finitude, hence "the universal determination to go on living" (188). As Bernard makes a point of emphasizing, "For this is not one life" (199), the characters could not remain passive or indifferent in the face of those tragic deaths of their fellow beings. We should hear Woolf's voice in the words of Bernard who expresses a willed refusal to abandon himself to mourning on a subjective, emotional level: "I am not going to lie down and weep away a life of care" (110). He chooses to face loss in its sternest form. As I am stressing here, Woolf persistently seeks to give the emerging community in this novel an ethical dimension, though not exactly a specific content, by casting it as an ideal of "in between"—what shatters integral selfhood on the one side, and yet resists the fusion of

bodies into a communal totality whose mind is fundamentally additive on the other. As Bernard protests, “our total will be known; but it will not be enough” (66). Woolf’s concern is therefore not really with the object lost, whatever or whoever it is, but with the feelings associated with losing it, and living with it.

Death by and large remains the imperative horizon for the characters, against which they project a certain understanding of their own solidarity. Out of that very insight, out of the belief, which I would like to close this chapter by endorsing, that as Bernard conveys to us, death “showed me how life withers when there are things we cannot share**”** (188). As Woolf had reminded herself, in the course of composing the first draft of *The Waves*: “I am not concerned with the single life but with lives together ” (qtd. in Briggs, 75), she is able to broach the question of community in its most intimate and abstract sense of the death of the other. This can be seen with particular clarity in her portrayal of Bernard’s affirmation of his responsibility to Rhoda. As Bernard tells us,

> [Rhoda] had killed herself. “Wait,” I said, putting my arm in imagination (thus we consort with our friends) through her arm. “Wait until these omnibuses have gone by. Do not cross so dangerously. These men are your brothers.” *In persuading her I was also persuading my own soul*. For this is not one life; nor do I always know if I am man or woman, Bernard or Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny, or Rhoda—so strange is the contact of own with another. (199; emphasis mine)

Woolf’s attempt to recast a community of finitude, in its active sense that Nancy has proposed, as an ethical practice ultimately reaches its apogee in this moving scene. It is precisely in this rigorous imagining of how death as community might be lived as “a purely physical statement” that more supple, intersubjective responses of these characters to death in this novel might be clear. In a crucial way, and despite his own struggle to sympathize, Bernard’s “mind’s eye” fails to reach Rhoda, fails to compensate for his absence from the

moment of Rhoda's death, and thereby, of the deaths of those others. When he is imagining this kind of ethical action, nevertheless, the significant interpolation, "In persuading her I was also persuading my own soul," gives voice to an imperative for their shared relation to death.

Characteristically, we are tricked into seeing substantial community where Woolf has in fact suggested or alluded to them, be it the leadership of Percival, or the social commonality Jinny brings up, or the larger nation or state as Bernard insists, "It is a trick of mind—to put kings on their thrones, one following another, with crowns on their heads" (161). Community, for its impulse to closure, is a way of asserting that all this diversity is one thing. This is a misleading and unproductive direction that any reading of community shall not take. We have a criticism that can delineate in detail the structures that are almost present in *The Waves.* Yet we seem to lack a criticism that can address more directly the rising and falling of the illusory community of death itself. Overall, the apparent community of this text is never what it seems, as with the ascendancy and fall of the colossal Percival. If it is Percival that reigns and binds the community, after his death, why should Louis's doctrine of "order" have never availed to lead? As Rhoda tells us: "I think of Louis…He says…he will shepherd us if we will follow. If we submit he will reduce us to order. Thus he will smooth out the death of Percival to his satisfaction" (114); also Bernard asks: "How then, I asked, would Louis roof us all in? How would he confine us, make us one, with his red ink, with his very fine nib?"(200). This is what I have suggested in the beginning of this chapter that Percival's death shall be read as an initiating event rather than a culminating theme of community. His death does not register the demise of the community nor, as Berman puts it, "the group of characters that make up *The Waves* ultimately construct their community without [Percival]" (149). However, critical confusion reigns over the exact nature of this community.[24] What

[24] Among the criticism of this novel, I believe Julia Briggs's reading has hinted at a brilliant new perspective for looking to somewhere wider than specific political agenda: "Bernard's comprehensive rejection of master narrative suggests that TW does not so much dissolve history as redefine it. Its simplifications demand a

Percival's death uncovers is rather that if there is any community, it can only be a community of death where "we" have nothing in common, except our own mortality. Death links and severs. The problem that might occlude this line of reading, however, resides in the highly "illusory" or incomplete nature of Woolf's conception of community—all deaths are one death—as well as in the fact that Woolf does not so much argue for a political community that "*could* build cathedrals, dictate policies, condemn men to death, and administer the affairs of several public offices," as rather suggest that community is simply lived as "a purely physical statement." As I have shown, *The Waves* shows a yearning and perhaps hesitancy written into that very gesture to a community of finitude, disclosing yet another facet of Woolf's complex and fraught relation to the question of death. Perhaps Woolf had written on the impossible community deeply buried in *The Waves*, as Bernard suggests:

> Yet something is added to my interpretation. Something lies deeply buried. For one moment I thought to grasp it. But bury it, bury it; let it breed, hidden in the depths of my mind some day to fructify. After a long lifetime, loosely, in a moment of revelation, I may lay hands on it, but now the idea breaks in my hand. Ideas break a thousand times for once that they globe themselves entire. (112)

For having been buried between life and death, in the midst of an anecdotal recounting, this form of community might "fructify" some day. Although it will be long in coming, this imaging is prefigured insofar as Woolf is continually showing us that in an originary irreducible distance between memory and what is not at present, there is proximity: "Here on the nape of my neck is the kiss Jinny gave Louis. My eye filled with Susan's tears. I see far away, quivering like a gold thread, the pillar Rhoda saw, and feel the rush of the wind of her flight when she leapt" (205). It is by now clear that what makes such a community just, then, is its very inability to achieve complete embodiment: the other or the death of the other can

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different kind of history, perhaps on an altogether vaster scale ("The Novels of 1930s," 77).

never be contained by memory, can never be delivered to the present by memory. To live as part of this community of death, for Woolf, means to remember that which is precisely inscribed without memory, that which cannot be forgotten.