

*Boredom and Individualism in
Virginia Woolf's The Voyage Out*

Aimless, trivial, meaningless, oh no – what she had seen at tea made it impossible for her to believe that. The little jokes, the chatter, the inanities of the afternoon had shriveled before her eyes. Underneath the likings and spites, the comings together and partings, great things were happening – terrible things because they were so great. Her sense of safety was shaken, as if beneath twigs and dead leaves she had seen the movement of a snake. It seemed to her that a moment's respite was allowed, a moment's make-believe, and then again the profound and reasonless law asserted itself, moulding them all to its own liking, making and destroying.¹

Launching her writing career after her father's death in 1904, Virginia Woolf became a public woman of letters just months after the Women's Social and Political Union formed and as feminists took to the streets, newspapers, and parliament in the cause of women's political and social freedom. The literary works of Woolf's feminist modernist peers May Sinclair and Dorothy Richardson present women's lack of selfhood as a fact that must be overcome, but the determined individuals they create cannot exist in genuine and prolonged social relation with others. Their selves are closely guarded secrets; their success is by definition marginal. *The Voyage Out* takes up the question of whether a woman can be a self-determining individual within the conventions and institutions of patriarchal society and, through Rachel Vinrace's failure, seems to answer with a resounding "no." But *The Voyage Out* is a fascinating exploration of this question, in particular through its textual use of boredom. Woolf uses the diffuse mood of boredom as a vehicle by which to express doubt not only about a young woman's ability to access any meaning or individual purpose, but, more broadly, to question individualism and the systems of knowing by which humans understand purpose and meaning.

The Voyage Out can be a disturbing book, precisely because it undermines narrative traditions in which meaning is embedded and replaces them with yawning gaps, shifts in perspective, odd and jarring images,

and a lack of narrative closure, all of which threaten meaning itself. There is a persistent, inhuman element in the novel that makes it more than a feminist protest novel. At the time of its publication critics called it a “bewildering” novel that left the reader unsure “of the meaning of it all.”² As Woolf’s contemporary Allan Monkhouse has noted, the reader detects in the novel, like a bored woman herself, a “certain insolence of withdrawal from a world condemned as ponderous or meaningless.”³ Portrayed diffusely, Rachel Vinrace is the apparent center of this uncertain world. Like so many women featured in literature in the early twentieth century, Rachel Vinrace is silent, vague, and more of an absence than a presence.⁴ She has failed the qualifications of post-Cartesian selfhood in which access to the truth is defined within knowledge.⁵ Rachel knows nothing; she thinks and feels, but she is an outsider to a system that produces knowing individuals. Yet where Rachel Vinrace might be pigeonholed as another bored woman of limited possibilities – and she is that – she also escapes those possibilities through her curious illness and death at the end of the novel. Here *The Voyage Out* distinguishes itself as a far more interesting, far more experimental novel than at first it might appear. *The Voyage Out* refuses to privilege the individual as source of meaning and organizing principle either of knowledge *or* of the novel as form. Rachel is a featured person in the story, but importantly and notably, the novel begins and ends in others’ stories, as if to remind the reader that no one person is so remarkable as to inform what is knowable and significant. In Woolf’s first attempt, the novel becomes a form by which to posit an openness to being outside of, or beyond, the individual – a form she would master in her later works.

In *The Voyage Out*, there are multiple boredoms. On one level, Woolf protests, alongside May Sinclair and Dorothy Richardson, women’s difficulty in achieving meaning in the male-formed world and presents boredom, often quite humorously, as a side effect of this confrontation. On another level, however, Woolf presents boredom much in the way that Martin Heidegger described profound boredom in his 1929–1930 lectures on the *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, as an indeterminate mood that undoes all interest and possibility and in which time becomes an empty, yawning expanse. This form of boredom is an unmooring of all meaning-making possibilities in which time functions much like space does in making relative, and therefore irrelevant, all human action. Woolf’s focus on the disclosure of being, just as Heidegger’s, eschews an instrumental view of life and living; boredom as a being made open to that which is closed to us, “the *indifference*

enveloping beings as a whole,”⁶ is the inverse of the positivist, capitalist form of boredom as lack of aim presented by early-twentieth-century feminists.⁷ *The Voyage Out*, written and rewritten repeatedly between 1908 and 1915, is concerned not just with the political representation of the bored woman as a failed individual, but in representing boredom as fruitful attunement to a way of being and accessing existence in terms other than positivist individualism. *The Voyage Out* presents knowing as necessary to the modern subject formation of the individual, and demonstrates how knowing subjects reduce other subjects to objects simply as a by-product of that knowing. But the novel presents individual existences of subjects and objects only to supplant them with boredom. Boredom unravels subjects as separate from objects and leaves one empty simply because it presents one with being that cannot be known, the indifference of time and being itself.

WOOLF'S EXPERIENCES WITH BOREDOM

Woolf was no stranger to boredom. Her own earliest diaries, recorded at age fifteen after a breakdown following her mother's death, observe over and over again the “dull,” “uninteresting,” and “melancholy” existence she led as she endured a partial version of the rest cure so often prescribed to “neurasthenic” women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁸ Woolf defined boredom and its more prolonged form, depression, as symptomatic of the stifled young women of her time. In her diary of 1905 she remarked of her sister Vanessa's good friend Margery “Snow” Snowden: “Snow to lunch, rather depressed, in body & mind, like all these vagrant & mildly discontented young women – not enough enthusiasm to carry them through with a swing, & so their existence seems to drag, & lack point rather.”⁹ In her memoir *The Edwardian Lady*, Woolf's childhood friend Susan Grosvenor, later known as Lady Tweedsmuir,¹⁰ reinforced the idea that young women of the Edwardian period were living muted lives. She explains, “The girls of my generation were supposed to marry and marry well . . . They were supposed to fill up their time with a little painting, a little reading, some music, to stay about in country houses, and generally play a sort of waiting game until the right (or wrong) man came along.”¹¹ These women were painfully aware of their own suppression, as Lady Tweedsmuir relates: “Many of my contemporaries who had been brought up in the strictest sect of young ladyhood rebelled against their enforced idleness and complained to their friends. My cousin, Hilda Lyttleton said bitterly to me one day, ‘I want to do

something better than rush up and down Oxford Street hunting for beastly pieces of tulle.”¹²

“Enforced idleness” was a generational plague, observed and rebelled against by Woolf and her contemporaries. Conspicuously, “enforced” idleness implies a social system that rewards idleness, whereas boredom is perceived as an internal state, enforced from within. Boredom hovers between individual and collective experience; the discreet entity of one’s self is pierced (bored), and there is no longer an impregnable barrier between what is outside and what is inside. Woolf exploits this unique construction of boredom to develop her narrative style.

THE EGO AND ITS OWN BOREDOM

Boredom’s slippage between individual and social, or group, experiences is mirrored in modernist understandings of human experience. For if early twentieth century Britain inherited individualist systems of politics, society, economics, and epistemology premised on the idea that rights derive from the individual’s innate being and that, in a classically gendered formulation “man” is “free of community restriction,”¹³ it also entered an age in which sociology and the psychology of crowds had registered as organizing principles of truth and power.¹⁴ Michael Tratner has convincingly shown that dismantling the individual during the modernist era was “not merely an intellectual, aesthetic, or psychological revelation, but a central feature of political debates, a topic of election speeches, a basis of policy, and commonplace of newspaper and magazine articles.”¹⁵ Inasmuch as modernist literature may focus on its characters’ solipsistic thoughts, those individuals always form part of larger wholes: Clarrisa Dalloway’s and Leopold Bloom’s June days are shared with wide cross-sections of the societies in which they live. Woolf asks the reader of “A Sketch of the Past” to “[c]onsider what immense forces society brings to play upon each of us, how that society changes from decade to decade; and also from class to class.”¹⁶ Modernist texts expose the formation of the social subject, revealing individuals’ thoughts as part of larger social patterns premised on commercial or collective entities such as gender, class, or nationality.

From an individualist point of view, Enlightenment ideals of individualism that value self-generated meaning over meaning derived from larger metaphysical or social frameworks (e.g., man’s reason before God’s law) put a heavy burden on the individual to achieve purpose. Momentary lapses of such achievement are experienced as boredom. From the sociological point of view, boredom is a failure of the social structure to address

the needs of subgroups within the collective. Feminists who addressed female waste and boredom could easily point to women's mass exclusion from the public sphere as a structural cause of their disaffection. But in *The Voyage Out*, boredom functions not merely as outside or inside, but as the often failed and mysterious point of contact between the two.

Theorized by the burgeoning field of psychoanalysis in the first few decades of the twentieth century, individual boredom was understood as a self-administered deprivation of the thoughts and fantasies that lead to satisfaction, "a state of longing and an inability to designate what is longed for."¹⁷ Psychoanalysis, premised, like the *bildungsroman*, on the conflict created between personal desire and collective demands, sets the stage for the drama of boredom as both individual and collective in Woolf's first novel. The condition of longing for one knows not what describes Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out*. Attempting to define herself in confidence to Clarissa Dalloway, Rachel says, "I am lonely ... I want –" She did not know what she wanted, so that she could not finish the sentence.¹⁸ If boredom is a desire for a desire, then Rachel's quest for self-realization is the quest to overcome boredom and know her desire. But what prevents Rachel from knowing it? Her own desires are inaccessible to her. Later in the novel, when Rachel angrily complains to Helen, "I tell you, Helen, the world's bad. It's an agony, living, wanting –,"¹⁹ it is most significant that, in a repeated pattern of dashes that intimate either self-censorship or searching for an answer, her desire forces silence, a pause. She cannot articulate it. Because she has no place as an individual in the social system in which she lives, her desires must remain unspoken. But it is more than that they are unspoken: they are unexplored, unrealized, somewhat poignantly, by Rachel herself.

Rachel's lack of social agency is part of a pattern in Woolf's novels. Almost every one of Woolf's novels features a scene in which a woman is made to socialize with a man, to encourage his talk, while, uninterested in what he says, she sits and tries to think of something else. For example, in *The Years*, Maggie thinks to herself as she listens to an elderly uncle: "To smile, to bend, to make believe you're amused when you're bored, how painful it is."²⁰ In *The Voyage Out*, the narrator notes, "Each of the ladies, being after the fashion of their sex, highly trained in promoting men's talk without listening to it, could think – about the education of children, about the use of fog sirens in an opera – without betraying herself."²¹ In *Night and Day*, Mary Datchett "was accustomed to find young men very ready to talk about themselves, and had come to listen to them as one listens to children, without any thought of herself."²² Mrs. Ramsay

heaves a great sigh in *To The Lighthouse* before embarking on a trip into town with the “insufferable bore” Mr. Tansley who “went on talking, about settlements, and teaching, and working men ... till she gathered that he had got back entire self confidence.”²³ Boredom born of capitulation to male privilege is featured as an – almost – unavoidable fact of women’s lives in Woolf’s novels. Lily Briscoe forms a remarkable exception to this rule at the Ramsay’s dinner party in *To The Lighthouse*. Aware that Charles Tansley is looking for a woman to solicit his opinion, she remembers his remark that women cannot paint or write and wonders why she should bother to help him. She muses:

There is a code of behaviour, she knew, whose seventh article (it may be) says that on occasions of this sort it behoves the woman, whatever her own occupation might be, to go to the help of the young man opposite so that he may expose and relieve the thigh bones, the ribs, of his vanity, of his urgent desire to assert himself; as indeed it is their duty, she reflected, in her old maidenly fairness, to help us, suppose the Tube were to burst into flames. Then, she thought, I should certainly expect Mr. Tansley to get me out. But how would it be, she thought, if neither of us did either of these things? So she sat there smiling.²⁴

These representations, even Lily Briscoe’s aggressive smiling, betray the anger beneath boredom and its representation. Just as it does in Sinclair’s and Richardson’s work, this strain of female boredom in Woolf’s work protests rigid gender roles. Her gentle satire reduces not the women she exposes as mimics performing the roles of ideal women, but the roles they must play, and the men who expect them to be identical to their performances.

But feminist revolt in *The Voyage Out* is attenuated because individualism is under suspicion in this novel.²⁵ Despite the growing influence of new disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, and sociology, which demonstrated that social forces permeate and construct private thoughts and private relationships, individualism was a significant cultural formation of the Edwardian and modernist periods.²⁶ In her book, *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant Garde*, Christine Froula argues that Virginia Woolf, along with those associated with the Bloomsbury Group including John Maynard Keynes, Roger Fry, Duncan Grant, and Sigmund Freud, sustained the Kantian Enlightenment tradition by privileging the free, rational individual as the proponent of civilized values.²⁷ The cultivation of oneself as an individual was an important part of what it meant to be modern. Individualism received considerable attention from little magazines, namely Wyndham Lewis’s *Blast*, A.R. Orage’s *The New Age*, and Dora Marsden’s *The Freewoman*, *The New Freewoman*,

and *The Egoist*. Feminists relied on the discourse of individual rights to redefine women and the feminine in such a way that promised them greater self-determination and, as such, greater determination of public life. Liberal reforming feminists “insisted on a woman’s right over her own person and property, and on women’s equality with men in the social sphere via education, increased employment opportunities, and political enfranchisement.”²⁸ While suffragists and feminists used individualism as justification for women’s participation in public life, various literary figures encouraged individualism as its own end.

Dora Marsden began her editorial career advocating individualism as a means of female empowerment, and eventually as an anarchist ideal. Called the “Max Stirner of feminism”²⁹ by feminist advocate Floyd Dell, Marsden participated in the popularization, and perhaps distortion, of Stirner’s individualist ideas. Max Stirner’s *The Ego and His Own* (1844) was translated from German into English in 1909, and between 1909 and 1929, forty-nine editions of the work appeared.³⁰ Michael Levenson claims Marsden’s “principal and overriding concern” in the *New Freewoman* “was to trumpet Stirnerian egoism ... ‘will,’ ‘life,’ and ‘self’ were celebrated as healthy, because egoistic, notions.”³¹ In the earlier incarnation of the journal, *The Freewoman: A Weekly Feminist Review* (1911–1912), Marsden argued that most women “By habit of thought, by form of activity, and largely by preference ... round off the personality of some other individual, rather than create or cultivate their own,” and that if a woman “is an individual, she is free, and will act like those who are free.”³² Importantly in terms of the relationship between individualism and boredom, Marsden later identifies individualism with desire, boredom’s opposite: “The centre of the Universe lies in the desire of the individual, and the Universe for the individual has no meaning apart from their satisfactions, a means to an end.”³³ In Marsden’s means-end feminism, the individual must be a desiring, self-directed force of will. To postpone desire, or submerge one’s own desires, is a failure and enforces servitude to others. Marsden argues, “When the main thing for women is not what men want but what they want” women will have succeeded; but women’s desires have been suppressed for so long “inhibition has become its own reward.”³⁴

If to be an individual means knowing and expressing one’s own desire, boredom baffles individualism. Contemporary psychoanalyst Adam Phillips observes this loss of self in his clinical work with children. Phillips explains that children experience boredom as an identity crisis in which a child’s project of self-sufficiency is pitted against acknowledgment of dependence. In boredom, the child does not know who he is

and waits, as it were, “for himself.”³⁵ For women of the early twentieth century, knowing one’s own desire, and thus oneself, was a demand that went against one’s training as a woman. The ideal of the self-sacrificing, self-effacing female rewarded women’s early dissociation from desire and punished female expressions of preference. But the increased representation of bored women in early-twentieth-century literature reveals a *collective* awareness that such desire was missing.

SOCIAL TYPES AND THE PROBLEMS OF
INDIVIDUALISM IN *THE VOYAGE OUT*

Woolf explores the ways that women can or cannot exist as individuals in her portrayal of Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out*. Opening the novel with a warning of the difficulties of individualism, the narrator announces, “In the streets of London where beauty goes unregarded, eccentricity must pay the penalty, and it is better not to be very tall, to wear a long blue cloak, or to beat the air with your left hand.”³⁶ At first glance, London is depicted as a social machine where individuality is punished. On further inspection, however, the conflict is located not between individual and group, but between social classes. The upper-middle-class Ambroses are dawdling along the busy streets of London followed by “small, agitated figures” who “had appointments to keep and drew a weekly salary, so that there was some reason for the unfriendly stare which was bestowed upon Mr. Ambrose’s height and upon Mrs. Ambrose’s cloak.”³⁷ Helen Ambrose, we learn shortly after, “knew how to read the people who were passing her; there were the rich who were running to and from each others’ houses at this hour; there were the bigoted workers driving in a straight line to their offices; there were the poor who were unhappy and rightly malignant.”³⁸ London is a place of social types, not individuals. That the characters are embarking on a voyage away from this stultifying system suggests that perhaps a freer way of life will be possible.

Yet life on the ship appears further confirmation that social types prevail. Rachel Vinrace – the heroine whose individuality is in question in this deconstructed *bildungsroman* – is to be treated as a type, the naive young woman, rather than as an individual. Woolf reminds the reader that Rachel is on “her father’s ship,”³⁹ and her father, in introducing the party to the Dalloways, lists the ship’s inhabitants as “my brother-in-law, Ambrose, the scholar (I daresay you’ve heard his name), his wife, my old friend Pepper, a very quiet fellow . . . And that’s all.”⁴⁰ That her own father does not include Rachel in the list suggests not just her insignificance

to him, but figures her presence as a kind of absence. If she is present to him, it is as a possession, like the goats he transports to South America. She has been educated into her lack of presence by her father who opines in Louise DeSalvo's compiled version of earlier drafts of *The Voyage Out, Melymbrosia*, that "[a]ction alone justifying talk, it followed that women should be silent, for they seldom do anything."⁴¹ This masculine opinion alienates women from action, self-expression, or self-acknowledgment – necessary constituents of individualism and traditionally the foundations for good plot making. But here Woolf may be insisting on a form of narrative truth. She notes the preponderance of experiences like Rachel's for young women in her diary on July 15, 1903, in a passage titled "Thoughts Upon Social Success":

I feel rather strange, & inclined to be absent minded. I look round the room, see nobody there I know, & forget what one says next . . . I can only comfort myself when I think of our social peculiarities by reflecting that we have this in common with the women of the world – we are equally at home everywhere – (not at all, that is to say) & we are confined to no one set in particular. This explains why it is usual for us to come into a room, & after shaking hands with our hostess, sit silent all the rest of the evening. We always seem to be outsiders where everybody else is intimate.⁴²

Woolf's notion that women are nowhere at home in the world, along with her use of the word "vagrant" to describe "Snow" and young women of her time in the preceding diary entry, conveys an awareness of women's lack of ownership and place in society. If they are bored, it is because they are partly aware of their own desire, but also of the necessity to deny it in order to be a "social success."

In portraying Rachel Vinrace, Woolf generalizes the experience of a young woman in society as one of alienation, both from society and from herself. Removed from representational terms of value, denied self-presence, Rachel is unable to signify, or to want, even herself. The lack of a female economy of desire creates a frustration leading to rage.⁴³ Claire Kahane contends that boredom – or, in Woolf's terms, "melancholy lethargy" – signifies repressed anger in *The Voyage Out*: "Melancholy lethargy, a symptom of repressed rage, replaces action in a kind of self-castration that leaves loss and emptiness at [*The Voyage Out*'s] very center."⁴⁴ Desire and anger having been repressed; only a feeling of emptiness remains. This emptiness is intended to mimic the alienated, diffuse state of Rachel's consciousness. Here is where boredom functions as the subject's resistance to the knowledge of its ideological constitution. The uncertainty or sense of suppressed meaning portrayed in the novel marks the limits of Rachel's capacity to comprehend her status.

“Woman of action” Helen Ambrose judges Rachel’s generalness, her “lack of colour and definite outline,” as the reason she will be bored on their voyage.⁴⁵ Looking at Rachel, Helen commits Rachel to a type: “Women of her own age usually boring her, she supposed that girls would be worse . . . how clear it was that Rachel would be vacillating, emotional, and when you said something to her it would make no more lasting impression than the stroke of a stick upon the water. There was nothing to take hold of in girls – nothing hard, permanent, satisfactory.”⁴⁶ Here, as throughout the novel, male-identified Helen invokes boredom as the mark of subjective self-satisfaction, an individual distinction. She is associated with a Romantic tradition of boredom that exposes others’ inauthenticity in order to mark her individuality as superior. Helen also emblemizes the knowing individual’s tendency to reduce subjects to objects. Women and girls will bore her because they do not register as meaningful, nor participate as subjects, in the male systems of thought Helen not only identifies with, but perpetuates in her strange devotion to her petulant husband.

Indeed, Helen’s individual agency is suspect from the moment we see her leaving London. She is unhappy for much of the novel, her frequent boredom attesting to it. Significantly, the novel opens with Helen’s emotional trauma, not Rachel’s, upon leaving her children; much of the novel’s repressed action can be said to flow from Helen’s attempts to master her rage, rage repressed into boredom. She surmises quickly that “she would be considerably bored” on the voyage, and after dinner on the first night of the voyage, her husband Ridley points out, “We bored you so that you left” – a fact she does not deny.⁴⁷ When Clarissa Dalloway cheerily offers in the manner of her class, “I’ve never met a bore yet!” Helen acerbically counters, “And I should say the world was full of them!”⁴⁸ While Helen’s boredom functions here as a mode of self-distinction and marks her as an individual unafraid to counter Clarissa’s drawing-room manners,⁴⁹ it barely contains her anger. Helen is a compromised individual. Bohemian Helen behaves conventionally in terms of catering to her husband’s needs and desires, a fact Terrence Hewet notes when he ruminates, “[S]he who was all truth to others was not true to her husband, was not true to her friends if they came in conflict with her husband.”⁵⁰ And where Helen is compromised in her marriage, she compensates in her relationship with Rachel. For as Grace Carter Smith argued in *The Freewoman* in 1912, to be happy, women needed to see themselves as successful and frequently realized this desire by wielding influence, “the indelible impression of [herself] on [her] surroundings, whatever they may be, as a power.”⁵¹ In

her need to assert herself, Helen adopts Rachel as a substitute child, but she repeatedly appeals to the fact that she wants Rachel to be educated by a man.⁵² There are few authentic ways in which Helen is self-determining, and yet Helen problematically takes on responsibility for Rachel's quest to become an individual.

In earlier drafts of *The Voyage Out*, begun in 1908, Woolf takes seriously the quest of Rachel to become an individual, and purportedly free. When Helen encourages her in *Melymbrosia*, "Now's your chance then. Your chance of being a person, I mean," Rachel replies straightforwardly, "I can be myself in spite of you, in spite of the Dalloways, in spite of William Pepper, and my father, and Darwin?" To this Helen replies, somewhat doubtfully, "You can; but I don't say you will."⁵³ The quest is doubtful, but it is still a serious quest.

By the time Woolf made her final changes to the published version of *The Voyage Out* in 1915, the same passage is defined by skeptical humor about Rachel's ability to become an individual. When Helen says, "So now you can go ahead and be a person on your own account," Rachel has a "vision of her own personality, of herself as a real everlasting thing, different from anything else, unmergeable, like the sea or the wind . . . and she became profoundly excited at the thought of living." The hyperbolic language of this passage, coupled with the fact that sea and air must constantly merge with other things – a notion Woolf exploits in *The Waves* – signals a lack of authenticity, a false vision. How can the one exist apart from the whole? Equally telling is Rachel's stuttering response: "'I can be m-m-myself,' she stammered, 'in spite of you and in spite of the Dalloways, and Mr. Pepper, and Father, and my Aunts, in spite of these?'" To which Helen replies "gravely": "In spite of everyone."⁵⁴ That Rachel is unable to say "myself" in one singular utterance, and must ask the question rather than assert it, signals the unlikelihood that she will achieve her individuality, and makes the quest to do so pathetically comic. That Helen avers "gravely" suggests that this quest for individualism is itself a dead end, an idea that Rachel's death at the end of the novel confirms.

The impossibility of female individualism is at the heart of the novel's boredom and anger, both in terms of the novel's narrative form and its characters. For when Richard Dalloway asks of Rachel, "What are your interests and occupations? I should imagine that you were a person with very strong interests," Rachel's stunned response is simply, "You see, I am a woman," as if to be a woman and to have interests and occupations are mutually exclusive.⁵⁵ This is partly confirmed in Rachel's occupations. When Helen wonders "what Rachel *did* do with herself," she checks and finds her "sitting

in her room doing absolutely nothing.”⁵⁶ In post-Enlightenment culture that values productivity and discourse as the product of knowing that creates individuals as such, Rachel’s idleness, coupled with her nonlinguistic expression through music, makes her a cipher. But this cipher exists as a type. The day after the hotel dance, Hewet wonders what Rachel could be doing and imagines her “[l]ying on a sofa and looking at a ceiling, perhaps. He could imagine her doing that, and Helen in an armchair, with her hands on the arm of it, so – looking ahead of her, with her great big eyes.”⁵⁷ Hewet imagines the women – as types – in the popular portrait style of the turn of the century in which neurasthenic women were painted staring vacantly into empty interiors.⁵⁸ To him they are empty and idle, containers waiting to be filled with meaning.

For Rachel’s vacuity, the novel faults “[t]he way she had been educated, joined to a fine natural indolence,” but reminds us that her education is part of the social system: “for she had been educated as the majority of well-to-do girls in the last part of the nineteenth century were educated.”⁵⁹ Notably, the narrator dates the quality of women’s education to the time of Queen Elizabeth, a pre-Enlightenment era before individualism became an ideal. Here Woolf reveals the fallacy of the individualist argument: Rachel is unable to be an individual because she has not been trained to be one. But if one can be trained to be one, if systems create individuals, are there in fact individuals? Individuals are simply those that belong to privileged groups, primarily consisting of educated men. Tellingly, the most pointed observations of Rachel’s vagueness and lack of self-definition occur in *Melymbrosia*. In that version of the story, Hirst wonders aloud of Rachel, “I mean does she reason – does she feel. She seems to me hopelessly vague.”⁶⁰ Earlier, Hirst had said to Rachel, “I should think it quite possible that you have a mind, but it is doubtful if you can think honestly because of your sex you see.”⁶¹ *Melymbrosia* goes a step toward imagining an alternative when it ventures, “Her dreams began to include a new dream, about saying what one thought, and getting it answered”⁶² But the revisions Woolf made to *The Voyage Out* betray an insecurity or inability to posit the likelihood of female self-assertion, and therefore individualism. As critics such as Louise DeSalvo, Diana L. Swanson, Mark Wollaeger, and Marianne DeKoven have suggested,⁶³ Woolf’s revisions to earlier drafts of *The Voyage Out* indicate that Woolf censored her own outspokenness, perhaps fearing, as DeKoven has argued was common of female modernists, “punishment for [her] dangerous desire for revision.”⁶⁴ Such revisions created a text in which “nothing really ‘happens’ on the level of action but a sporadically disgorged rhetoric of rage suggests havoc

being wreaked elsewhere.”⁶⁵ It is a boring text that enacts its own boredom in the form of its repressions.

In Santa Marina, Rachel, in her quest for individuality, is compared to the women she meets at the hotel. Most obviously, Rachel is contrasted with Susan Warrington, who becomes engaged to Arthur Venning. Quickly it is noted that “Susan . . . had no self, and counted neither one way nor the other.”⁶⁶ Mrs. Thornton’s long life and many children “seemed to have rubbed away the marks of individuality.”⁶⁷ Terence addresses his concerns about women’s lack of individuality when he poses to Rachel: “I’ve often walked along the streets where people live all in a row, and one house is exactly like another house, and wondered what on earth the women were doing inside,” he mused. “Doesn’t it make your blood boil?” he asked suddenly turning upon her. “I’m sure if I were a woman I’d blow someone’s brains out.”⁶⁸

Terence focuses in this passage on the lack of individuality in which women dwell. That Woolf found in the image of women in row houses an apt metaphor for women’s lack of individuality and attendant boredom is clear in her use of the image more than twenty years later in an unusual passage from *The Years* in which an anonymous lower-class woman is shown peering out of her row house in utter boredom:

The smoke blowing through Peter Street had condensed, between the narrowness of the houses, into a fine grey veil Nothing whatever was happening; a few children were playing in the street, two cats turned something over in the gutter with their paws. Yet a woman leaning out of the windows searched this way, that way, up and down the street as if she was raking every cranny for something to feed on. Her eyes, rapacious, greedy, like the eyes of a bird of prey, were also sulky and sleepy, as if they had nothing to feed their hunger upon. Nothing happened – nothing whatever. Still she gazed up and down with her indolent dissatisfied stare.⁶⁹

Here the poverty of the scene is connected to the poverty of woman’s interior life, and boredom, as it often is, is likened to rapacious hunger. Conspicuously, the environment offers her nothing, and yet she continues to look outward to relieve her suffering. In *The Voyage Out*, it is made clear that social conventions prevent women from achieving individuality, and Terence observes, “All the most individual and humane of his friends were bachelors and spinsters.”⁷⁰ Here, as throughout *The Voyage Out*, individuals are themselves types. Rachel’s inability to find herself in the already provided forms of a woman’s life leads to an existential crisis of boredom in which she seeks “she knew not what”⁷¹ in order to provide relief from the vague discomfort of her identity-less, meaningless condition.

AFFECTIVE ATTUNEMENT TO BOREDOM AS BEING

More than just a feminist protest novel, *The Voyage Out* is characterized by an aloof, inhuman element that persistently diverts attention away from Rachel's story into mysterious, elliptical descriptions and perspective shifts. There is something ominous, unresponsive, and unknowable underlying the novel. That something may be boredom as dehumanization and the erasure of meaning as such.

Woolf presents Rachel's central crisis of boredom on a Sunday, "the mute black ghost or penitent spirit of the busy weekday."⁷² If time and history are markers of meaning that in their knowability and predictability shape the possibilities of human action, it is significant that in boredom time and history lose this capacity. When time becomes long, it no longer promises order and meaning, it no longer promises that the future will come. On the particular Sunday in question, adhering to the English tradition has managed to "slow down the hours, dull the incidents, lengthen the meals, and make even the servants and page-boys wear a look of boredom and propriety."⁷³

Rachel attends church where she falls into an angry state of disillusion and renounces both priest and followers. After this she experiences defamiliarization – she sees all with fresh eyes as though the contexts that have given them meaning have been erased. So, for instance, from the hotel in town she looks up at the villa where she has been staying with the Ambroses and observes that the "familiar view" had "a certain unfamiliar distinction."⁷⁴ Wandering around the hotel, she is invited to visit, in succession, the rooms of Mrs. Flushing, the nouveau-riche would-be artist of "half-realised idea[s]";⁷⁵ Evelyn Murgatroyd, the young woman who longs for male adventures and to actually *do* something; and Ms. Allen, the spinster scholar whose self-deprivations are symbolized by the unopened bottle of crème de menthe named Oliver she has carried without drinking for twenty-six years. Between visits, Rachel lingers in the hallways with an "unformed restless desire in her mind" and is "absorbed by her restlessness."⁷⁶ She looks to each new person whom she visits to relieve the "mystery which burdened her."⁷⁷ But no visit is satisfying, and when Miss Allen and the elderly Mrs. Paley fail to understand what the other is saying in a hotel passageway, Rachel slips away, symbolically, to a cul de sac, for "[t]his misunderstanding, which involved a complete block in the passage, seemed to her unbearable."⁷⁸ Restless and bored, Rachel is at an impasse in her search for meaning. Crying, she looks out of the window with "eyes that would have seen nothing even had they not been dazed by

tears.”⁷⁹ In the ultimate moment of defamiliarization, boredom produces a vision of how much she dislikes all that has gone before her, not just in the day, but in their entirety – “all things were wrong, all people were stupid.”⁸⁰ Here boredom functions as a valuation and rejection of the given world, what Heidegger calls in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* an attunement to the emptiness of being that is not nothing, but rather a refusal of life’s mystery to reveal itself, which leaves the one who is bored aware only of lack.⁸¹ Panicked by this boredom, which she experiences as emptiness and need, Rachel turns inward toward herself as the source of meaning: “For the time, her own body was the source of all the life in the world, which tried to burst forth here – there – and was repressed now by Mr. Bax, now by Evelyn, now by the imposition of ponderous stupidity – the weight of the entire world.”⁸² This conclusion leads her into a trancelike boredom, a “melancholy lethargy,” in which she sees “vaguely” people in the garden whom she represents “as aimless masses of matter, floating hither and thither, without aim except to impede her. What were they doing, those other people in the world?”⁸³ The other is a mystery. Collective life impedes her quest to become an individual. The vagueness and aimlessness of people, the pointlessness of existence, oppresses Rachel who searches to find her own meaning. That boredom often masks anger is underscored when narrator states, “The force of her rage was beginning to spend itself.”⁸⁴ When Rachel believes she sees Terence below, she is “roused . . . from her melancholy lethargy” and appears to find in him a potential source of meaning and purpose. Here we can see an analogy to Heidegger’s second form of boredom, described in Chapter 1. To avoid the emerging form of being-left-empty induced by her boredom, Rachel will attempt to be taken – lost or captivated – by an object outside of herself.⁸⁵ Woolf reveals this pattern as common to women. Rachel will exercise her choice as an individual in choosing Terence as the object by which to be taken. This will, of course, spell the end of her individualism.

Given the pitfalls of love for a woman who would be an individual, the scene in the jungle in which Terence and Rachel confess their love to each other is emblematic in that it depicts the death of the “I.” Walking through the trees, the landscape itself bespeaks the alienation of boredom and their displacement from meaning: “[T]he noises of the ordinary world were replaced by those creaking and sighing sounds which suggest to the traveller in a forest that he is walking at the bottom of the sea” and both are “unable to frame any thoughts.”⁸⁶ The unlikelihood of the analogy of forest to sea bottom is jarring and, in being so, fitting to the process of the unmooring of meaning. For who might possibly know

what walking on the bottom of the sea sounds like? Meanwhile wild animals cry randomly in the background. The trees and creepers close in on them, sunlight comes through only in gaps, and profound silence weighs on them. The source of narrative authority shifts between the human and the nonhuman, and being, which is not known, is as prevalent as the lovers. This is not the setting of clichéd romance, nor a promising site of possibility. It is, in the vein of Heidegger's profound boredom, the diminishment of individual existence against the backdrop of existence itself and the horizon of time on which existence rests.⁸⁷

Terence begins by asking if she is frightened, and Rachel says, "I like it" and repeats the phrase – an interesting self-echo, and the last assertion of personal preference she will make. Terence, in a move that counters the traditional personal confession of love, says, "We love each other,"⁸⁸ subsuming Rachel's feelings and desires into "we."⁸⁹ In her echoing of his phrase she foregoes her own voice. Being, that which is nonhuman, asserts its presence aside the lovers: "The silence was then broken by their voices which joined in tones of strange unfamiliar sound which formed no words."⁹⁰ Rachel, in response both to the loss of self predicated on her merging with Terence and to "the persistent churning of the water" that competes with her individualist apprehension of existence, can only murmur, "Terrible – terrible."⁹¹ Terence becomes intensely preoccupied with time, looking at his watch and complaining, "We're so late – so late – so horribly late."⁹² His fixation on clock time suggests a conventional rather than personal sense of passing time, a desire to rejoin convention and social institutions after their personal and joint unraveling that pierces their subjectivity and is the experience of boredom.⁹³ When they become lost on their way back to the boat, the novel's language alludes not to Rachel's biblical namesake but to Ruth 1:16, stating, "Rachel followed him, stopping where he stopped, turning where he turned, ignorant of the way, ignorant of why he stopped or why he turned."⁹⁴ In becoming engaged to Terence she has shattered her chance at individuality, but at the same time alternative ways of being have been opened up to her.

Rachel's failure to individuate is made abundantly clear when Terence, who had until their engagement appeared to approach all women as individuals, now writes about women as a generic category, a type:

"Women – under the heading Women I've written:

'Not really vainer than men. Lack of self-confidence at the base of most serious faults. Dislike of own sex traditional, or founded on fact? Every woman not so

much a rake at heart, as an optimist, because they don't think.' What do you say Rachel?"

Rachel said nothing.⁹⁵

Rachel's silence corroborates the loss of a possible voice, as does the fact that, at Terence's behest, she begins to write thank-you notes that "bore a considerable likeness to those she had condemned."⁹⁶ When Rachel notes that "[i]t was strange, considering how very different these people were, that they used almost the same sentences when they wrote to congratulate her upon her engagement,"⁹⁷ Woolf underscores how social institutions themselves are at odds with individualism.

Rachel's illness and death refuse the lack of individualism that marriage offers and at the same time confirm it. Just before she comes down with her headache, Rachel has a moment of revelation, in the hotel, that is the opposite of boredom, a moment in which meaning and purpose are confirmed in a way that negates the possibility of individual identity and affirms life as impersonal pattern, existence as encompassing but not predicated on individuals. This comes about in part through the use of the pronoun "one," a pronoun Christine Froula locates as being used by Woolf first in *A Room of One's Own*, but is quite clearly used earlier in *The Voyage Out* in critique of individualism and as a way of proposing alternative access to truth and being.⁹⁸ Rachel sits feeling herself "amazingly secure" and thinks:

That was the strange thing, that one did not know where one was going, or what one wanted, and followed blindly, suffering so much in secret, always unprepared and amazed and knowing nothing; but one thing led to another and by degrees something had formed itself out of nothing, and so one reached at last this calm, this quiet, this certainty, and it was this process that people called living . . . and in that pattern lay satisfaction and meaning.⁹⁹

Importantly, Rachel realizes existence itself: "[L]ife was independent of her, and independent of everything else."¹⁰⁰ This insight allows Rachel to conceive that "she was independent of [Terence]; she was independent of everything else," and "love" had allowed her to feel this "independence."¹⁰¹

In Woolf's mature reflection on her teenage years in *Moments of Being*, she uses the rhetoric of boredom to describe what she calls "non-being": "Non-being made up a great proportion of our time in London. The walks – twice every day in Kensington Gardens – were so monotonous. Speaking for myself, non-being lay thick over those years."¹⁰² Woolf clearly describes the affect of boredom as the opposite of the peak

experiences she calls “moments of being” in which pattern and meaning are revealed. Notably, neither moments of being nor nonbeing are dependent on the individual to achieve them. Rather, just as they do in Sinclair’s and Richardson’s work, moments of “being” or revelation arrive “for no reason that I know about,” claims Woolf, and “they seemed dominant; myself passive.”¹⁰³ The self in-moment-of-being in Woolf is not the achieved, individual self apart from others of Richardson and Sinclair, but is instead a decidedly impersonal being apprehending impersonal being. So where *The Voyage Out* appears to promise Rachel’s quest to become an individual, near the end it turns away from a political, feminist sense of individualism and the freedom that Dora Marsden saw as attached to it, and turns instead to an independence that is connected to impersonality, akin to the state Heidegger calls *being-in-the world* in which consciousness is not cut off from objects and the subject/object divide does not exist. At this moment Rachel finds herself “detached and disinterested” and ready to accept anything in life.¹⁰⁴ Rachel has a “moment of being” in which pattern is revealed, and importantly this experience has nothing to do with individual agency, will, or desire. Neither is it Sinclair’s sublimated achievement. It simply happens and is boredom’s opposite. Building on Heidegger’s work, Jean-Luc Nancy’s explanation of subjectless freedom speaks to this transporting experience, which Richardson and Sinclair clearly attempted, and which Woolf seems to have captured:

Freedom is *a transcendental experience or the transcendental of experience*, the transcendental that *is* experience. What ‘I experiment with for myself’ is in no way a power I could withhold, or a capacity I could get in touch with in myself. Instead I experiment *that I am* in the experience of myself – this intensity of (un)founded no-thingness – I experiment that the withdrawal of essence *is* an affirmation of my existence and that it is only on the ‘foundation’ of this affirmation that I can know myself to be the subject of my representations, and give flesh to my singular being in the world.¹⁰⁵

Here the withdrawal of essence is seen not as erasure, but as a privileged form of access to being that elides the subject as a willing “I”. This is important in understanding Woolf’s project in her depiction of Rachel’s revelation. Rachel’s vision of the world as “so large, so hospitable” renders a form of love that is “not the love of man for woman, of Terence for Rachel,” because, pointedly, “they had ceased to be little separate bodies; they had ceased to struggle and desire one another.”¹⁰⁶ Rachel’s vision supersedes subject-object relations and with it the politics of individualism; it is awareness of being, that “life was independent of her, and independent of everything else.”¹⁰⁷

Rachel's illness is a continuation of this detachment, but it is not a continuation of disinterest. In her sickbed she becomes "completely cut off, and unable to communicate with the rest of the world, isolated alone with her body."¹⁰⁸ She is detached, but very much bothered by Terence's attempts to "bring them back to their old relationship."¹⁰⁹ She turns her back to him repeatedly and does "not wish to remember" their past life.¹¹⁰ Terence is thrown into "sordid misery and profound boredom" by her mute refusal of that past life, leading to the existential panic that "[n]othing mattered."¹¹¹ Rachel lapses into boredom as the unraveling of familiar meaning: "For long spaces of time she would merely lie conscious of her body floating on top of the bed and her mind driven to some remote corner of her body, or escaped and gone flitting around the room. All sights were something of an effort, but the sight of Terence was the greatest effort because he forced her to join mind to body in the desire to remember something."¹¹² In this passage time no longer functions to order meaning. Duration is measured spatially, not temporally, and history has been erased. Rachel, whose vision of unity has surpassed the living politics of her time as exemplified by Terence's insistence on conventions, experiences a literal Cartesian split, mind separated from body. What had seemed significant is no longer so in boredom. Even Terence "did not mind if she died" just as "long as the succession of these hard and dreary days was broken."¹¹³

Upon her death, however, he reinvests her sickness with meaning, reinterpreting her death as symbolic of "their complete union."¹¹⁴ The reader is left to believe that Rachel's death functions as a metaphor for the experience of women in marriage – a conclusion supported by many critics of the novel. For instance, in a 1986 article, Christine Froula suggests that "Rachel's death represents not only the power of female initiation structures to overwhelm female desire when it ventures to imagine a different future, but also the difficulties that Woolf confronted in her first attempt to imagine an alternative to the female initiation plot."¹¹⁵ Mark Wollaeger observes that Rachel "begins to die as soon as she is drawn into the marriage plot."¹¹⁶ Similarly, June Cummins argues that Rachel, "[b]y refusing to participate in the institutional structures of patriarchy and imperialism . . . chooses the only route of resistance available to her: a very passive resistance."¹¹⁷

While *The Voyage Out* forwards a materialist, feminist critique of the impediments before women's experience of individualism and the boredom that accompanies their enforced "vagueness," it simultaneously suggests, through boredom as an unraveling of self and knowledge, that

individualism is a false promise, distracting one from existence as a whole. Thus the novel ends not with Rachel's death, but with an additional two chapters. Directly after Rachel's death, the narrative proceeds with a lengthy description of the cycle of night into day. Much like a miniature experiment with what Woolf later attempted in the "Time Passes" episode of *To the Lighthouse* in which "darkness" and "nothingness" prevail,¹¹⁸ Rachel's individual death is dwarfed by the larger, impersonal forces of time and nature: "During these hours the silence was not broken, and the only movement was caused by the movement of trees and branches which stirred slightly, and then the shadows that lay across the white spaces of the land moved too."¹¹⁹

Life continues on and, through free indirect discourse, the narrative darts in and out of character's minds. And while it might have been a tidy ending to witness Evelyn Murgatroyd's refusal of a marriage offer after which she asks the seemingly profound question, "What did matter then? What was the meaning of it all?"¹²⁰ the novel persists. *The Voyage Out* refuses to be just a marriage-plot novel and it eschews individual agency and knowledge as the bedrock of its form. Persisting another ten pages, the narrative describes a ferocious rainstorm that diminishes the humans and then follows several of the novel's minor characters as they end their day. Like Rachel's previous vision, St. John Hirst sits in the drawing room of the hotel and observes that "the voices seemed to draw together from different parts of the room, and to combine themselves into a pattern before his eyes," while Mrs. Flushing examines the earth from the window and exclaims, "Splendid! Splendid!"¹²¹ Ending the novel congenially with sleep a few paragraphs later, Woolf rejects boredom as ultimate meaning, but rather uses it as a vehicle of unraveling both the individual and the social in order to expose unknown and unrealized possibilities. This is not a pointing toward known possibilities, but rather a pointing out of possibility as such, a piercing or boring through the veil of what we think we know to what might not be known but nevertheless exists.