CHAPTER FIVE

AESTHETIC FAILURE

At the end of Chapter 2 I alluded to the gulf between language and reality that *The Waves* exposes. Having seen in *To the Lighthouse* the successful expression of an aesthetic formulated to convey Woolf's particular vision of lived experience, I would like to turn again to *The Waves* where, I believe, that aesthetic breaks down. That question of the complex nature of the relationship between life and literature that *Orlando* flirts with is the focus of *The Waves*. This work is often regarded as a "classic text" of modernism; and indeed the work is useful as a storehouse of typical ideas, but not much more than this. It is a kind of warehouse in which are found the materials from which novels such as *To the Lighthouse* or *Between the Acts* may be created. Early on in the work's construction Woolf herself felt that "I am only accumulating notes for a book" (D, 30 November 1929). *The Waves* never gets beyond this state, and yet there are many who would disagree.

Critics have found *The Waves* a work in which form and content are "closely bound together to form one substance" (Fleishman, *Virginia Woolf*, 157); a work in which is displayed "the artist's ability to create unity" (van Buren Kelley, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, 198). More recently, Lyndall Gordon has written that "Virginia Woolf's main ambitions came together in *The Waves* and never fused so perfectly again" (*A Writer's Life*, 247). It is eloquent that for two chapters Gordon does little more than describe the work. The book's reputation as a classic text of modernism owes much to its abstruseness; its hostility to "common reading" seems to qualify it for a special prominence among notoriously "difficult" works of modern art. It is because of its peculiar position in critics' estimations that I choose, for a moment, to treat *The Waves* in isolation from the other works.
The Waves is an antinovel that yields very little to the processes of assimilation, memory, and comparison that constitute reading; it is not strong enough to forge its own conventions in the way that, say, To the Lighthouse is (see above, p. 72-81). It is particularly significant that in its conception and development, Woolf was far more concerned with the shape of the book than anything else. In the process of writing other novels, she had been interested in the characters, their movements and relations; but a reading of the entries that refer to The Waves in her diary shows very different prevalent concerns:

Abstraction is the dominant note in entries about the new work. As so often, Woolf recorded the genesis and development of her new fiction in her diary. The first stirrings of what would become The Waves are interesting in that Woolf is concerned with her own “process” of creation (“I want to watch & see how the idea at first occurs. I want to trace my own process.” [D, 30 September 1926]). A month later she was still watching carefully: “At intervals, I begin to think (I note this, as I am going to watch for the advent of a book) of a solitary woman musing[?] a book of ideas about life. This has intruded only once or twice, & very vaguely: it is a dramatisation of my mood at Rodmell. It is to be an endeavour at something mystic, spiritual; the thing that exists when we aren’t there” (30 October 1926). This was written during revision of To the Lighthouse. In the central “Time Passes” section, Woolf attempted to convey a sense of “something that exists when we aren’t there.” I have said that if the self exists it does not share the modes of being established for identity; it may be impossible actually to describe (see above, p. 31).
Bearing this in mind, and also that basic tenet of Woolf's aesthetic—that the way to achieve beauty or wholeness was not to come at it directly, but to communicate indirectly—it is strange that in *The Waves* she seems to abandon the lessons of earlier works and to approach directly that empty center of acute 'reality' that seems to be the soul's domain.

The "mood at Rodmell" (to which some attention has already been given; see above, p. 33-35) is given central importance by Woolf (J. W. Graham calls it "the seminal experience out of which the book grew" and notes that she refers to it, in a "ritualistic gesture," at the end of each draft over four and a half years¹), and so, intensely private though it is, I repeat its description here as it might throw some light on her expectations for *The Waves*. The mood is described in two diary entries written just after Woolf had finished *To the Lighthouse*:

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Intense depression: I have to confess that this has overcome me several times since September 6th... It is so strange to me that I cannot get it right—the depression, I mean, which does not come from something definite, but from nothing. "Where there is nothing" the phrase came to me, as I sat at the table in the drawing room.

All the rest of the year one's (I daresay rightly) curbing & controlling this odd immeasurable soul. When it expands, though one is frightened & bored & gloomy, it is as I say to myself, awfully queer. There is an edge to it which I feel of great importance, once in a way. One goes down into the well & nothing protects one from the assault of truth. Down there I can't write or read; I exist however. I am. (D, 28 September 1926)

I wished to add some remarks to this, on the mystical side of this solitude: how it is not oneself but something in the universe that one's left with. It is this that is frightening & exciting in the midst of my profound gloom, depression, boredom, whatever it is. One sees a fin passing far out. What image can I reach to convey what I mean? Really there is none I think. The interesting thing is that in all my feeling & thinking I have never come up against this before. Life is, soberly & accurately, the oddest affair: has in it the essence of reality. I used to feel this as a child—couldn't step across a puddle once I remember, for thinking, how strange—what am I &c. But by writing I don't reach anything. All I mean to make is a note of a curious state of mind. I hazard the guess that it may be the impulse behind another book. (30 September 1926)
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It is revealing that Woolf treats this as a new experience, for it bears the characteristics of a fundamental experience of several
characters in the preceding novels. Clarissa Dalloway, for example, is seen to undergo precisely this sense of wonder at simply being at all and to feel the "presence" of nothing, which at once fascinates and depresses her.

Perhaps it is because the creation of earlier novels was "unconscious"—in the sense that Woolf felt artistic creation to be predominantly unconscious—that she finds the experience one she has "never come up against" when she tries actually to write it out directly. It is this directness that flaws *The Waves*, and it is surprising that she even made the attempt in the light of that aesthetic seen to govern *To the Lighthouse*. As she began to work on the book, she wrote in her diary of the futility of such an endeavor: "But who knows—once one takes a pen and writes? How difficult not to go making 'reality' this & that, whereas it is one thing" (*D*, 10 September 1928).

Bernard seeks "the one true phrase" that will sum up life; he feels that all his stories are ancillary to the "true story" or "final statement" that will fix the elusive "reality" of life. It is in a way ironic that the diary entry just quoted should explain why *The Waves* must fail: 'reality' is 'no-thing,' but writing is naming, an attempt to substantize, to give a form to that which has no form. This might seem to suggest that all the novels are equally failures as I have stressed that they are concerned to give a form to this formless 'reality.' Why they are not failures is that Woolf's aesthetic is fully cognizant of the nature of the act of reading. The novels—except *The Waves*—enter into a communion with the reader. Reading is a dynamic and dyadic experience, analogous to other events in human life, in which the reader creates a *virtual* form of actual life, and is enabled to enact experience (to re-create it) on the terms of the novel. In *The Act of Reading*, Iser describes the structural similarities of lived experience and reading:

Reading has the same structure as experience, to the extent that our entanglement has the effect of pushing our various criteria of orientation back into the past, thus suspending their validity for the new present. This does not mean, however, that these criteria or our previous experiences disappear altogether. On the contrary, our past still remains our experience, but what happens now is that it begins to interact with the as yet unfamiliar presence of the text. This remains unfamiliar so long as our previous experiences are
precisely as they had been before we began our reading. But in the course of the reading, these experiences will also change, for the acquisition of experience is not a matter of adding on—it is a restructuring of what we already possess. (132)

*The Waves* is antireading in this respect: it does not allow for the participation of the reader, but continually dictates through a highly self-conscious structure. In an essay on "Jane Austen," Woolf wrote, "She stimulates us to supply what is not there. What she offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet is composed of something that expands in the reader's mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial" (*CR*, 174). This is but one of an enormous number of references in Woolf to a reader's participation in the constitution of a text. Iser refers to this passage: "The 'enduring form of life' which Virginia Woolf speaks of is not manifested on the printed page; it is a product arising out of the interaction between text and reader" (168). What I contend is the prime reason for *The Waves*’ failure is the avoidance of what Iser calls "the structured blanks of the text," that "stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text" (*Act*, 169).

Turning again to the diary, it is clear that Woolf herself was aware of the dangers that the form she was developing was open to:

Who thinks it? And am I outside the thinker? One wants some device which is not a trick. (25 September 1929) . . . In particular is there some radical fault in my scheme? (11 October 1929) . . . Is there some falsity, of method, somewhere? Something tricky? (5 November 1929) . . . But how to pull it together, how to compost it—press it into one—I do not know; (26 January 1930) . . . it may miss fire somewhere. (9 April 1930) . . . I think this is the greatest opportunity I have yet been able to give myself: therefore I suppose the most complete failure. Yet I respect myself for writing this book. Yes—even though it exhibits my congenital faults. (20 August 1930) . . . I imagine that the hookedness may be so great that it will be a failure from a reader's point of view. (2 February 1931)

When published, the reviews were favorable, which of course pleased the author. Nevertheless, she wrote in her diary that the book had not been understood: the *Times* praised her characters "when I meant to have none"; the book was "an adventure which I go on alone" (*D*, 5 October 1931). *The Waves* is hostile to reading, and yet has nearly always been read as a com-
plete, harmonious work of art. It is, though, a product of crisis and reflects this in its form.

In two insightful articles, J. W. Graham documents Woolf’s growing distaste for “psychology” and her search for voiceless, characterless expression. In the introduction to his edition of the two holograph drafts of the book, Graham explores the background to its conception as seen in the diary and essays written between 1927 and 1930. In contemporary modes of fiction, Woolf saw an excessive concern with psychology. In “The Narrow Bridge of Art” she says that writers have been too much taken up with personal relations:

> We have come to forget that a large and important part of life consists in our emotions toward such things as roses and nightingales, the dawn, the sunset, life, death, and fate; we forget that we spend much time sleeping, dreaming, thinking, reading, alone; we are not entirely occupied in personal relations; all our energies are not absorbed in making our livings. (*GR*, 19)

In “Phases of Fiction,” two years later, she wrote of just that aesthetic she had achieved in novels like *To the Lighthouse*, but which is largely abandoned in *The Waves*:

> As the pages are turned, something is built up which is not the story itself. And this power, if it accentuates and concentrates and gives the fluidity of the novel endurance and strength, so that no novel can survive even a few years without it, is also a danger. For the most characteristic qualities of the novel—that it registers the slow growth and development of feeling, that it follows many lives and traces their unions and fortunes over a long stretch of time—are the very qualities that are most incompatible with design and order. (*GR*, 143)

Here she has stated exactly the danger to which *The Waves* falls prey. The passage continues by saying that the “most complete novelist” is the one who can achieve a balance of the powers so that “the one enhances the other.”

It is evident that *The Waves* was intended to give a sense of “life itself going on” (*D*, 28 May 1929); among early working titles were “the life of anybody” and “life in general.” This universal scope is not new in the fiction: Rachel Vinrace wished to be told “everything” and Lily Briscoe is overwhelmed by no less a question than “What is the meaning of life?” *The Waves*—
explicitly in the final episode—attempts to answer this question directly, attempts to map life completely with art.

At this point we might make a useful excursus to examine a sketch of 1920 that adumbrates Bernard's project of summing up life in a story: "An Unwritten Novel." The narrator is on a train, sitting opposite a woman whom the narrator "reads," believing that she is trying to tell her something simply by the way she sits, moves, looks: "I read her message, deciphered her secret, reading it beneath her gaze" (AHH, 14). The unreliability of such "reading" is demonstrated when the unknown woman gets off at her destination and shows that her life has nothing in common with the narrator's interpretation; the narrator is bewildered: "Well, my world's done for! What do I stand on? What do I know? That's not Minnie. There never was Moggridge. Who am I? Life's bare as bone" (AHH, 23). That life is impoverished because it does not tally with a reading is a characteristic feeling of Bernard's: he makes up scenes (stories) and expects life to fit them. For example, he goes to visit Louis and Rhoda, imagining Rhoda murmuring poetry, Louis filling a saucer with milk for a cat, but neither of them are even there: he feels at once that life is a poor affair (TW, 195). In the sketch the similar sense of loss gives way almost immediately to a euphoric celebration of life's richness and variety:

Oh, how it whirls and surges—floats me afresh! I start after them. People drive this way and that. The white light splutters and pours. . . . Wherever I go, mysterious figures, I see you, turning the corner, mothers and sons; you, you, you. . . . If I fall on my knees, If I go through the ritual, the ancient antics, it's you, unknown figures, you I adore; if I open my arms, it's you I embrace, you I draw to me—adorable world! (AHH, 23)

The Waves was intended to express "life itself," to "give the moment," and yet it is more about art than life. It is an intensely self-regarding work, and its failure is partly due to this inwardness. In Beyond Egotism Robert Kiely remarks that Neville's comment that "our friends are not able to finish their stories" "is not merely an idle criticism of Bernard's inability to hold an audience but a deeply serious and universally applicable expression of life's refusal to conform to narrative convention. Friends cannot finish their stories because their audiences and their subjects are forever dispersing" (173-74). Life will not conform to
stories, a recalcitrance that prevents Bernard from ever realizing the integrated "selfhood" that some critics (e.g., Richter, van Buren Kelley) claim for him, and reduces his experience to mere phrases.

In *The Act of Reading* Iser writes, "events are a paradigm of reality in that they designate a process, and are not merely a 'discrete entity' " (68). He continues this theme with a theoretical formulation that could be taken as parallel in a way to that important image in *The Waves* (which also appears in Woolf’s diary) of a fin turning in a waste of water:

Each event represents the intersecting point of a variety of circumstances, but circumstances also change the event as soon as it has taken on a shape. As a shape, it marks off certain borderlines, so that these may then be transcended in the continuous process of realization that constitutes reality. In literature, where the reader is constantly feeding back reactions as he obtains new information, there is just such a continual process of realization, and so reading itself "happens" like an event, in the sense that what we read takes on the character of an open-ended situation, at one and the same time concrete and yet fluid. The concreteness arises out of each new attitude we are forced to adopt toward the text, and the fluidity out of the fact that each new attitude bears the seeds of its own modification. Reading, then, is experienced as something which is happening—and happening is the hallmark of reality. (68)

We may say, then, that literature paradoxically complements reality in that it provides a perspective on the world, through symbols, which is not available to the world of actual experience. "Symbols enable us to perceive the given world because they do not embody any of the qualities or properties of the existing reality; in Cassirer’s terms, it is their very difference that makes the empirical world accessible" (Act, 64). Fiction is described by Iser as “the pragmatically conditioned gestalt of the imaginary”4: “It appears to be a halfway house between the imaginary and the real. It shares with the real the determinateness of its form, and with the imaginary its nature of an ‘as if.’ "5 Crucial in the failure of *The Waves* as a work of literature that can be successfully and fruitfully read is Bernard’s failure to distinguish between story-telling and life and Woolf’s failure to harmonize design and content. In the summing up—Bernard’s ultimate story—the reasons for the book’s failure are focused on.

The summing up is distinguished from the eight preceding
episodes in a number of ways, most significantly by its narrative voice. The dominant tense (like that of the interludes) is not the pure present of the other episodes—a tense that J. W. Graham notes, necessitates repetition of “I,” as there is no helpful copula like the “am” of the progressive present. The “phantom dinner party” mirrors the situation of text and reader. It is not a normal social situation: the silent, unnamed guest is a “reader” of Bernard’s story.

In the second holograph draft (1930), the final episode begins: “There are times,” said Bernard, ‘which seem to be no time: & places which are no particular place, just as you, if you will pardon me, are not <any particular> person. in particular” (Graham, 656). This is the situation of a literary work as regards the reader. The impression of timelessness is also indicated by the possibility that the summing-up is largely a dream, something that is only very slightly hinted at in the published text. At the end of episode eight Bernard is sleeping on a train: “But what is odd is that I still clasp the return half of my ticket to Waterloo firmly between the fingers of my right hand, even now, even sleeping” (TW, 167). The draft—as is usual in Woolf’s work—is more explicit about the dream state: a note written as a reminder of what has still to be composed reads:

(he goes in to be shaved, & sees the wind in looking glasses—regularity of the man’s hand like the gardeners broom—& the dream)

(April 12th) 1930
(Graham, 360)

Another plan for the section reads:

The walk (after arriving at Waterloo)
hairdresser [sc.?]
Then the loss of identity.
Then the return
The wave falls.
He wakes.
Death
O Solitude.

(Graham, 766)

The status of draft material should not be taken for granted in reading a published text; however, it is of particular help in read-
ing *The Waves* as revisions are nearly always contractions or deletions. One further plan reads:

Then the phantom dinner party when *the* others are not present; but only Bernard, & he sums up all their lives; & becomes part of them. Then the general death.

(Graham, 757)

The conception jotted down in drafts and notebooks, of Bernard summing up "all their lives," is not realized in the book itself, and indeed could not be realized. Bernard’s summing up is not a uniting of the characters; it does not create that single human being he says they saw laid out before them on the restaurant table at their reunion dinner (196). The conclusion is merely one more story in the repertoire of *The Waves*. The book is not an "*ars poetica* for fiction" (Fleishman, *Virginia Woolf*, 152), but a sketchpad for an unwritten novel.

The wish to put ourselves in an unmediated relation to whatever "really" is, to know something absolutely, means a desire to be defined totally: marked or named once and for all, fixed in or by a word, and so—paradoxically—made indifferent. (Hartman, *Saving the Text*, 97)

Bernard’s intention to "explain to you the meaning of my life" (168) can be read as Woolf’s intention to explain the “meaning” of *The Waves*. The summing-up is not just the conclusion to Bernard’s life, it is the author's way—as she states in her notebooks and diaries—of drawing together the various elements of the book, rounding it off and making some “final statement” about all the characters. Bernard himself alternates between extolling the power of art to express life in this way, and denigrating its poverty. The real problem, however, lies in his inability to distinguish between life and art and, as we shall see, in his refusal of the distinctions of identity and difference.

The first difficulty he encounters is the politics of experience: "the globe full of figures" as which Bernard images his life, his companion can not see. "You see me . . . opposite you," says Bernard, but whose, or which, "me" is this? The problem of voice, that is never solved in *The Waves*, is most particu-
larly Bernard’s, a confusion that leads to inextricably complicated identifications. In evidence of this, we might take Bernard’s recollection of his reaction to Percival’s death: “I said, ‘Give him (myself) another moment’s respite’ as I went downstairs” (TW, 187). The three pronouns exemplify the confusion of voices in the work, a confusion that stems from the attempt to fix what is impossible to fix. A further note of Samuel Butler’s is apposite here: “Besides what is the self of which we say that we are self-conscious? No one can say what it is that we are conscious of. This is one of the things which lie altogether outside the sphere of words.”

James Naremore (The World Without a Self) is one of very few critics to have found The Waves a failure (“though a highly interesting one”). He too finds a confusion of voices:

It is as if Virginia Woolf were asking the reader to suppose that the six types she has arranged in the novel can at any given moment be represented by six detached spokesmen who are continually going through a process of self-revelation. These voices seem to inhabit a kind of spirit realm from which, in a sad, rather world-weary tone, they comment on their time-bound selves below. Even while the voices assert their personalities, they imply a knowledge of a life without personality, an undifferentiated world like the one described by the interchapters. (173)

Naremore feels that “the reader almost drowns in the language” of The Waves (189). Yet, despite his feeling that the book is one of those that “generate an aesthetic crisis and call into question their very being” (175), Naremore surprisingly concludes that it achieves “that ultimate synthesis which . . . [she] sought to depict in her fiction” (160).

Bernard attempts to discover a grammar of life, to reduce experience absolutely to language, but there is a disjunction between the two, felt even in the discrepancy experienced by Bernard between himself and his name. This discrepancy is explained by J. Hillis Miller:

All proper names, as linguists and ethnologists have recognized, are metaphors. They alienate the person named from his unspeakable individuality and assimilate him into a system of language. They label him in terms of something other than himself, in one form of the differentiating or stepping aside which is the essence of language. To name someone is to alienate him from himself by making him part of a family.
As already noted (see above, p. 41), the self cannot be named; what Hartman calls the "nomen numen" is extralinguistic. Bernard's assertions of identity (e.g., "I rose and walked away—I, I, I; . . . I, Bernard") are repeatedly undercut by his uncertainty as to how much others have contributed to that identity. Ultimately, Bernard is trying to verbally reduce the "I" that is his identity, to "sum up" his life and *speak* his self (or soul) into being in the actual world. "In a sense that cuts much deeper than semantics," writes George Steiner, "our identity is a first-person pronoun." Bernard wishes to go beyond this *semantically, verbally*. His desire (and Woolf's) to reduce life to art, to fix the movement of identity by speaking into the world his secret name, leads eventually to the strange concept of "a man without a self."

One day, Bernard tells his guest, he did not answer the call of "I"; he experienced a world drained of all color, devoid of all features. However, while he can still say "I am dead" (*TW*, 202), he is still living, voicing his identity, still in the world he says he has transcended. If Bernard is "a dead man," who speaks? As Bernard says that he has dissolved all difference, resolved all identities into one, the biblical allusions of his "Last Supper" take on a greater import. "Take it. This is my life." says Bernard at the beginning of the last episode, echoing 1 Corinthians 11:24. He believes he has "summed up" all the others in this communion, forming one body, one being:

> And now I ask, "Who am I?" I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know. We sat here together. But now Percival is dead, and Rhoda is dead; we are divided; we are not here. Yet I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt "I am you." This difference we make so much of, this identity we so feverishly cherish, was overcome. (*TW*, 205)

This dislocation of identity reflects the crisis the book generates. Throughout, Bernard has questioned the nature of his own being in an empirical fashion quite unlike any other of Woolf's characters. The limits of subjectivity (what Naremore calls the "ultimate refinement") are reached as Bernard tries to undo the tautological knot of identity, enshrined, as Steiner says, in monotheistic religion's "I am that I am" (*Extraterritorial*, 64).
Distinction between one and other is dissolved in this quasi-religious self-glorification of Bernard's. He is claiming universal knowledge (which denies death) by what he imagines is a summing-up in an instant of his entire being; he claims access to "the mystery of things" (TW, 207), to being one of God's spies.9

The illusion that Bernard expresses is shattered (as we will see below, chapter 7) in the "Time Passes" section of To the Lighthouse, and it is perhaps a mark of the rigor of the writer's mind that Bernard is returned to consciousness of his actual identity by the (Sartreian) look of his dinner companion: "You look, eat, smile, are bored, pleased, annoyed—that is all I know. Yet this shadow which has sat by me for an hour or two, this mask from which peep two eyes, has power to drive me back, to pinion me down among all those other faces, to shut me in a hot room; to send me dashing like a moth from candle to candle" (TW, 208). From his self-apotheosis Bernard is returned to simple identity—"I." Perhaps an echo of that tautological irreducibility is heard in his wish to be left alone, "myself being myself" (TW, 210). The failure of Bernard, and consequently of The Waves, to make the promised "final statement" is perhaps admitted a few pages earlier: "What does the central shadow hold? Something? Nothing? I do not know" (TW, 207). Indeed, the summing-up has acknowledged its own failure even before this, when Bernard says, "Life is not susceptible perhaps to the treatment we give it when we try to tell it" (TW, 189). Such an admission is irreconcilable with the sense of transcendence of all limits, the dissolution of identity and difference that Bernard professes, and is an example of those unresolved tensions that fragment The Waves. Language cannot go beyond the nominal pronoun in representing self. R. D. Laing (amongst others10) has expressed the catch succinctly in The Bird of Paradise: "The Life I am trying to grasp is the me that is trying to grasp it" (156). Bernard—and Woolf—try to transpose the problem into other-worldly terms, but the argument remains strictly earthbound.

Before the truly Victorian melodrama of the ending's memorial to Woolf's brother, Thoby Stephen, is perhaps an admission of defeat: "However beat and done with it all I am, I must haul myself up, . . . I, I, I . . . must take myself off and catch some last train" (TW, 210). The "I" here contains the tri-
umph and humiliation of human being, what Buber termed “the sublime melancholy of our lot” (*I and Thou*, 68). Severely flawed though it is, *The Waves* must not be rejected; it continues to develop and expound the perennial themes of Woolf’s fiction. It is also important as evidence of a conflict that points toward the last and in many ways most difficult novel, *Between the Acts*. In that work’s fusion of design and substance, in its dazzling play of voices, is conveyed that sense of something there when we are not that *The Waves* attempted.

The contours of Woolf’s art reveal the paradigmatic experience of “emptiness” at the heart of life. The idea of “absent presence” emerges from recognition of the disjunctive filiation of art and life. This strange concept is associated both with Woolf’s idea of self, or soul, and with her consciousness of reality. With this description as a context, we will turn now more specifically to ‘reality’ and Woolf’s sense of the numinous, which at once disturbed and enthralled her.