Measuring by Waves

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*slide*, *v.*

a. To pass from one place or one point to another with a smooth and continuous movement, *esp.* through the air or water, or along a surface.
e. To ride across the face of a wave.

—*Oxford English Dictionary Online*

It is the space of each sentient body’s awareness of itself. It is not boundless like subjective space: it is always finally bound by the laws of the body, but its landmarks, its emphasis, its inner proportions are continually changing.

—John Berger, “Rembrandt and the Body” (107)

John Berger tells us that in Rembrandt’s *Bathsheba Reading King David’s Letter*, Bathsheba sits, naked, “her nubile stomach and navel” painted “with love and pity as if they were a face” (“Rembrandt” 108). The stomach, according to Berger, has become Bathsheba’s countenance and thus shows a kind of emotion, expresses a story—perhaps of love, of tragedy. Her stomach is full, but sags with a certain disappointment; it imitates her facial expression as she holds a letter with a sort of silent acquiescence; she submits to the King’s desire for her, her fated pregnancy with the future King Solomon, and the inevitable death of her husband. Berger explores the notion of a “corporeal space,” a physical, bodily place that is often shared and shaped by the people who exist within it. In exploring Rembrandt’s depiction of Bathsheba’s stomach, he recognizes this bodily place as “the space of each sentient body’s awareness of itself”; it describes a hyper-awareness of the physical, whether through pain or pleasure (107). Berger emphasizes that Bathsheba’s body parts live in awareness of each other; her stomach is shaped by the presence of her face, her lifeless hand, her crossed legs. These “different points of view,” as Berger describes them, “can only exist in a corporeal space which is incompatible with territorial or architectural space,” in that
they do not, for instance, follow the rules of anatomical proportion (109). While grounded in the physical and the body, this conception of space can also contain an essence of something more. Rembrandt allows viewers to feel as if they can intercept “dialogues between parts gone adrift, and these dialogues are so faithful to a corporeal experience that they speak to something everybody carries within them” (109). For Berger, Rembrandt’s awareness of the physical allows us to remember something of our own physical and “inner experience” because of what we see reflected in the painting (109). Yet spectators who manage to share Bathsheba’s space possess different experiences that speak individually to their own bodies. Berger reveals that Rembrandt paints not of real space, but of this multifaceted, multi-perspective area that is configured, formed, broken, and reconstructed by the touch of some other essence.

But the space Berger mentions might not only be of essence; it may also partake of time. Virginia Woolf implies that “sliding” helps us live in a present that is forever enriched by the past. That awareness of our bodies that Berger writes about, our physical beings set in an ethereal world, comes from such an act of sliding. Sliding, for Woolf, is a verb, not a noun. In “A Sketch of the Past,” she reflects that “[t]he past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths. In those moments I find one of my greatest satisfactions, not that I am thinking of the past; but that it is then that I am living most fully in the present” (98). She indicates that a scene must have “the sense of movement and change,” to a point that “One must get the feeling of everything approaching and disappearing, getting large, getting small, passing at different rates of speed” (79). In her novel To the Lighthouse, Woolf creates the feeling of this motion, as waves crash upon the shore, as the lighthouse beams its light through the windows of the Ramsay house and quietly disappears, as the space between Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay pulsates with a certain life that makes intimacy a silent conversation, and as Lily Briscoe moves to capture dead Mrs. Ramsay on canvas. But the word slide could possibly be a noun—a shape that forms around each essence, around each piece of work that endeavors to capture it.

In To the Lighthouse, Lily Briscoe presents the struggle of an artist—the arduous process of gliding towards another through time and distance, reaching for the subject’s core, for intimacy. Lily, in the last section of the novel, continues her portrait of the late Mrs. Ramsay, a woman whom she admired and adored. But on the quiet lawn outside the Ramsay house, where only she
and one other houseguest sit, she relives memories and scenes of the past as she paints. Suddenly, we are told, “she lost consciousness of outer things” and “her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurt ing over that glaring, hideously difficult white space” of her canvas (159). This active submission to her “uncompromising” painting, her hand, which quivered with the rhythm of life, and her mind, which pulsed with memories, scenes, and ideas, gives Lily a vision that allows her to start a painting held in mind for ten years (157). Perhaps the interaction between the past and the present, two bodies and essences of Lily and Mrs. Ramsay moving smoothly across each other, makes Mrs. Ramsay more real. As Lily takes green paint onto her brush, she feels something emerging, a kind of clarity in her image of Mrs. Ramsay. At that moment, Mrs. Ramsay’s manipulative nature and her flaws, and the beauty that she possessed, that “stilled life—froze it,” are all transformed into a visible, corporeal shape (177).

As Mrs. Ramsay seems no longer to be a Greek goddess set in the middle of the dining table, but rather a beautiful woman with a certain shape, like multiple fruits stacked on top of each other, Lily no longer feels her to be unreachable. She is released from Mrs. Ramsay’s authority and the beauty that once blinded her; she feels that “now she could stand up to Mrs. Ramsay” (176). The revelation of her flaws makes Mrs. Ramsay an ordinary yet even more extraordinary presence—“to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that’s a chair, that’s a table, and yet at the same time, It’s a miracle, it’s an ecstasy” (202). In fact, by viewing her as a person with imperfections, by warming the beauty that had frozen Mrs. Ramsay, Lily glorifies her even more; she paints Mrs. Ramsay’s fleeting essence on a canvas and makes it permanent. Perhaps the key to this unreal yet ordinary experience of Mrs. Ramsay’s presence, the key to intimacy itself, is a kind of distance. The time that has passed allows Lily to reform and reshape the space between her past and present. Consequently, she is able to see the outline of the relationship she once had with Mrs. Ramsay. In some moments, this increasing time, this swelling space of emptiness, is excruciating, making her long for that space to contract, allowing her to feel close to Mrs. Ramsay again. But this distance also allows her to see an “unornamented beauty,” which permits her to envision Mrs. Ramsay as something ephemeral yet permanent. Lily allows time to make the ordinary unreal and the unreal, ordinary (155). Distance, then, permits us to slide. Lily’s endeavor to paint Mrs. Ramsay over time allows her to live in multiple places simultaneously; she searches for Mrs. Ramsay in the past, reaches for Mr. Ramsay as he sails off to the lighthouse, and lives within
her own corporeal space and shares it, thereby feeling something change within herself and the people who inhabit that space.

Yet what matters to our inquiry, more than capturing an essence, is the act of looking—understanding that searching itself creates intimacy. In “Penelope,” John Berger couples Vija Celmins, a Latvian-American artist, with Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, by virtue of their commitment to distance—their patience in depicting something they cannot see, but can only envision from afar. The images that Celmins paints seem hand-made, like Penelope’s woven works, which represent images of war and events far off from where she wove her tapestries. Berger imagines Celmins “in her studio shutting her eyes in order to see—because what she wants to see—or has to see—is always far away” (46). But Berger clarifies that Celmins is not looking for a way to replicate reality—she is aware that from such a distance she cannot duplicate a scene; “she transcribes with all the fidelity she knows” what only her mind’s eye can see (48). Celmins, like Lily Briscoe, wants to get hold of “that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything,” because a scene, a moment, is most vivid then (Lighthouse 192-93).

Inevitably, “painting can never get the better of appearances,” Berger tells us, implying that a painting will never represent the whole essence of a scene or person, but perhaps will represent only a fragment (47). In our endeavors to capture with fidelity the exact curves of the mountains, the face of a nubile stomach, we tend to create an image that is half essence and half movement; it is always an image “of searching” (47). Berger explains that Celmins wants her fixed image to represent the act of searching, that To Fix the Image in Memory—a game in which she takes eleven pebbles, casts them in bronze, and tries to tell them apart—is actually capturing a movement, a gesture that indicates the act of looking, searching for distinct shapes, essences, value. Her ability to recognize a movement towards intimate knowledge allows her to warm “her chilling images of distance” (48). The essence we seek is not in the exact representation, but in something we find before we even reach that representation, the very jar of the nerves Lily mentions—a magnetic field to glide toward and enter, allowing us to distinguish the subject’s essence from our own.

There is something in Celmins’s attempt to slide across a distance that lets us experience her artwork not only as a representation of an essence or scene, but also as a moment “of searching” (47). Lily turns, at the end of To the Lighthouse, to her painting, and looks at it “with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something” (208). Both Celmins
and Lily, when they look back at their paintings, see them as movements towards that other something, an effort set in motion by a hope of capturing or recapturing an intimacy they have lost. This loss possibly stems from an attempt to represent an ideal image, an impression that seems too perfect, too detailed. In moving across a distance toward someone else, the artist is shaped by what she tries to paint; instead of molding the subject into a fixed ideal, a chilling image of beauty, she attempts a collaboration that will capture the ephemeral and ineffable.

To feel a certain proximity, an artist must move toward the subject to transform it into something that can be touched, made permanent, made more accessible. But the thing an artist wants to capture is not always an essence or intimacy, not always about the past and present; it can also represent a power that can change us in the process of observing, of moving into a relationship. This transformative power is encapsulated in the opening line of Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin*: “Those who saw him hushed” (3). Phillipe Petit’s high-wire performance between the Twin Towers in 1974 is reminiscent of “sliding”—a word central to McCann’s novel and Woolf’s vision of the interaction between the present and the past. McCann weaves together the stories of seemingly unrelated New Yorkers and pulls them in, as if Petit’s walk is a magnet, drawing us from a distance. McCann centers an entire novel on one performance—close to the sky but far from the ground. He tries to transform Petit’s walk—by surrounding it with stories that enrich the moment—into something that is not only a performance of sheer beauty, but that also evokes pain, controversy, awe, and love.

Through each character’s narrative, we can recapture a dimension that we did not see before—one that allows us to relate, to exist within their world for a moment. At first, the hookers Jazzlyn and Tillie seem to be manipulative, dirty women who suck the life and resources out of those who try to help them. But when Tillie tells her story, she becomes, for us, a wiser character. Her narrative is inundated with the smell of hotels, the fragrance of oily pizza, moments of irony, and self-deprecating regret. As she reflects on Jazzlyn’s death, she recalls thinking during her daughter’s childhood, “She’s never gonna work the stroll. You swear it. Not my baby. She’s never gonna be out there. So you work the stroll to keep her off the stroll” (200). But Tillie fails; she cannot get off the stroll; it’s an addiction, and she passes it on to Jazzlyn. She lives in penitence and knows she will kill herself soon to escape her pain; but her reflection on her life, in which, as Woolf would describe it, her present flows over her past, is full of humor. Although she knows she is “a fuck-up,” Tillie also realizes “how it is in the life. . . . You joke
a lot” (210, 201). When we encounter Tillie, we too collide with and accommodate her. Her appearance changes the shape of the novel, the life of other characters within it, and Petit’s walk. She changes us. From her narrative, we gain a new feeling of intimacy that results not only from our understanding of Tillie’s essence, but also our unconscious movement towards our subject. We, like Celmins and Lily, are molded by another body’s essence.

But McCann, through Petit’s movement across the wire, shows us that sliding over a distance also separates us from something else—that reaching the sky separates us from the ground. By delving into another’s narrative, we are also parting from others, diving into a certain dark emptiness. Claire Soderberg loses her son Joshua, a computer genius, to the Vietnam War; she opens her refrigerator at night, having secret conversations with her dead son through the shivering cold, the humming electricity running through it—“the word was not snap, more like slide. A word Joshua had liked. I will slide out” (90). But when she slides toward Joshua, she loses connection with the outside world, with the ladies she meets every Sunday to reminisce about their sons, with Solomon, her husband, and with herself.

Woolf complicates an analogous problem when Mr. Ramsay and Lily are slowly separating as he sails towards the lighthouse with his two children, James and Cam. But Lily is not disconnected from Mr. Ramsay as he sails from the house, nor does she forget about him as she reaches out for Mrs. Ramsay’s presence; she begins to think that “so much depends . . . upon distance: whether people are near us or far from us; for her feeling for Mr. Ramsay changed as he sailed further and further across the bay” (191). Each time Lily drifts toward a past scene with Mrs. Ramsay, she measures the distance Mr. Ramsay has traveled: “Where are they now?” Lily thought, looking out to sea. Where was he, that very old man who had gone past her silently, holding a brown paper parcel under his arm?” (182). In fact, Mr. Ramsay is crucial to her painting; he is the force that balances Mrs. Ramsay: “she could not achieve that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces; Mr. Ramsay and the picture” (193). As her vision of Mrs. Ramsay morphs when she paints, so does her vision of Mr. Ramsay. The old, widowed tyrant of a man who seemed to demand sympathy, attention, slowly unravels into a softer shape in his beautiful leather boots, a shape that evokes and requires the kind of empathy Rembrandt’s Bathsheba elicits.

Along their ride to the Lighthouse, Cam and James feel something of themselves attach to their father; they finally begin to slide over into his presence, to feel and observe the shape of a man they both hate and adore. Throughout the whole scene, Lily, Cam, and James all seem to have silent
conversations with him, just as Mrs. Ramsay once had. When Lily finishes
her painting, she thinks aloud, “He must have reached it,” which makes her
feel as if she is stretching her mind and body into his corporeal space (208).
All of the characters inhabit that space with him. Unlike McCann, Woolf
uses Lily and Mr. Ramsay to remind us that it is possible for someone to
move toward something or someone else, without sacrificing themselves
entirely; it is possible, too, to balance opposing forces such as Mr. Ramsay
and Mrs. Ramsay during such a moment of inhabitation.

“Those who saw him hushed”: the silence becomes a corporeal space, a
place untouched, yet shared, much like the one Mr. Ramsay, Lily, and Mrs.
Ramsay occupy as they have silent conversations with one another. Perhaps,
then, it is not that artists are merely attempting to sail through a span of time,
of separation, to reveal an essence; they also attempt to put us into a physical
place, to stretch us to reach and bend with the characters. When Rembrandt
painted those he loved or imagined, “he tried to enter their corporeal space
as it existed at that precise moment, he tried to enter their Hôtel-Dieu. And
so to find an exit from the darkness” (Berger 111). He looked closely into the
darkness, hoping “he might find the presence of a light, damaged and
bruised, but a little light all the same” (McCann 20). That darkness is a space
that swells with emptiness and loneliness—one we might find impossible to
negotiate without the artist’s help. Lily is her own kind of Rembrandt, an
artist who draws lines and shapes to define spatial relationships among the
people she tries to paint. In sharing a space with Mr. Ramsay and Mrs.
Ramsay, she begins, finally, to have a dialogue, in which their flaws and beau-
ty are revealed, and she paints a line in the middle of a canvas, establishing a
visual symbol of balance and of understanding.

The act of sliding toward intimacy, towards another, is not some linear
pathway, that moves us directly from a starting point to a destination; rather,
it is a recursive motion, a constant moving about that demands extension. We
are trying to expand the body, reach for a light out of our own darkness,
extend ourselves to another presence, thereby changing our sense of the
world we inhabit.

Bernard, Woolf’s writerly presence in *The Waves*, is initially in a self-
enclosing bubble, but is constantly touched by others, disturbed by them
within his isolation, solitude, darkness; he is in agony in the last section of *The
Waves* because he cannot find a way to alleviate the pain of isolation and the
constant invasion by other bodies. Although he conjures certain impressions
of each of his friends, and seems to take some of their words and make them
his own, he begins to think, “Faces recur, faces and faces—they press their beauty to the walls of my bubble—Neville, Susan, Louis, Jinny, Rhoda and a thousand others. How impossible to order them rightly; to detach one separately, or to give the effect of the whole” (256). Woolf chooses Bernard to carry the perspective of all five of his friends near the end of the novel, but he struggles to contain the whole, to capture the entirety of so many selves. Instead, he is constantly trying to enforce “I, I, I” (296). He tries to distinguish himself from the others, to see how he perceives things, how he is an utter failure: “I . . . felt my own failure; my desire to be free; to escape; to be bound; to make an end; to continue; to be Louis; to be myself” (257). He desires to make something permanent, something distinctly him—not to be someone who must be triggered by others to create phrases, words that illuminate moments. Bernard longs for solitude, time for himself, but others keep invading his corporeal space—waiters come back and forth, people touch their faces to the walls of his bubble, demanding his attention. But when he begins to feel he is streaming away from Susan, Jinny, Neville, Rhoda, and Louis into his desired isolation, he becomes aware that perhaps “this streaming away...[is] a sort of death? A new assembly of elements? Some hint of what was to come?”—he is not yet sure (279). He realizes finally that the appearance of another, the reaching, the sliding to share a bodily, physical space—“that other clock which marks the approach of a particular person”—is excruciating because appearance inescapably means disappearance (273). As he returns home and stands in the night, he envisions Day as “the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again,” and Death as “the enemy” (297). Perhaps Death and darkness, then, disperse forces, essences; they break up the space that all of the characters once shared. And yet Woolf reminds us that “beauty must be broken daily to remain beautiful”; this is perhaps why she depicts the scene of dawn as a sort of rebirth—it is a renewal, a wave breaking into a certain space to create something brilliant again, something different from before . . . and yet a continuance as well (174).

The friction of the canvas and the brush—the gliding between surfaces, essences, is a creation of two worlds merging and giving birth to new forms. The process of creativity, and of creating, requires us to exchange and expand, to constantly break the space we inhabit, to create distance, and to close in on it again. This creative activity is a process of transformation. As Woolf might suggest, sliding is both a verb and a noun—it creates a shape that captures an act of intimacy and convergence. It is both a life-preserving and life-giving act.
WORKS CITED

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