

POLYPHONIC ELEGIAC LAMENT OVER PERCIVAL IN *THE WAVES* BY VIRGINIA WOOLF

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ABSTRACT

The groundbreaking “play-poem” *The Waves* has attracted much critical acclaim due to the innovativeness of the form. While endorsing the claims on Woolf’s experimentation, the present article suggests that ancient traditions and modes are discernible within the innovative narration of grief. The thematic scope involving the death of the major character, Percival, is argued to be a major reason for prioritising the fifth section of *The Waves* as the midpoint, and indeed the central point, of the narration. The formula of mourning contained in this section is investigated alongside the ekphrastic set-piece description of noon preceding it. Subsequently, the elegiac lament over Percival found in Section V is examined, with the analysis based on the references to tragic or pastoral traditions known and deployed in European literature since antiquity. This particular fragment of *The Waves* is argued to constitute a modernist version of prose elegy, being a literary rendition of a polyphonic lament in which each subsequent part differs in terms of mode and rhetoric. The paper examines how much the form and the premise of the elegiac triad of lamentation–confrontation–consolation predetermine the choice of the elegiac speakers: Neville – the pastoral, elegiac mourner; Bernard – the eulogist and chief representative of the community; and Rhoda – a performer of the rites of leave-taking.

Keywords: polyphonic lament, elegy, elegiac triad, pastoral mourner, funeral eulogy, ekphrasis, noon

INTRODUCTION

The Waves (1931) is a remarkable novel; or, rather, it is an outstanding literary achievement that has never failed to challenge the reader's established expectations regarding the form of narration. In fact, it has become common knowledge that Virginia Woolf searched for an appropriate word to indicate the formal novelty of her prose well before the volume came into a literary existence: as early as in 1925, Woolf observed in her diary that she had an idea that she would "invent a new name for [her] books to supplant 'novel.' A new – by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?" (Woolf 1980, 34). A subsequent explicit diary reference to *The Waves* ventures the term "play-poem" (Woolf 1980, 139) to replace "novel" in this particular case, with the disclaimer reiterated on the manuscript, warning that "The author would be glad if the following pages were not read as a novel" (Parsons in Woolf 2000, VI). The experimental nature is thus indicated at the outset of the reading process. Nonetheless, the present article seeks to explore the traditional elements of narration discernible in *The Waves*, given the author's sound classical education and the claims included in one of her essays, "On Not Knowing Greek".

While numerous researchers have explored the formal intricacies of Woolf's fiction (de Gay 2006, Walsh 2009, Sandberg 2014, Penner 2015), this article reconsiders past traditions and modes of expression discernible within the framework of *The Waves*. In particular, it addresses the elegiac mode and the rendition of pain and despair in an act of lamentation. I would argue that Section V²² of *The Waves* draws upon the tradition of polyphonic lamentation rendered as a literary elegy which – with the help of the figure of the pastoral disdained lover and the solemn form of the funeral eulogy as reinforcement – transmit the bereavement Percival's friends suffer after his sudden death. Barely articulable (Walsh 2016), their pain is at first (re)present(ed),²³ even tough; similar to other elegies of the period (Ramazani 1994), "it is not a refuge for outworn nostalgias and consolations" (Ramazani 1994, ix). As Ramazani argues, modern elegies feed upon "a multitude of [...] deaths, including the body of its own traditions" (1994, 8). In the present paper, I will address these traditions by

²² Presumably following the author's intention, the sections in *The Waves* are not numbered. For transparency, I have added numbers to each.

²³ On the policy of "(re)present(ing)" the past in Henry James's autobiographies, see my 2023 monograph.

negotiating partial applicability of what Vickery terms the elegiac triad underlying the structure of Section V: “lamentation for the individual’s death, confrontation with the fact of human mortality, and consolation for the inescapability of death” (Vickery 2009, 1), with the final point contested.

THE PRELUDE

“GREAT BEAST STAMPING”

As indicated, *The Waves* (1931) is hardly a novel. Framed as a series of scenes preceded by italicised landscape descriptions and based upon soliloquies voiced by six friends, its composition suggests a transposition of narration into a dramatic or, perhaps, poetic work; indeed, into what is today known as Woolf’s “play-poem” (Woolf 1980, 139). As de Gay observes, “the novel itself is profoundly polyphonic” (2006, 160), thus emphasising not only the multitude of voices, but also the phonic quality of the narrative. As expected in a polyphonic work, the notion of rhythm is essential in *The Waves*. The writer once admitted that she had created *The Waves* by “writing to a rhythm and not to a plot”²⁴ (Woolf in Parsons 2000, v). Since establishing a rhythmic pattern may involve a dialogue with (oral) literature, music,²⁵ and art, a certain range of intertexts presents itself as potentially referential (de Gay 2006), among them Greek tragedies and the classical elegy.²⁶ As explored further, if involved in the discussion, these textual forms do add to the interpretation of *The Waves*.

The rhythm is maintained by repetitive patterns, both auditory and visual: the recurrent image of the sea with waves pulsating against the shore, the characteristic phrases uttered by various speakers which regularly reappear,²⁷ the polyphonic descriptions of the same incidents narrated from various angles in conformity

²⁴ The citation is also adduced in Jane Dunn’s *Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell. A Very Close Conspiracy* which I read in Polish – trans. by Paweł Łopatka (2004, 283). For more details, see Goldman in Sellers (2010, 70).

²⁵ Gerald Levin argues that, according to an entry in Woolf’s diary, Beethoven’s music influenced the shape of the manuscript – see Levin 1983, 164–171.

²⁶ See Woolf’s essay “On Not Knowing Greek”. The interest of modernist writers in the Greek tragedy is discussed in Walsh 2016, 201–212 (as regards Woolf) and Ambrosini 2013, 6–12 (as regards Joseph Conrad).

²⁷ For example, Bernard’s somewhat obsessive interest in words: “what are words?” Similar rhetorical questions reappear in *The Waves* on pages 26, 45, 46, 64, 135, 161, and 166.

with the multiple-point-of-view narration – all these means help to transmit the idiosyncratic inner pulsation beneath the linguistic structure of the text. The rhythm is also maintained by the italicised ekphrastic landscape descriptions opening each section: each italicised description presents a different image of the same landscape, a landscape that is transformed by the position of the sun on the horizon. It can be postulated that these involve synaesthesia and, combining music and visual art, they draw on the impressionist and post-impressionist fascination with the interplay of light on objects' surfaces, a matter of significance for the author's contemporaries such as Claude Monet or Paul Cezanne.²⁸ The highly poetic italicised preludes follow the course of the sun in the sky, completing its daily trajectory in the last section of *The Waves*, in which "darkness cover[s all]" (Woolf 2000, 134). If one may apply the narrative term at all, the plot unfolds according to the (life) stages marked in the preludes, although this too can be broadened: each section reveals a different stage of life, beginning with early childhood, through school days and the years of work, until the moment of death. The final unsentimental italicised comment, "*The waves broke on the shore*" (Woolf 2000, 167; italics in the original) evokes the final stroke of a painter's brush.

Endorsing other scholars (Penner 2015, 68–69; Walsh 2016, 202), I shall argue that Section V of *The Waves* constitutes the centrepiece of the play-poem. Penner views its centrality with regard to the structural and thematic significance by arguing that Percival's death "gives shape to the seemingly endless succession of character monologues and underscores the elegist's role as an organising agent" (2015, 68). While I agree with Penner on both arguments, I would nuance the latter point by emphasising the formal centrality of Section V which, vibrant with intense emotions after Percival's sudden death, locates *The Waves* within the tradition of literary lamentation. The time of day is crucial in this respect: as with the previous sections, Section V opens with a description of a seaside landscape which is this time captured at noon. The noon that forms the middle part of *The Waves*, both

²⁸ In fact, Virginia Woolf and her sister, Vanessa Bell, were inspired by the post-impressionist exhibition organised in 1910 by Roger Fry. On its significance, see Stansky 1996 passim and Butler 1994. See Dunn 2004, 172. See the series of Rouen Cathedral paintings completed in the 1890s by Claude Monet currently exhibited in the Musée Marmottan Monet and Musée d'Orsay in Paris. See also the series Mont Sainte-Victoire by Paul Cezanne.

formally and conceptually, proleptically indicates Percival's death, which occurs in his prime and becomes the highlight of the narrative.

As with every other section in *The Waves*, Section V opens with an italicised prelude anticipating the climactic event – Percival's death. The prelude begins with a vision of noon:

The sun had risen to its full height. It was no longer half seen and guessed at, from hints and gleams, as if a girl couched on her green-sea mattress tired her brows with water-globed jewels that sent lances of opal-tinted light falling and flashing in the uncertain air like the flanks of a dolphin leaping, or the flash of a falling blade. Now sun burnt uncompromising, undeniable. It struck upon the hard sand, and the rocks became furnaces of red heat, it searched each pool and caught the minnow hiding in the cranny, and showed the rusty cartwheel, the white bone, or the boot without laces stuck, black as iron, in the sand. (Woolf 2000, 82; italics in the original)

Formally, the prelude to Section V is an ekphrasis.²⁹ The way in which the succinctness of its first sentence – “*The sun had risen to its full height*” (Woolf 2000, 82; italics in the original) – clashes against the length and the style of the subsequent statements seems to foretell the rupture of the rhythm of life, which stops suddenly at the moment of Percival's death. Given the disproportionate length of the few neighbouring sentences in the opening paragraph, each in turn seems to indicate the regular pulsation of the sea waves which are forced into a hold-up by unforeseen obstacles. The imagery in the second sentence connotes the sudden blow which is to occur: at midday the sun is hardly benign, it sends “*lances of opal-tinted light falling and flashing in the uncertain air like the flanks of a dolphin leaping, or the flash of a falling blade*” (Woolf 2000, 82; italics in the original). On the phonic level, the f- and l- alliterations as well as the long vowels and diphthongs resemble the regular pulsation of waves in the sea, which contributes to the rhythmic pattern of the passage. On the semantic level, stressed by the chiasmus “flash – fall”, the associations with sudden, and momentary, actions such as flashing or falling are revealed, the latter a proleptic omen of Percival's fall

²⁹ More information on ekphrasis in Klarer 2001, passim. See Alpers 1996, 139ff.

and death. Characteristically, the next two sentences participate in the interplay between laconicity and effusiveness. Negatively charged, the sun seems an aggressor: it “*burns uncompromising, undeniable*” (Woolf 2000, 82; italics in the original). Synaesthesia becomes visible in the oppositions between light and darkness as well as sound and silence. At noon, light is besetting and inimical, it persecutes and, further on in the prelude, beats “*upon passengers*” (Woolf 2000, 82; italics in the original), and cuts short the “*passionate [bird]songs*” (Woolf 2000, 83; italics in the original). The world seems subdued in its silence and poised in anticipation of the unexpected and unwelcome event, with its immediate advent predicted in the last phrase of this prelude: “*like the thud of a great beast stamping*” (Woolf 2000, 83; italics in the original).

To my mind, the fact that Percival’s death in *The Waves* is semantically anticipated in the prelude with reference to noontime signals a certain epistemological affinity of the fragment with classical philosophy. As Buczyńska-Garewicz observes, philosophers have long argued for particular significance of noon: the sun at its zenith means a world symbolically poised between morning and afternoon activities (Buczyńska-Garewicz 2003, 144). The scholar adds that in the tradition of Mediterranean literature as well as in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, noon is conceived as a moment that is beyond linear time, thus allowing a glimpse into eternity.³⁰ As I have argued elsewhere, noon, being traditionally dedicated to Pan, the god of shepherds, has contributed to the creation of the pastoral topos of the locus amoenus, that is, a lovely place (Wojciechowska 2017, 28). Interestingly, the pastoral convention explores this dimension of the noon in a twofold way: as a time for passion as well as for terror. As regards the former, in Eclogue 2, Virgil celebrates passion “*sole sub ardenti*” (v. 13)³¹ in perfect time for repose and love – in the Virgilian eclogue, that means Coridon’s homosexual, unrequited love for Alexis. Instantiating the “*huc ades*” pastoral topos (v. 45), Eclogue 2 deploys the symbolism of noon heat connoting unfulfilled male

³⁰ The concept of the “Great noon” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* offers considerable possibilities for investigation in this context, yet, for reasons of space, it must be left for a future study. A comprehensive analysis of the meaning of noon in philosophy and literature in: Hanna Buczyńska-Garewicz 2003, 144–177.

³¹ The Latin original of *Eclogue 2* is available at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Verg.+Ecl.+2&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0056> (accessed July 2018). I also refer to a Polish translation of Virgil’s *Eclogues* by Zofia Abramowiczówna 2006.

desire.³² As shown further, this line of argumentation has a certain bearing upon *The Waves* and the portrayal of one of the speakers in Section V, that is, Neville.

As indicated, however, the paradigm of the pastoral topos at noon also includes an opposite representation of this daytime: in pastoral literature, noon may connote a moment of uneasiness that anticipates the arrival of an angry Pan, who is believed to create panic and awe among the shepherds. The figure of the goatherd in *Idyll 1* by Theocritus who admits “I go in too great dread of Pan” (v. 16)³³ has become a literary classic in this context. As Buczyńska-Garewicz argues, the magic of noontide also involves dark magic inimical to men (2003, 146). Indeed, anything may happen at noon since, at this moment in the day, the boundaries of time and space may be transgressed. It seems plausible to assume that the prelude to Section V in *The Waves* closely endorses this line of argument: the stifling heat of the sun at its zenith hushes the natural world into silence and divides it into “[s]harp-edged wedges of light” and “*circles of impenetrable darkness*” (Woolf 2000, 83; italics in the original). The feeling of uneasy anticipation creates a proleptic suspense in preparation for the shock of Percival’s sudden death.³⁴

SECTION V POLYPHONIC LAMENT

The main part of Section V of *The Waves* explores the feeling of loss and bereavement experienced by Percival’s friends after his death. The unexpectedness of the event means all are quite unprepared even though the italicised prelude is imbued with a sense of suspense: the image of the “*great beast stamping*” (Woolf 2000, 83), closing the prelude, materialises in the form of the first abrupt sentence of Section V: “He [Percival] is dead” (Woolf 2000, 84).

³² See also more recent literature praising the world at noon in: D’Annunzio 1964, 69–72, especially the poem entitled *Meriggio* (ibid.).

³³ The English translation of *Idyll 1* available at <http://www.theoi.com/Text/TheocritusIdylls1.html> (accessed July 2018). See Łanowski 2007, 19f.

³⁴ On the shock Woolf experienced at the death of her brother, Thoby, who is often part of the discussion regarding *The Waves*, see Penner 2015, 64–66.

In *The Waves*, Percival is the apparent compositional axis whose necessity Woolf once indicated as crucial in one of her letters to Roger Fry: the writer demanded one central element underlying the compositional balance in any work of art (Dunn 2004, 171f). Perceived exclusively through the eyes of his friends, Percival effectively becomes the central figure in the community consisting of six friends and himself – the person whose uniqueness is mirrored and amplified in their thoughts and remarks. In Section IV, before Percival's death, Neville voices their complete emotional dependence on their apparent leader by stating: "now we are together. But without Percival there is no solidity. We are silhouettes, hollow phantoms moving mistily without a background" (Woolf 2000, 68). The predictable disorientation and confusion after the fatal fall from a horse leaves a mark on the imagery of Section V: having been notified of the tragic death, the friends feel lost among the familiar surroundings while unknowingly performing meaningless activities and mechanically passing others in the labyrinthine streets of London.

On the formal level, Section V is minutely constructed: every member of the circle is mentioned by name and the three major representatives – Neville, Bernard, and Rhoda – are given a voice to express their common loss. While Neville and Bernard are supposed to represent the privileged male members of British society (Penner 2015, 68), Rhoda is a female voice countering the established order (Penner 2015, 69). Though barely active in the lamenting chorus contained in Section V, Louis, Susan, and Jinny are present within the monologues of their friends and thus included in the circle of silent mourners. The act of establishing indirect bonds of pain between the speakers transforms individual mourning into collective grief. In my reading, Section V thus becomes a polyphonic expression of loss and pain, opening with the rendition of shock and closed with the rites of leave-taking completed by Rhoda. I would argue that this section constitutes a modernist re-imagining of the ritual lamentation performed after the death of a beloved person, a lamentation now re-dressed in a novel form open to psychological processes of mourning, or, as Smythe terms them, "fiction-elegies" (64–65). As a whole, Section V thus validates the long tradition of lamentation, both in rhetoric and poetry, about a promising individual whose life has been cut short.

POLYPHONIC LAMENT IN SECTION V NEVILLE'S ELEGIAC LAMENT

Vocalised by the three friends – Neville, Barnard, and Rhoda – the lamentation by each mourner in Section V differs in mode and rhetoric: the first sub-section is filled with Neville's despair, which I read as the despair suffered by the (unaccepted) pastoral lover; the second part includes Bernard's eulogy of the deceased; and the last contains Rhoda's ritual farewell to Percival.

As a deserted lover, Neville initiates the lamentation. In my opinion, Neville is a classical link locating the play-poem in a dialogic position with the pastoral tradition of elegiac writing. It would seem that Neville's lament is the voice of a pastoral elegiac mourner, which rests upon his sustained presentation as a pastoral speaker:³⁵ by the beginning of Section V, Neville has been established as the pastoral lover, however platonic his love turns out to be. Portrayed as a delicate child in the opening section of *The Waves*, Neville is reported sickly and prone to solitary rambles; for him, the image of "the immitigable tree" epitomises the transformative "moment of being" (de Gay 2006, 168) first experienced at the news of the sudden death of an acquaintance (Woolf 2000, 12).³⁶ The vision of "the immitigable tree" obsesses him at the moment of Percival's death. Solitude, detachment, and despair at the finality of death are characteristics integral to the pastoral convention, as well as to the topos of a despised lover, which Neville seems to exemplify. Indeed, in the re-enactment of classical pastoral loci, the adult Neville envisages himself musing: "I shall lie, too, in the fields among the tickling grasses. I shall lie with my friends under the towering elm trees" (Woolf 2000, 17).³⁷ In line with the pastoral, he realises "the urgency of [his] own passion" for Percival (Woolf 2000, 27) and despairs when asking himself the rhetorical question, "Should I walk under beech tree,

³⁵ Consider the contents of Section II of *The Waves*: Neville's homosexual pastoral longing, his unrequited love, his dedication to poetry, the topos of the rejected lover in a locus amoenus. This issue certainly deserves a separate investigation.

³⁶ See a similar reference to Neville's weakness as an adult – Woolf 2000, 25. The phrase "death among the apple trees" (*ibid.*) is believed to contain an autobiographical reference – see Woolf 2000, 169, Note 7; de Gay 2006, 166–168. Consider the symbolism of apple trees in the pastoral tradition.

³⁷ See Virgil, *Eclogue 1*, 1–4. *Eclogue 2*, 4–5. Virgil is explicitly mentioned in *The Waves* (2000, 17) in a sentence immediately preceding Woolf's prose variation on the pastoral topos.

or saunter along the river bank [...]?” (Woolf 2000, 28). Even though, subsequently, Woolf does not overtly deploy pastoral elegy within Neville’s lament in Section V, his outcry of despair in Section V may be viewed as the lament of a pastoral speaker, given his former portrayal and the cohesion of the world described in *The Waves* (Dunn 2004, 172). Since *The Waves* has been examined as a narrative bespeaking Woolf’s “relationship with the literary past” (de Gay 2006, 162), I read Neville’s lament as being inspired, perhaps indirectly, by the elegiac protestations of the shock felt at the death of the beloved and established within the pastoral convention. This is plausible since, according to Penner, “Woolf reclaims the elegiac enterprise for literature of her own devising” (2015, 64), with the classical echoes discernible if transmuted into novel expressions in her prose.

Pastoral lament has a long tradition, with its conventions encapsulated in the pastoral elegy.³⁸ Milton’s *Lycidas*, Matthew Arnold’s *Thyrsis*, and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Adonais* are well-known, modern instances, with Milton and Arnold being apparent heirs to the classical convention and Shelly a much admired elegist within the Bloomsbury Group.³⁹ Among the ancient examples of the pastoral elegiac are *Idyll 1* by Theocritus and *Lament for Adonis* by Bion of Smyrna.⁴⁰ If juxtaposed, Section V of *The Waves* and the expressions of despair in Bion’s *Lament for Adonis* converge in certain respects: devastated by the premature deaths of the beloved, both speakers, Neville as well as Bion, try to express the inexpressible pain. The features of the compositional structure underlying both lamentations are similar. Short and concise, the first few lines of Bion’s lament contain a repetitive restatement of the finality of death, with the opening statement “The beauteous Adonis is dead” in its first verse⁴¹ being perhaps a model for the cry of woe – “He is dead” (Woolf 2000, 84) – with which Section V of *The Waves* opens. Like Bion, Neville too continues to repeat to himself that “All is over,” and again: “This is the truth. This is the fact. [...] He died where he fell” (Woolf 2000, 84), and yet again:

³⁸ Originally, “elegy” only denoted the form of a poem, that is, a poem written in the elegiac distich, not its content. With the passing of time, the elegy became a poem expressing grief and lament after the death of a beloved person. More information in Abrams 1985, 72 and 48; Alpers 1996, 81–112. On elegy and *The Waves*, see Goldman 2010, 56–66.

³⁹ See Penner 2015, 65. See also *ibid.*, Note 4 on page 88.

⁴⁰ My analysis of *Lament of Adonis* is based on its Polish translation included in Łanowski 2007, 121–124.

⁴¹ The English translation of the Greek original, *Lament for Adonis* available at: <http://www.theoi.com/Text/Bion.html> (accessed July 2018).

“Percival fell; was killed; is buried” (Woolf 2000, 84). As noted above, the unexpectedness of the event is reflected in the choice of vocabulary in the narrative: various forms of “flash” and “fall” link the contents of this section with its prelude in the same way as the references to light and darkness do. The same inner consistence holds true for Bion’s *Lament of Adonis*: the chiasmic formula of the first two verses of the poem, underlined by the caesura, creates a focus on lament and death (v. 1) vs. death and lament (v. 2) and, reiterated in a variety of ways, it also functions as an important structural means in the refrain.

The speakers, grieving for both Adonis and Percival, respectively, attempt to understand the unimaginable event by visualising the last few moments in the lives of the beloved. In the ancient pastoral elegy, Bion’s mourner recalls the “thigh pierced with the tusk” (v. 8) and in Woolf’s narrative Neville holds “the telegram in [his] fingers” (Woolf 2000, 84). In their minds’ eyes both speakers visualise the final moments of the recently deceased: “the gentle passing of breath,” “the red blood drips,” “the eyes beneath his brow wax dim” (vv. 8–17) betoken Adonis’ passing. Similarly, Neville imagines the successive stages of Percival’s death: “His horse stumbled; he was thrown. [...] There was a surge; a drumming in his ears. He died where he fell” (Woolf 2000, 84). At this stage the ancient and the modernist texts diverge: the former includes a polyphonic lament which establishes the elegiac pastoral mode with the help of adynata, personifications, and descriptions of nature transfigured in pain. The final elegiac verses include a description of a procession, specifically of Adonis’ mourners lamenting and performing the rituals common to wakes. By contrast, Neville seems transfixed with grief, powerless to go beyond the initial stage of mourning: the ritual will be finally completed by Bernard and Rhoda. Neville is fixated on the act of dying: his mind concentrates on the irreversibility of death and the impossibility of becoming reconciled with the situation: the “tree with stiff leaves which we cannot pass” (Woolf 2000, 84) visibly obsesses him, this “immitigable tree” (Woolf 2000, 85) that essentialises the apparent lack of agency, while, rhetorically, constituting a modernist version of a conventional pastoral adynaton.

As already argued, by the opening of Section V Neville has been established as a modernist pastoral speaker, which explains the lack of conventional pastoral topoi in his elegiac lament in this section. The final few lines of Neville’s sub-section seem the highpoint of his lament: “For this moment, for this one moment,

we are together. I press you to me. Come, pain, feed on me. Bury four fangs in my flesh. Tear me asunder. I sob, I sob" (Woolf 2000, 85). Neville's invocation to pain turns his speech into a dramatic masterpiece: it links Neville's lament with those recited by ancient mourners on stage such as Euripides's Hecuba or supplicant mothers.⁴² Further, it incorporates the fragment into the traditional ritual lamentation that is still preserved in modern Greek culture.⁴³ Finally, it links Neville's speech with the *Lament for Adonis*, a pastoral elegy: according to Greek mythology, Adonis died being torn asunder by his own hunting dogs,⁴⁴ which Neville's challenging address "Bury four fangs in my flesh. Tear me asunder" seems to invoke.

As indicated above, performed in short and abrupt phrases, Neville's lament opens Section V, which comes immediately after the meaningful italicised prelude emphasising the centrality of noon. The ekphrastic set-piece description of midday as a moment poised on the verge of time is upheld in Section V: all the speakers try and imagine Percival's last few moments in India, with the emotional climax formed by Neville's dramatic outcry that closes his soliloquy. Utmost intimacy and immediacy feature in the final verses of Neville's speech. Quite unlike the conventions of the pastoral tradition, the outcry erupts with emotions: the pastoral elegy is known, and sometimes repudiated,⁴⁵ for its artificiality. As argued above, however, Neville's despair seems to draw upon the pastoral elegy, which is imbued with Eastern emotionality,⁴⁶ as seen in *Lament for Adonis* by Bion of Smyrna, which may explain the crying and moaning cadence in Neville's performance. The account of Neville's state of mind renders the shock of recognition. The extra-temporality of noontime is matched by the extra-spatiality of Neville's imagination which portrays Percival's last moments in India, they both allow for a combination of "here" and

⁴² See Hecuba's speeches in Euripides' *Hecuba*, Epeisodion 1, vv. 216–443. See also the laments of the desperate mothers in Euripides' *Suppliants*, *Parodos*, v.48–53. I consulted the Polish translation in Łanowski 2005. Attention should be paid to acts of self-injury mentioned in the sources listed above. It is perhaps worth noting that Euripides is believed to have died a violent death as a person torn to pieces by hunting dogs.

⁴³ More information in: Fishman 2008, 274–280.

⁴⁴ See the overt references to the myth in *Lament for Adonais* in lines 8–28.

⁴⁵ See Samuel Johnson's harsh criticism of Milton's *Lycidas* included in *Patrides* 1983, 60. Johnson complains that: 'Lycidas' "is not to be considered as the effusion of real passion" (ibid.).

⁴⁶ See Łanowski on *Lament for Adonis* in: Łanowski 2007, XLVI.

“now” together with vivid descriptions of scenes remote in time and place.

POLYPHONIC LAMENT IN SECTION V BERNARD'S EULOGY

Bernard's "funeral service" (Woolf 2000, 87), as he himself terms his rumination on Percival's death, supplants Neville's desperate outcry of grief and woe that opens Section V. By the same token, the initial account of individual and intimate grief is superseded by a speech expressing collective mourning. This has already been noted, with Penner assigning Bernard the special role of "chief mourner" in the circle of mourning friends in *The Waves* (Penner 2015, 74) and Walsh calling him "the monopolizing elegiac voice" (Walsh 2016, 203). As a speaker who "begins seven of the nine sections of 'The Waves'" (Penner 2015, 69), Bernard is indeed a prominent figure in the narrative: nevertheless, since his elegiac funeral service is only secondary to Neville's opening outcry of despair in Section V, his centrality as "the chief mourner" in this particular section calls for a certain revision. It can hardly be a coincidence that Bernard's speech is staged in the middle of the lamentation contained in Section V, with Neville preceding him and Rhoda resuming, and indeed closing, the mourning proceedings. As I shall argue further, Bernard's eulogy for Percival participates in collective mourning by representing the official line of the elegiac address usually performed by the privileged male members of (British) society. In this regard, Bernard's speech act is indeed what Penner terms an "elegy [...] shaped by a public school and university education" (2015, 64).

Bernard's first words resume the topic of death broached by Neville, yet the mention of "the incomprehensible combination" (Woolf 2000, 85) of life and death has its roots elsewhere: "My son is born; Percival is dead" (Woolf 2000, 85). This opening statement encapsulates the idea of circularity⁴⁷ or, perhaps, continuity and inheritance, which shifts the focus away from Neville's benumbed immobilisation towards the active succession of life and death that is characteristic of human existence. In his rumination, Bernard, the male representative of the privileged classes (Penner 2015, 66–

⁴⁷ By circularity, I mean the idea of a time cycle governing the italicised interludes which track the rising of the sun on the horizon. It suggests the immovable circular movement of the sun and, by extension, the continuation of humanity. More information in Dick 2009, 67.

70), becomes the spokesman for the community of friends who have prematurely lost their leader (Briggs in Sellers 2009, 77ff): Bernard recalls himself and his friends as the “soldiers in the presence of their captain”, meaning Percival (Woolf 2000, 89). I would argue that Bernard’s speech exhibits the characteristics of an official funeral address, a eulogy held in Percival’s honour.

No longer heir to the pastoral elegiac tradition, Bernard’s part of Section V nonetheless resumes the *laudatio* of the deceased, traditionally included in pastoral elegies.⁴⁸ In his eulogy, Bernard emphasises Percival’s leadership within the community⁴⁹ and his special role within society as a judge,⁵⁰ both consistent with the ancient traditions of public orations.⁵¹ Bernard highlights Percival’s virtues, defined as the most valuable in noble men as early as the Greek classical era: “justice and courage are the most esteemed, the latter being useful to others in war, the former in peace as well” (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1366b).⁵² A range of “means of amplification”, encapsulated in the Aristotelian rule “you [were] alone, or first, or with a few” (*Rhetoric* 1368 a), further underscores the classical ethical foundations of Bernard’s oration. His emphasis on the young age of the deceased and the lost opportunities of the whole community bestows on Percival a heroic dimension which is nevertheless checked by the ironic comment on the absurdity of his accidental death. Since each of the speakers in *The Waves* intends to fill the vacuum of Percival’s personality, or, “to interpret him as they choose” (Penner 2015, 73), Bernard’s underscoring of the classical traits in the leader’s ethical portrait is telling: the eulogist becomes a spokesman for the privileged community of males who miss their leader. Bernard’s eulogy, supplanting Neville’s expression of the shock felt by a bewildered individual,

⁴⁸ See Milton’s monody, *Lycidas*, especially Poebus’ part in verses 76–85. In the article, I refer to the version included in *The Arnold Anthology of British and Irish Literature*, 1997.

⁴⁹ The topic of war is subtly alluded to in the implication regarding imperial dominance over India where Percival goes as a representative of the British Empire. More information in Briggs 2009, 77f.

⁵⁰ See “You have lost a leader whom you would have followed” (Woolf 2000, 85), “You would have had to form up and follow behind him” (Woolf 2000, 86); “a judge” (Woolf 2000, 86). See Adrastus’ oration in Euripides’ *Suppliants* vv. 857–917.

⁵¹ See Adrastus’ oration in Euripides’ *Suppliants* vv. 857–917.

⁵² See also other virtues mentioned by Aristotle: “The components of virtue are justice, courage, self-control, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, practical and speculative wisdom” (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1366b). In the recollections of the friends in *The Waves*, Percival represents them all in varying degrees.

may thus be viewed as a particular example of what Walsh observes regarding the singularity of Woolf's poetics of loss: the blows of loss are registered both on the personal and collective level (2016, 200–201).

Bernard speaks on behalf of the community, which seems to be present at the "funeral service" as an imaginary audience that is addressed with the words, "Oh, yes, I can assure you" (Woolf 2000, 85). The mute recipients of the eulogy constitute an imaginary circle of mourners who might be present at the actual funeral. Dependence upon their presence is upheld in the speech when it is continued in the National Gallery where Bernard withdraws and contemplates the "cold madonnas" (Woolf 2000, 86), a visual reference to his newborn son. In Bernard's mind, death inextricably mingles with new life, as envisaged in the recurring image of doves; thus, inevitably, death is argued as a natural part of life, included within "the totality of existence" (Walsh 2009, 3). Mentally excluded from his immediate surroundings, Bernard becomes a detached observer of London life, who, in his grief, "resent[s] the usual order" of routine activities around him (Woolf 2000, 86).

The mood of the commemorative speech is not desperate, closing with Bernard's act of choosing life and the living (Woolf 2000, 86). Indeed, he delivers Percival's eulogy in the certainty that in this way "something of you [Percival] remains" (Woolf 2000, 86), a certainty which, as some scholars assert, suggests a certain closeness to Milton's elegiac *Lycidas* (Goldman in Sellers 2010, 51).⁵³ In contrast to Neville's shock and grief, Bernard's speech in fact finishes with a plea for life: whereas the former, petrified with grief, remains a figure of despair, the latter prefers Jinny's companionship in order to commemorate Percival. The recurrent images of doves and references to "the machine [that] works" (Woolf 2000, 85) render death one of the experiences of living. Unlike Neville, who tries to envisage death as a fact accomplished in time and triggering consequences for himself, Bernard endeavours to capture its meaning for a community that inhabits a definite space, namely post-WWI London. The spatial and temporal bias in Bernard's speech is crucial: the shattered,

⁵³ Further Goldman argues: "Milton's 'Lycidas' is, of course, a web of such classical poetic borrowings, something that Woolf, unlike Yeats and De la Mare, finds productive" (Goldman in Sellers 2010, 53). Goldman observes: "Bernard, the writer, [...] [was a potential] equivalent of Milton's singular 'uncouth swain'" (Goldman in Sellers 2010, 65). See also *ibid.*, 51.

post-WWI world calls for new expressions of pain, expressions foreign to both the elegiac pastoral, pre-occupied with the individual, and public eulogies shaped by Roman ethics which used to connote honourable public life which proved unavailing in times of war. As the new world order finds little application for the traditional forms of expression, both the pastoral elegy and the funeral eulogy for a *vir illustris* have lost their appeal. Though seemingly assuming the place of “the chief mourner” in the community of friends, Bernard thus yields to Rhoda, whose expression of lament in Section supervenes upon the traditions of male mourning.

POLYPHONIC LAMENT IN SECTION V RHODA’S RITES OF LEAVE-TAKING

Bernard’s official eulogy is supplanted by Rhoda’s words of grief. She resumes the lament as the final speaker within the polyphony of voices, being the only female voice in Section V. To some extent, Rhoda thus represents the figure of the female mourner traditionally present at funerals as a performer of ritual lamentation, traces of which can be found in Euripides’s tragedies, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, or modern ritual lamentations.⁵⁴ Rhoda’s thoughts close Section V, helping in the leave-taking of Percival through the symbolic act of throwing flowers into the Thames. The final observance completed, Percival’s imaginary funeral, as envisaged in Section V, is over.

Various critics note that Rhoda may be the most difficult voice in *The Waves* to follow owing to her “estrangement from her body” (Ondek Laurence 1991, 136). When compared to Neville (suspended out of time from the moment he receives the news) or Bernard (the observer of London life) Rhoda appears as a character whose detachment is of different nature from that exhibited by Neville (temporal detachment) or Bernard (spatial detachment): she lives in a dream state and explores the realms of the mind (Ondek Laurence 1991, 146). Her confrontation with a sudden death leads Rhoda in a direction opposite to that taken by Bernard: while Bernard turns to his newborn son, she searches for detachment and the final truth about the human condition by

⁵⁴ See Euripides’ *Suppliants* and the choir of mothers in despair. In Chaucer’s epic, see the fragment included in *The Knight’s Tale* in the description of “a company of ladies [...] [a]ll clothed in black” (Chaucer 1954, 49). On modern ritual lamentation, see Fishman 2008, 267–295.

concentrating upon images of decay and destruction. As Ondek Laurence puts it: “Rhoda is not the ‘thinking’ woman or the ‘thinking’ mind that Bernard represents, but the visionary, dreaming mind made flesh” (1991, 168). Notably, Rhoda’s speech becomes a token of subjective leave-taking of the deceased in an act of reconciliation, which, I argue, means no final consolation. It is in her soliloquies that the elegiac triad of lamentation–confrontation–consolation, as formulated by Vickery (2009, 1), is called into question: while Neville and Bernard may be interpreted as participating in the lamentation and confrontation processes, respectively, Rhoda is never consoled. Even if reconciled with death as part of life, she is hardly consoled in her grief after Percival’s fatal fall. In fact, she cannot be consoled since her wound is barely healed.

Rhoda resumes the speech where both Neville and Bernard have stopped, each in turn is evoked in her speech by virtue of character-specific rhetoric: like Bernard before her, Rhoda begins her soliloquy by addressing “them”, that is, the mourners whose gazes she directs towards “the figure that stood in the grove where the steeped-backed hills come down [who] falls in ruin” (Woolf 2000, 88).⁵⁵ In her subtle way, Rhoda also involves Neville in this opening of her speech since she employs one of the pastoral topoi, the topos of a beautiful youth in a solitary grove. In her short reference to “the figure robed in beauty” (Woolf 2000, 88) and the rhetorical question “What lovely boy?” (Woolf 2000, 89), for a moment, she bestows a pastoral touch upon her mourning speech. Later on, detached and lonely – “I am alone in a hostile world” (Woolf 2000, 88) – she walks down Oxford Street, heading towards Greenwich and the mouth of the River Thames so that she might perform her final rite – the offering of a bunch of flowers to Percival.

If examined in its entirety, her speech is imbued with images of death and decay. Since Rhoda’s contribution is part of a joint, if heteroglossic, mourning (Penner 2015, 77), she resumes the lament in the space that she shares with other mourners. In contrast to the two preceding elegists, however, she does so by focusing upon the repulsive aspects of London life. Initially, Rhoda admits “I am sick of prettiness” (Woolf 2000, 89), so in her speech the image of the doves mentioned by Bernard is exchanged for those of rooks and crabs and maggots. In her dismissal of “prettiness”,

⁵⁵ See Virgil, *Eclogue 5*, v. 43: “Daphis ego in silvis” on Daphnis’s epitaph, which may arguably be a source for the analysed sentence in *The Waves*.

the oak of the pastoral tradition is pictured as “cracked asunder”, with its “flowering branch [that] has fallen” (Woolf 2000, 88). While the elaborate linguistic texture of this fragment binds Rhoda’s lament with the previous speeches,⁵⁶ it may also be considered an example of what Walsh terms “Woolf’s elegiac figure-language” (2016, 200). Such figure-language, explains Walsh, “enact(s) a particular kind of language [...] which, composed by an assemblage of figures, simultaneously serves as a response to and expression of blows driven by death and loss” (2016, 200). To convey her pain, Rhoda thus depicts the world around her as a place of sorrow and ugliness, which Percival’s death has revealed to her. The repelling aspects of reality – the faces, “deformed, indifferent” (Woolf 2000, 89); “hate, jealousy, hurry and indifference frothed into the wild semblance of life” (Woolf 2000, 89); “sweat, and scent as horrible as sweat” (Woolf 2000, 90) – are gradually reduced to mere onomatopoeic exclamations in the series of “Ah[s]!” reported by Rhoda (Woolf 2000, 90): the “Ah!” hurled by a woman who, apparently, crushes into nothingness ancient Paris’s reckoning of beauty; the “Ah!” cried by a woman to her lover; the “Ah[s]!” that follow (Woolf 2000, 90). To my mind, the exclamations of “Ah!” link Rhoda’s speech to the ritual cries such as “aiai, oi, ea” (Fishman 2008, 269) known from the Greek tragic or pastoral traditions which Woolf appreciated (Walsh 2016, 210). Similar to the pain-stricken mothers in Euripides’ *Suppliants*, who exclaim “Ió moi” and “Ió Ió, moi moi”,⁵⁷ Rhoda turns her attention to the cries, by the same token reducing the significance of language. The cries thus not only betoken the elegiac character of her speech, but seem to suggest the sheer impossibility of conveying by means of language the pain experienced. Interestingly, Rhoda reports the “Ah!” series before finally asking the ontological question: “And what is a cry?” (Woolf 2000, 90). This question suggests the infeasibility of rendering human despair by means of words. Consequently, the cries of “Ah!” not only bespeak the classical inspiration behind Rhoda’s part in Section V, they also underscore the inadequacy of

⁵⁶ Attention should be paid to the choice of vocabulary which brings to mind the chiasmus of flash and fall in Neville’s section, which also links Section V to italicised prologue.

⁵⁷ See Euripides’ *Suppliants*, Epeisodion 1, v. 275: “Ió moi” and in Epodos, v. 828: “Ió Ió, moi moi”. See Bion of Smyrna, *Lament for Adonis*, “aiai” in v. 90. The Greek word for crying, “Aιάζω”, is onomatopoeic and it reappears in elegies. See the opening verses of the original *Lament for Adonis*.

language uttered by people in great distress. As Woolf argues in "On Not Knowing Greek", in certain cases "it is necessary to take that dangerous leap through the air without the support of words" (Woolf 1984, 30). Woolf continues, arguing: "The meaning is just on the far side of language. It is the meaning which in moments of astonishing excitement and stress we perceive in our minds without words" (Woolf 1984, 30). Apparently, the death of a close friend is such a "moment [...] of astonishing excitement" it calls for extra-linguistic means of expression.

Since words apparently fail her, the highpoint of Rhoda's lament is the act of throwing flowers into the Thames. Formally, such an ending resumes the elegiac traditions of leave-taking: traditional elegies contain descriptions of flowers, often elaborate, covering the hearse of the deceased.⁵⁸ Since Percival's coffin is in India, the Thames and the sea become a metonymical link with India and indeed the coffin. Rhoda's ritual homage is not conventional, though: the characteristic "vernal flowers" of the elegy (Lycidas v. 141) have been replaced by Rhoda's bunch of violets, "wind-bitten, almost deformed, without fruit or blossom" (Woolf 2000, 91). Thus, although Rhoda's physical gesture of lamentation conforms to the elegiac frame, the "elegiac figure-language" (Walsh 2016, 200) refuses the conventional and instead chooses the somewhat repelling images of decay. This qualitative change bespeaks the novelty in Woolf's elegy which offers a novel take upon the form of the elegy.

Rhoda's contribution is not desperate, though. Instead, it ends on a calm note. In her lament in Section V, Rhoda finally finds the answer to the question "To whom?" which, apparently, has concerned her from the beginning of *The Waves*: "Into the wave [...] I throw my violets, my offering to Percival" (Woolf 2000, 91), she says. Hardly consoled, she admits to have found something vital to her: "Look now at what Percival has given me" (Woolf 2000, 88). The truth she learns from Percival's fatal fall addresses the transience of beauty and human life and leads to the acceptance of death as an indispensable part of life. The initial feeling of disorientation with which she opens her lamentation – "All palpable forms of life have failed me" (Woolf 2000, 90) – is supplanted by words of "liberat[ing] understanding" (Woolf 2000, 91) when closing it with the assertion: "Wander no more, I say; this is the end" (Woolf 2000, 91).

⁵⁸ For example, Milton's *Lycidas*, vv. 138–151. See Bion of Smyrna, *Lament for Adonis*, v. 73f. There is more on elegiac convention in Alpers 1996, 81–112 and Abrams 1985, 73.

CONCLUSION

Section V of *The Waves* is an expression of mourning in both the individual and collective dimensions. Regardless of considerations concerning the nature of the six voices in *The Waves* – whether they are six individuals or six versions of the one individual⁵⁹ – intuitively, Section V can be viewed as a rendition of lamentation, which in literature has been absorbed into the form of the elegy. I suggest that the generic affiliation of the passage has impacted on the selection of the characters allowed to give voice to their pain in *The Waves*. The choice of Neville and not Susan – “whom he [Percival] loved” (Woolf 2000, 88) – as the lover’s voice may be explained by the pastoralism involved in Neville’s portrayal and the traditions of pastoral, elegiac writing with which Woolf engages in intertextual dialogue. Bernard, a male voice in the community of mourners, resumes the role the conventional eulogist whose credibility is questioned by the fact that he finally yields to Rhoda and retreats back to “life [that he wants] round [himself]” (Woolf 2000, 88). Indeed, it is Rhoda, a female mourner, who explores the margins of human experience and closes the elegy with her rites of mourning. The manner in which the rites are concluded betokens the immediacy of experience that is part of Woolf’s elegiac “figure-language” (Walsh 2016, 222):

Now I will relinquish; now I will let loose. Now I will at last free the checked, the jerked-back desire to be spent, to be consumed. We will gallop together over desert hills where the swallow dips her wings in dark pools and the pillars stand entire. Into the wave that dashes upon the shore, into the wave that flings its white foam to the uttermost corners of the earth, I throw my violets, my offering to Percival. (Woolf 2000, 91)

Consumed by her grief, Rhoda refuses to be consoled after Percival’s death in the manner she earlier deems possible for her friends, that is, for Louis who “will shepherd us if we will follow”; for the public official, Bernard; for “pirouetting” Jinny and Susan who will stand for a [mere] second with the telegram before her”;

⁵⁹ In one of her letters Woolf admitted: “But I did mean that in some vague way we are the same person, and not separate people. The six characters were supposed to be one” – Woolf in: Goldman in Sellers 2010, 69, Note 33. More on the issue in Briggs in Sellers 2009, 23.

and, finally, for Neville who will ask “What lovely boy” (Woolf 2000, 89). In contrast to them all, Rhoda chooses to pay her “tribute to Percival: withered violets, blackened violets” (Woolf 2000, 89). Futile as it is (Penner 2015, 84), the gesture seems to betoken the interlacement of death and life (Walsh 2016) that cannot be dismissed in Woolf’s prose in general, and in *The Waves* in particular. Her loss may be felt, but complete consolation never follows. Thus, the concept of the elegiac triad is only partially applicable, with its final, consolatory stage barely reached.

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