

The Education of Consciousness: Virginia Woolf's The Waves

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Abstract: Attempting to explore and push the margins of philosophy of education, this article describes Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and its characters, staying inside the and observing the education of their consciousness. The description offered is limited to educational reflections on *what happens*, avoiding normative questions and concerns. However, the conclusion hints towards ways in which philosophers of education who are interested in normative questions and concerns might approach this text in ways which this article does not. The expressions used in this paper – dispositions, consciousness, unconscious – are gestural and figurative rather than exhaustive and scientific. The argument is not concerned with what these words mean in general but rather with what they might mean and might elucidate for educational thought in the context of reading *The Waves*. This article rejects the need to do something un-literary by comprehensively elucidating key concepts, saying why they are important, relating them to everyday life, and defending claims like «dispositions are in-educable». The educational resonances of the text itself are presented as evidence, context, and point of interest. Implicit to the argument of this paper is a critique of limited and institutionally biased conceptions of experience as education.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf; consciousness; dispositions; unconscious; education; philosophy.

Recibido / Received: 15/12/2016

Aceptado / Accepted: 07/10/2017

1. Introduction

While Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* has long been understood as a pioneering exploration of the experience of consciousness, it has generally escaped the analysis of philosophers, who have tended to explore her more explicit engagement with philosophy and philosophers, *To the Lighthouse* (Duran, 2004; Luttrell, 2013; Parkes, 1982; Rosenbaum, 1983). It is therefore unsurprising that *The Waves* has also escaped the attention of philosophers of education. With this article, I hope to reveal *The Waves* as an extraordinary exposition of the education of consciousness. The philosophy of education presented in the novel is descriptive rather than prescriptive, and I shall argue that Woolf explores what does happen rather than

what should happen. However, despite Woolf's (and my own) lack of prescription, her exposition of the education of consciousness can itself be a resource for educators, and her insight into the complex relation between dispositions, consciousness and the external world, allows her readers access to incidences of experience ordinarily hidden from them. To learn about the education of consciousness in *The Waves* might be to become better equipped for understanding our own education, and the task of teaching those for whom this education is also occurring.

More traditional philosophers of education might find that where this article ends is where they would want it to begin. I describe *The Waves* and its characters, but stay inside the minds of the subjects. The description I offer is limited to educational reflections on *what happens*¹, avoiding normative or prescriptive questions and concerns. However, in my conclusion I hint towards ways in which philosophers of education who are interested in normative and prescriptive questions and concerns might approach this text in ways which I have not. The expressions I use in this paper – dispositions and consciousness – are gestural and figurative rather than exhaustive and scientific. I am not concerned with what these words mean in general but rather with what they might mean and might elucidate for educational thought in the context of reading *The Waves*. This article rejects the need to do something which undermines the literary space opened up by Woolf's text by comprehensively elucidating key concepts (which are instead developed alongside my reading), saying why they are important (which I will take for granted, as Woolf seems to suggest one must), relating them to everyday life (what is more «everyday» than relationality?), and defending claims like «dispositions are in-educable» (which is a fundamental assumption made in Woolf's text). The educational resonances of the text itself are my evidence, my context, and my point of interest.

The small number of philosophical approaches to the novel include Suzette A. Henke's (1989) «Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*: A phenomenological reading» which applies a Heideggerian lens to the novel, an approach previously critiqued by Mark Hussey's (1986) *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction*, because of the lack of sensitivity it shows to the philosophy he sees as inherent to Virginia Woolf's work. While more recently, Michael Lackey (2006) has turned his attention to critiquing not just the application of philosophers' or theorists' work to Woolf's but also the implication that there was an inherent philosophy to it. In his «Modernist Anti-Philosophicalism and Virginia Woolf's Critique of Philosophy» he presents a strong case for Woolf as an anti-philosophical thinker due to what he argues is «the philosophers' blindness to the unconscious» (Lackey, 2006, p. 93). In one of the only contemporary analyses of *The Waves*, Maureen Chun argues that «consciousness is radically depersonalized and physicalized in the novel» (Chun, 2012, p. 55). While I agree that there is always an element of depersonalizing and physicalizing of consciousness in the novel, I contest that consciousness in fact becomes more personal and less physical within the first few pages of the novel and the progressively throughout. My argument is not laid out explicitly in terms of the unconscious but it does attempt to account for and respond to dispositions and experiences which exceed and effect on conscious or even simply intentional

¹ Which follows a philosophical trajectory I began to develop in Bojesen (2015).

thought; that is to say, passively. These dispositions are the aspects of individuals which remain constant and might affect behaviours and responses to experiences in sometimes predictable ways. *The Waves* presents a world where these dispositions cannot be educated or even changed, however, because consciousness *can* be educated, it might be possible to enhance the best of our dispositions and repress the worst – or, of course, the opposite. Woolf's novel shows what happens when consciousness is educated and illuminates conditions of existence that underpin educational experience.

Through the different protagonists (who we will meet in the readings below), Woolf provides six examples of the different ways in which these conditions play out. The novel is divided into nine sections, the first three of which are dedicated, in chronological order, to the childhood, youth and young adulthood of its six protagonists. The novel's complex narrative structure does not easily lend itself to brief synopsis as the six characters' individual narratives move further apart from one another as the novel progresses. Maurice Blanchot (2014, p. 133) even went so far as to say of the novel that, «plot is not only of no importance, it is imperceptible». He makes this specific claim in the context of a broader argument on the paradoxes of the novel where he goes on to tell us that

novelists have no reason to think that a novel is good just because the plot is well handled or the heroes come from the normal world. On the contrary, a novelist must beware of the easy options provided by imitation, as well as the false resources of character analysis, psychology, or social history. It is within himself, in his inner dream, that he can best reach the mysterious reality whose revelation can only take place in the novel (Blanchot, 2014, p. 133).

As such, instead of offering plot summary and character outlines, I will move on from my introduction to the basic structure of the novel, and simply gesture towards my close reading of the text, which is where I attempt to come into proximity with the novel's revelation of Woolf's «mysterious reality». There is no single story, but rather six, sometimes interrelated, presentations of conscious thought. The first three sections of the novel are the focus of this essay as they provide its most useful examples of the education of consciousness. I will argue that these sections of *The Waves* illustrate how an individual's dispositions underpin their education of consciousness and their conscious understanding of who they are. Even though each individual's dispositions play a significant part in conditioning their education, they do not themselves seem educable or changeable. Dispositions, in the context of reading *The Waves*, are also not another name for an «essential self» but rather one of many relations effecting on the conscious comprehension, agency, and passive receptivity of self that, for a few of the characters, is often in question. The structure of experience for these individuals is at the educative intersection of their dispositions, their consciousness and the external world. The experience of this intersection changes who they are, consciously but seemingly also unintentionally, as well as educating the very consciousness that enables them to conceive of themselves as a self. Crucially, this «self» is itself a site of mobile relationality, correspondent with Leo Bersani's (2010, p. 110) definition, whereby, «Relationality is grounded in

antagonism and misapprehension, which means that to meet the world is always to see the world as a place where I am not – or, if I am there, it is as alienated and/or unrecognizable being».

The reading I provide here might, then, offer less of an opportunity for educators, than an indication of a limit. The implicit claim might then be that there is only so much that can be done in formal, intentional education; especially given that the dynamics required for the education of consciousness reside within the relations produced between and within dispositions, consciousness and experience, often set at quite a (non-physical) «distance» from more empirically verifiable external factors. Equally, these relations are not necessarily or always actively sought or controlled by the individual children or responsible adults, revealing a somewhat passive dimension to educational experience.² And, therefore, the significance of these forms of relation, and perhaps especially the relations produced by a broader conception of language, pose important questions for the educational subject in what we call the «information age»³.

2.

The first section of the novel begins with descriptions of almost entirely passive experiences. There is very little content to the thoughts of the children that could not be described as bluntly empirical. They see («a ring...a slab of pale yellow...a globe») and hear («a sound...something stamping») but they do not act on what they see or hear (Woolf, 1931, p. 4). However, their perceptions quickly turn to analogies, allowing their empirical experiences to become a part of an abstracted consciousness: «The leaves are gathered round the window like pointed ears», said Susan (Woolf, 1931, p. 4). An overlap between internal and external experience is already apparent. Memory allows the children to make these analogies and, as external experiences multiply in number, so do the resources of memory. The children all experience different things, so their memories are different and therefore the analogies they are able to make are, once again, different. For Woolf the complexity of individual consciousness seems to begin not with empirical experience but in the relation of memory to empirical experience through analogy. However, the disposition *towards* consciousness is not simply the sum of their memory and experience. Consciousness is itself something to be *related to* by their unique dispositions. One of the children, Louis, shows what happens when his dispositions run contrary to the elicitation of a conscious determination of subjectivity:

«Now they have all gone», said Louis. «I am alone». They have gone into the house for breakfast, and I am left standing by the wall among the flowers. It is very early, before lessons. Flower after flower is specked on the depths of green. The petals are harlequins. Stalks rise from the black hollows beneath. The flowers swim like fish made of light upon the dark, green waters. I hold a stalk in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world,

² A subject I have explored in detail in Bojesen (2016a).

³ Which I have written about the implications of in Bojesen (2016b).

through earth dry with brick, and damp earth, through veins of lead and silver. I am all fibre... (Woolf, 1931, p. 5).

When left alone he loses his identity to his surroundings. His self at once disintegrates and is extended to become his context: «I am the stalk». However, even this relatively radical experience of depersonalization is not without the resource of memory, here employed as imagination. The experience is one that Louis desires, preferring to be «all fibre» over the company of the other children. He hears them calling for him but would prefer to «be unseen» (Woolf, 1931, p. 6). It seems that his socially and consciously determined subjective self has disintegrated, leaving behind an asocial and experientially extended self: He is the stalk, he is not Louis. This experience is not the realisation of an existential self or a Heideggerian authentic moment but merely one among many examples of where dispositions and consciousness clearly reveal a subject that is inseparable from objects; or, to put it another way, where notions of insides and outsides become indistinct and arbitrary. Louis's experience here is exemplary only in that it reveals the complex relations that – albeit in different ways – condition all consciousness. For Louis, this intense experience continues until he is found and kissed by Jinny and «all is shattered» (Woolf, 1931, p. 6).

A few passages after Louis's experience of being the stalk it becomes clear that the children are now in a school classroom. The reader does not know if minutes or years have passed. The children's streams of consciousness continue to unfold at the unique intersections of their memory and empirical experience but at the same time it is made clear that their very disposition towards language differs from one another's. Louis's asociality remains, but now becomes bound up in his dispositions towards language, national identity and the social hierarchy: «I will not conjugate the verb», said Louis, «until Bernard has said it. My father is a banker in Brisbane and I speak with an Australian accent. I will wait and copy Bernard. He is English» (Woolf, 1931, p. 10). It is now apparent that his fixation on his difference from the others is informed both by his asociality and also by his conscious anxiety, which now starts the process of taking the place of his asocial disposition. But Louis is not the only one who is different. All of the children are also not so much shaped by a shared language as they shape it for themselves; or to be more precise, they colour it and move it:

«Those are white words», said Susan, «like stones one picks up by the seashore».

«They flick their tails right and left as I speak them», said Bernard. «They wag their tails; they flick their tails; they move through the air in flocks, now this way, now that way, moving all together, now dividing, now coming together».

«Those are yellow words, those are fiery words», said Jinny. «I should like a fiery dress, a yellow dress, a fulvous dress to wear in the evening».

«Each tense», said Neville, «means differently. There is an order in this world; there are distinctions, there are differences in this world, upon whose verge I step. For this is only a beginning» (Woolf, 1931, p. 10).

Taken together these examples seem to reveal an underlying relation that each child has to their linguistic consciousness, as well as from their linguistic consciousness of the world. Louis, Susan, Bernard, Jinny and Neville all come to language differently. Language and linguistic consciousness are also empirical objects in *The Waves*. The Latin words the children are reading in class are perceived by a non-linguistic consciousness or self and they are themselves assisted by conscious analogy to linguistically anchored objects or experiences held in their memory and called upon by their imagination. The exception to this is Rhoda, for whom written language does not yet *mean* in the same way as language that is spoken or thought. Because she is unable to complete the exercises that the teacher has set, she is held back alone after class:

The figures mean nothing now. Meaning has gone. The clock ticks. The two hands are convoys marching through a desert. The black bars on the clock face are green oases. The long hand has marched ahead to find water. The other, painfully stumbles among hot stones in the desert. It will die in the desert (Woolf, 1931, pp. 10-11).

Rhoda's imagination takes flight as the figures on the page continue to mean nothing. While for the other children the written words not only had meaning but unique meaning – differing according to their dispositions and memories – for Rhoda their non-meaning has meaning in and of itself. The difficulty that the reader is presented with is the decision as to whether or not Rhoda's dispositions prohibit her from engaging with the written words or, instead, if she does not yet have the conscious capacity to understand them. Either way, the education of consciousness is key to both increasing the capacity for learning and understanding, as well as creating a conscious disposition which might counteract or take the place of the disposition.

3.

In the second section of *The Waves* the passages recording individual consciousness grow longer and the language becomes more advanced. In this section it also becomes clear that Woolf has separated the sections into subsections set into separate periods of time. The beginning of the section is set at the children's first arrival at secondary school, whereas it ends at the start of a summer holiday. The major change in terms of the consciousness of most of the protagonists is that conscious predicates have more thoroughly begun to take the place of their dispositions. The clear disjunction between dispositions and linguistic consciousness apparent in the first section begins to disappear. This is either because linguistic consciousness is more fully able to articulate the dispositions than before or rather, as I argue, that its predicates have begun to co-opt those earlier dispositions. The more capable the children become at thinking in language the less likely they are to be influenced by those dispositions. Therefore, even if the initial disposition towards language is predicated by dispositions, the education of linguistic consciousness comes at the cost of pre-linguistic dispositions. Alongside the disappearance of these dispositions

is the disappearance of the children's passivity. Their thoughts are consistently directed towards active behaviour or opinionated reflection on experiences they are subjected to. What this section of *The Waves* begins more noticeably to illustrate is how language, or more specifically, linguistic consciousness, *gets in the way of* experience. To put it another way, as it develops, linguistic consciousness becomes an increasingly dominant aspect of experience for the children. Their dispositions are no longer mediated by their thoughts but rather repressed by them.

This experience of language and linguistic consciousness standing between dispositions and the world is articulated in different ways by all of the protagonists. Bernard's opening monologue shows that this process, is for him at least, an active form of defence against the emotional experience the world around him provokes on his first day at school: «I must make phrases and phrases and so interpose something hard between myself and the stare of housemaids, the stare of clocks, staring faces, indifferent faces, or I shall cry» (Woolf, 1931, p. 16). Language is not only the barrier that exists to stop his tears from flowing but a barrier between himself and the world. However, this barrier soon begins to become the most definitive aspect of his self. The same is true for Louis, who experiences the use of language as a means of conveying or creating perceptions of identity. He hears other boys boasting but feels that he cannot join in, «My uncle is the best shot in England. My cousin is Master of Foxhounds». Boasting begins. And I cannot boast, for my father is a banker in Brisbane, and I speak with an Australian accent» (Woolf, 1931, pp. 16-17). In the first section of the novel Louis does not want to speak in class because of this same self-consciousness, and here its repetition is striking because it indicates a persistent conscious preoccupation with what he perceives as a hereditary inadequacy. His concern for the effect his accent will have on how he is perceived reveals additional tensions that can exist between self, language and world.

For Neville, on the other hand, language is primarily something external to be learned and enjoyed. When he arrives at the school he sees the library, «where I shall explore the exactitude of the Latin language, and step firmly upon the well-laid sentences, and pronounce the explicit, the sonorous hexameters of Virgil, of Lucretius; and chant with a passion that is never obscure or formless the loves of Catullus, reading from a big book, a quarto with margins» (Woolf, 1931, p. 17). Language here is not the language of internal consciousness but rather of external experience, although as the first section of the novel made clear, these distinctions can be relatively arbitrary. What sets Neville apart from the other two boys is his apparent joy upon arrival at school and his perception of language as something to be enjoyed rather than to be used as a means of asking questions about oneself. Despite the fact that the language Neville is interested in engaging with is not his own, his relation to it exhibits his greater capacity to retain his dispositions. Language is not so much constitutive or representative of who he is but rather it is what he is predisposed towards. However, maintaining his dispositions at the cost of the development of a more conscious identity, with its concomitant predicates, means that even though he might know what he likes he does not necessarily know who he is.

For the girls, language is less an object of direct concern but rather a means of articulating the distance from their sense of self they have come to feel. Rhoda

regards the «desks with wells for the ink. We shall write our exercises in ink here. But here I am nobody. I have no face. This great company, all dressed in brown serge, has robbed me of my identity. We are all callous, unfriended» (Woolf, 1931, p. 18). And for Susan, «All here is false; all is meretricious» (Woolf, 1931, p. 17). School has robbed them of their sense of identity and put them in a context of artificiality, the same kind of artificiality the experience of language exhibits more explicitly for the boys. The two girls' dispositions make them feel entirely out of place and they are both forced to live this disjunction between disposition and experience. Only Jinny seems un-phased by school, concerned more with the colours of dresses she would like to wear and see worn (Woolf, 1931, p. 17). Later she falls more fully into superficial concerns: «I hate the small looking-glass on the stairs», said Jinny. «It shows our heads only; it cuts off our heads. And my lips are too wide, and my eyes are too close together; I show my gums too much when I laugh» (Woolf, 1931, p. 22). The language of physicality absorbs her linguistic consciousness as she embraces (however self-critically) that which Rhoda and Susan feel alienated by. In the first section of the novel, words make Jinny think of the kinds of dresses she would like to wear (Woolf, 1931, p. 10) but in this second section she has become entirely disconnected from the written word: «When I read, a purple rim runs round the black edge of the textbook. Yet I cannot follow any word through its changes. I cannot follow any thought from present to past» (Woolf, 1931, p. 22). Words that are not directly to do with her sense of self and its attendant superficiality become unintelligible, seemingly through their lack of relevance to her primary concern: her appearance.

4.

The pattern or rhythm of the internal monologues changes once again in the third section. Bernard receives three monologues, interspersed with two from Neville, but Louis, Susan, Rhoda and Jinny follow in that order with only one each. Bernard's opening sentence sets the introspective tone for this section, focusing on their young adulthood: «The complexity of things becomes more close», said Bernard, «here at college, where the stir and pressure of life are so extreme, where the excitement of mere living becomes daily more urgent. Every hour something new is unburied in the great bran pie. What am I? I ask. This? No, I am that» (Woolf, 1931, p. 42). The mutability of identity is amplified for Bernard due to his constant reflection on it. Unlike in the previous section where Bernard simply analysed his use of language, here he uses language to address himself:

you understand, *you*, my self, who always comes at a call (that would be a harrowing experience to call and for no one to come; that would make the midnight hollow, and explains the expression of old men in clubs-they have given up calling for a self who does not come), you understand that I am only superficially represented by what I was saying tonight (Woolf, 1931, p. 42).

It is not just that he does not know who he is, it is that he is conscious of several selves. Here there are at least two selves, one addressing the other. However, it

is not clear if these statements are directed from the position of dispositions to a linguistic consciousness or rather the other way around. Either way, there is clearly a separation between the self as «superficially represented» and actually experienced. Despite his confidence as to there being a self who comes at a call, «something remains floating, unattached» (Woolf, 1931, p. 43). His identity remains un-unified, scattered, and his education has not helped him to develop his sense of self but has rather contributed to complicating it. A little later in this monologue (or should it be called a dialogue or internal dialectic?) he attempts to simplify these problems of consciousness by returning to empirical certitude: «When I say to myself, «Bernard», who comes? A faithful, sardonic man, disillusioned, but not embittered. A man of no particular age or calling. Myself, merely. It is he who now takes the poker and rattles the cinders so that they fall in showers through the grate» (Woolf, 1931, pp. 44-45). Only by absencing the complexity of his linguistic consciousness can he convince himself of his identity, which in itself would entirely invalidate the thought of dispositions or even a self, bound up in linguistic consciousness. The inability to bring his conscious and physical selves into alignment seems to have no obvious educational solution: there is nothing he can learn which will get him out of this predicament. And, in fact, the more he learns about himself and his experience the more complicated and unsolvable this problem becomes.

In a very different way Neville also expresses these problems of self-knowledge and the inability to learn who he is or who he should be: «I do not know myself sometimes, or how to measure and name and count out the grains that make me what I am» (Woolf, 1931, p. 46). However, unlike Bernard, Neville is an eternal student of others, without ever seemingly finding his own voice in literary or existential terms. While Bernard is caught up in his multiple selves, Neville is defined by his relations to external others, whether they are his friends or writers of great books. On the occasion of a meeting with Bernard he ponders the effect of others on the self:

Something now leaves me; something goes from me to meet that figure who is coming, and assures me that I know him before I see who it is. How curiously one is changed by the addition, even at a distance, of a friend. How useful an office one's friends perform when they recall us. Yet how painful to be recalled, to be mitigated, to have one's self adulterated, mixed up, become part of another. As he approaches I become not myself but Neville mixed with somebody – with whom? – with Bernard? Yes, it is Bernard, and it is to Bernard that I shall put the question, Who am I? (Woolf, 1931, p. 46).

The way in which Neville perceives the affective consequences his friend has on his identity indicates that he does not think of his self as being essential but rather socially mutable. It is not just that his identity adapts to different settings but that it actually changes. This relation echoes that of Neville's perception of language, in the second section, as something external to be enjoyed. This relation to language exhibits a singular disposition but comes at the cost of a conscious sense of self. When he engages with a friend he also partly becomes that friend or at least a self greatly affected by the presence of that friend. Asking Bernard the question of who he is not only implies that Bernard might know him better than he knows

himself but also that he could potentially teach him who he is. However, even though Neville elevates Bernard to the position of a potential educator of his identity, he is also critical of the way in which Bernard seems to educate himself in his own. His internal monologue directs itself almost accusingly at Bernard and his modelling of his identity on Byron and a reading the poet as a mirror image of himself:

You have been reading Byron. You have been marking the passages that seem to approve of your own character. I find marks against all those sentences which seem to express a sardonic yet passionate nature; a moth-like impetuosity dashing itself against hard glass (Woolf, 1931, p. 48).

This realisation of his friend's imaginative indulgence in exploring the Byronic aspects of his identity leads him to simplify his own understanding of himself. Neville no longer asks himself who he is but insists, «I am one person – myself. I do not impersonate Catullus, whom I adore» (Woolf, 1931, p. 48). Even if Neville does not know who he is, he knows that his identity is singular rather than plural, or at least attempts to assert this fact to himself. Bernard, on the other hand, becomes more than comfortable with his plurality of selves. Although there is some ambiguity, it seems Neville has got frustrated with him and told him «You are not Byron; you are your self». To which Bernard's internal response is: «To be contracted by another person into a single being-how strange» (Woolf, 1931, p. 49). When Neville leaves him, he feels his «familiar» return and his plural self restored:

The mocking, the observant spirits who, even in the crisis and stab of the moment, watched on my behalf now come flocking home again. With their addition, I am Bernard; I am Byron; I am this, that and the other. They darken the air and enrich me, as of old, with their antics, their comments, and cloud the fine simplicity of my moment of emotion. For I am more selves than Neville thinks. We are not simple as our friends would have us to meet their needs (Woolf, 1931, p. 49).

Bernard has learned to accept his disposition towards plural identity but it is a disposition which is not easily communicable. For Neville, Bernard's Byronicisms are a façade, whereas for Bernard himself they are a part of a constant and remnant experience of multiple selves. Bernard knows he is not Byron but he also knows that *part* of him is. Neville does not know who he is except in the company of others while Bernard cannot be himself in the company of others; his familiar goes into hiding and his plurality becomes reduced to a superficial and misleading singularity.

Louis's experience of his own consciousness and comprehension of his identity is similar to Bernard's in that he does not feel comfortable in the presence of others. However, for him this is because he is so self-conscious about certain aspects of his identity that his relations to others are internally disrupted. For Louis, «The streamers of my consciousness waver out and are perpetually torn and distressed by their disorder. I cannot therefore concentrate on my dinner» (Woolf, 1931, p. 51). His disorder is not analogous to Bernard's plurality, nor Neville's reliance on his friends to provide him with his identity. Louis and Jinny are, for very different

reasons, the two characters who are most clear about their identities. They do not ponder philosophically about who they are. Louis is entirely clear about the definition of his identity as the son of a banker in Brisbane, who has an Australian accent. But the affirmation of this identity constantly isolates and undermines him in the world around him. He feels as if his existence is counter to the rhythm of that shared by other people he comes across. While sitting in a café he becomes unsettled by his exclusion:

Here is the central rhythm; here the common mainspring. I watch it expand, contract; and then expand again. Yet I am not included. If I speak, imitating their accent, they prick their ears, waiting for me to speak again, in order that they may place me – if I come from Canada or Australia, I, who desire above all things to be taken to the arms with love, am alien, external. I, who would wish to feel close over me the protective waves of the ordinary, catch with the tail of my eye some far horizon; am aware of hats bobbing up and down in perpetual disorder (Woolf, 1931, p. 52).

He defines himself by his externality and therefore in opposition to the world around him. There is very little content to his conception of his own identity, as it is purely a structural relation to a world he cannot conceive of himself as being a part of. With every social experience he relearns his difference and reaffirms his arrhythmic existence. His formal education has not helped him here and neither has the informal education of his consciousness. However, his externality also gifts him with the extraordinary perception of the rhythm of the world, even if he is excluded from it. It is his sense of its rhythmic perfection that both terrifies and attracts him. The knowledge he has of the common is in this sense mis-educative in terms of his personal and social growth.

Jinny is also defined by her perception of a kind of rhythm to the world, however, she feels very much included in it. The experience of the self-certainty of her inclusion is clarified by Woolf when Jinny attends a party in London:

All is exact, prepared. My hair is swept in one curve. My lips are precisely red. I am ready now to join men and women on the stairs, my peers. I pass them, exposed to their gaze, as they are to mine. Like lightning we look but do not soften or show signs of recognition. Our bodies communicate. This is my calling. This is my world (Woolf, 1931, p. 56).

Her preoccupations are still with superficiality which simplifies her existence and allows her access to the world that Louis (and all the other, now, young adults) feel set back from in various ways. For Jinny there is no depth of character or critical self-reflection. She has learned the rhythm of the world but has not developed the complexity of her consciousness. This is not to say that her dispositions are not in play. In fact, her superficiality can be traced along a line from her early childhood experiences. She is the least conflicted and least complex character because her dispositions were always simple, physical and superficial. Her unquestioning

approach to the world is not one that can be learned. On the other hand, Rhoda, who also attends the party Jinny is at, is harshly affected by its falsity:

What I say is perpetually contradicted. Each time the door opens I am interrupted. I am not yet twenty-one. I am to be broken. I am to be derided all my life. I am to be cast up and down among these men and women, with their twitching faces, with their lying tongues, like a cork on a rough sea. Like a ribbon of weed I am flung far every time the door opens. I am the foam that sweeps and fills the uttermost rims of the rocks with whiteness; I am also a girl, here in this room (Woolf, 1931, p. 59).

What Jinny embraces, Rhoda detests. But what Rhoda cannot understand is that Jinny did not make some ordinary choice to be superficial, it is rather a dispositional trait of her character, one which she has learned to accommodate and develop. Rhoda cannot be herself in this world and imagines herself as being at the mercy of it. In the same way that she was unable to grasp the meaning of the words given to her in the classroom in the first section and was left alone to deal with the problem, she is now alone in a crowd, unable to give or find meaning in society and, at the same time, is at the mercy of it. The analogies she draws between herself and the cork and the ribbon indicate the absence of control she conceives herself as being able to assert on the world around her as well as on her own identity and the paths she might wish to take.

In this third section of the book we begin to see clearly, in all of the manifestations of consciousness the characters experience, what Leo Bersani (2015, p. 94) describes when he tells us that:

Our receptiveness to external stimuli is of course fraught with risk, most obviously in our political lives. Nothing is easier, or more disastrous, than to meet the anxiety-provoking demands of stimuli from the world by attaching them to representations meant to liberate us immediately from their demands. Demands that might expand or extend consciousness into new relations with other subjects among whom we live are projected back to their presumed sources as threats that must be fled. The refusal of the work all stimuli demand from us can take the form of an attack on an otherness that, we fear, would destroy us.

Woolf seems, in *The Waves*, to chart these demands, accessions, and refusals, within the realm of consciousness itself. We see, at once, how Jinny's dispositionally grounded ability to respond to her «calling» allows her to sidestep the provocation of anxiety in a manner the other characters cannot. While Louis, in almost the exact reversal of Jinny's position, defines himself structurally in opposition to, and against the world, as «alien...external». Neville, Bernard and Rhoda, on the other hand, oscillate between these two positions; Neville in his plurality, Bernard with his Byronisms, Rhoda perhaps especially, conceiving herself as not of the world but at its mercy. What Woolf helps to illustrate, though, is that the conscious play of our receptivity and refusal is fundamentally produced in relation to our dispositions, which seem, in *The Waves* at least, to be in-educable. Maybe, then, even as Woolf

shows us how consciousness comes to be educated, she also repeats an older, more elemental, lesson: ἦθος ἀνθρώπων δαίμων⁴.

5. Conclusion

The dispositions of the characters in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* guide, for better or worse, their relation to consciousness and the external world. Consciousness is itself shown to be somewhat external to these dispositions. The education of consciousness that each character undergoes either mediates these dispositions, takes their place, or exists in complex dialogue in relation to them. The experience of formal education that each child is able to have is caught up in the personal and social anxieties that accompany the unique incidence of their dispositions, their linguistic consciousness and the external world. Their learning is conditioned by these unique co-incidences and, as such, they all come to language, education and the social differently. The characters who seem happiest are those who are best able to align their dispositions with their linguistic consciousness and external experience. However, there is no model offered for how this can be accomplished. Memory plays a significant part in their thought process but it too is subject to their dispositions. Memory in *The Waves* is a repository of objects to be drawn upon by consciousness, sometimes more or less under the influence of dispositions. From the perspective of educational philosophy, these first three sections of the novel are about two things: the part dispositions play in the education of consciousness and the in-educability of those dispositions. Because there is no narrator to tell the reader what the dispositions of the children are, they must be read in the negative through their streams of consciousness. As they grow older some of the children (Bernard and Jinny) learn consciously to communicate their dispositions to themselves but for most, because their very relation to linguistic consciousness and experience is conditioned by these dispositions, they become trapped in experiences which put their dispositions and consciousness at odds with one another.

The philosophy of education in *The Waves* is descriptive rather than prescriptive. That said, the description of the education of consciousness that the novel communicates presents several questions to educational thinking and practice. How is it possible for educators to discern the dispositions of learners? How do educators or learners determine if consciousness should be educated as a means to better facilitate their dispositions or, rather, to take their place? And, if this is, in fact, determinable, what part can the educator play in this largely «internal» activity? While it is not the place of this essay to answer these questions the examples of the education of consciousness presented by Woolf in *The Waves* provides important tools with which to explore them. By better understanding the ways in which the education of consciousness occurs from *inside* the minds of subjects, we might think about our differently about the education of our own consciousness, and educators might think more clearly about how they might respond from the outside. The primary «educator» in Woolf's novel cannot be determined, as it exists in between the fields of dispositions, consciousness and experience. One certainty, though,

⁴ «One's bearing shapes one's fate», in Heraclitus (2001).

is that intentional activities of external individuals (including those socially defined as educators) seem, in Woolf's estimation, to have much less of an effect on the education of our consciousness than many educators or philosophers of education might assume.

6. References

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