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# Modernist Temporalities: Figures of Time in the Novels of Virginia Woolf

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Modernist Temporalities: Figures of Time in the Novels of Virginia Woolf

An Honors Thesis

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Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

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## Abstract

As a genre, the novel is inextricable from the narrative form. For Virginia Woolf, a novelist who often preoccupied herself with the chaos of time, this partnership between novel and narrative can be a disquieting one. As a concept, time eludes even the broadest attempts at definition, so all attempts to make objective claims about it are accordingly moot. As a result, temporality—or one's subjective experience of time—has proven to be particularly useful for my thesis, which examines the theme of temporality in three of Woolf's novels: *The Waves*, *Orlando*, and *To the Lighthouse*. At the core of my analysis are questions specific to Woolf's modernist dilemma: how does an author portray the continuous becoming of time in light of the inadequacies of language itself and the formal constraints of the novel as a genre? *The Waves* is a famously elusive narrative, in part because of its polyvocality. Its male narrators, I argue, emphasize storytelling in order to reinforce notions of historical temporality; conversely, some of the novel's female narrators tend towards more natural forms of temporality as a rejoinder to this logocentrism. In my analysis of *Orlando*, I argue that Woolf parodies assumptions about linear time in a way that informs her experimentations with gender, voice, and the temporal in *The Waves* by depicting a "queer" temporality via the titular character's gender transversals. Finally, symbolic and structural representations of time in *To the Lighthouse* convey the disparate ways in which its characters make sense of their own temporalities, reinforcing a notion Woolf puts forward in *The Waves* and *Orlando*: that subjectivity permeates every dimension of narrative expression, even the dimension of time itself.

## Introduction

In 2002, Alejandro González Iñárritu was enlisted alongside ten other directors to contribute to the anthology film, *11'09"01 September 11*, a response to the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center. Symbolically allotted eleven minutes, nine seconds, and one frame with which to work, Iñárritu packed sounds from all around the globe into his segment, “Mexico,” many of which were recorded on the day of the attacks. The voice of a panicked American newscaster narrating the fateful morning in real time, for example, overlays a Spanish speaking newscaster’s own narration, while incessant sounds of sirens, as well as sounds of jumpers’ bodies hitting pavement, provide an eerie backdrop. Most intriguingly, the majority of the segment’s visual accompaniment consists of a black screen. Despite, or maybe even because of this decision to accompany its dense soundtrack with a black screen rather than something more ‘realistic’ (the footage from which the audio was sundered, for instance), “Mexico” has been known to trigger intense and authentic emotions among its viewers ever since it debuted over sixteen years ago.

How can something as patently unrealistic as a black screen serve to enhance a film’s authenticity? In trying to understand the reasoning behind this paradoxical relationship, Paul Ward’s scholarship proves quite useful. Writing about the “animated documentary” genre— itself a strange intersection between a genre intending to construct something artificial and one intending to document reality—he employs the term “subjective documentary” in order to identify a particular type of documentary which “draws out some of the problematic issues of a belief in an ‘objective’ position from which certain stories can be told” (86). In other words, because animation is an overtly subjective genre, it has the power to critique the documentary

genre's claim to objectivity, bringing to light esteemed animator Jan Švankmajer's counterclaim that "objective reality is an illusory, unhelpful, and ultimately misleading concept" (qtd. in Ward 87). Too often, documentary filmmakers mistake their attempts at realism for "objective reality," thereby overlooking the fact that "objective reality" does not actually exist. As "Mexico"'s multilingual soundtrack demonstrates, there are an infinity of perspectives from which any given story can be told. An American newscaster's perspective, for example, may differ from the perspective of a Mexican newscaster, and neither of these two perspectives can do justice to the third perspective of, say, a passenger aboard one of the planes which hit the World Trade Center; at best, they can only describe it. As such, it is problematic to assume that any single one of these perspectives counts as the "objective" one. So, by complementing the manifold perspectives of its soundtrack with a black screen, "Mexico" is arguably even more authentic than a standard audiovisual documentary because its universal image of a black screen accommodates a greater abundance of subjectivities, none of which are any more 'realistic' than the others.

In a similar manner, the novels of Virginia Woolf are strikingly true to life, despite their *prima facie* departures from realism. Throughout the Victorian era directly preceding the modernist movement of which Woolf was a part, the concept of realism was deeply entwined with the material world. Much of the literature from that era was bogged down by prominent materialist notions that, in order to be realistic, a text ought to be foregrounded with naturalistic observations of material objects. Pushing back against this notion, Woolf and her modernist contemporaries began incorporating new narrative techniques such as stream of consciousness as a way of distancing themselves from Victorian preoccupations with material

objects. Rather than undertake the fool's errand of seeking out objectivity, they sought to authenticate their novels by emphasizing the subjectivities of the characters therein.

Particularly important to this modernist fixation on subjectivity is the concept of time. Being both the standard by which all other forces measure themselves and the governing force of existence itself, time eludes classification. It is simply too ubiquitous. The intervening centuries since the Scientific Revolution have lifted the veil of mystery from many other concepts previously understood only in metaphysical terms, for instance gravity, freeing them from the fanciful reins of writers and philosophers. When William Shakespeare wrote *Troilus and Cressida* at the beginning of the seventeenth-century, for example, Isaac Newton had not yet been born, so the great playwright was able to grapple with the yet to be discovered concept of gravity under his own terms, as a force "at the very centre of the earth, / Drawing all things to it" (4.3.110-111). Newton went on to elucidate gravitational force in ways that extended far beyond Shakespeare's scope later in the same century, but to this day, no comparable physicist has succeeded at proving or disproving the claim made by another of Shakespeare's characters, that "time is out of joint" (*Hamlet* 1.5.210). In his momentous theory of relativity, Albert Einstein came close when he mapped time alongside space, understanding it not as something insubstantial, but as a fourth dimension attached to the three dimensions of space. But his findings were only theoretical, and the corroborative experiments lacked the punch of Newton's laws. So, due to the fact that no clear and objective delineation of its properties exist, to this day the concept of time in some ways belongs as much to the imaginations of novelists as it does to the expertise of scientists.

Time's exceptional status among the universe's operating forces is reflected in how fiction writers delineate its properties. Writers employ countless metaphors, analogies, aphorisms, and idioms in order to understand time, but because it eludes even the vaguest of definitions, these literary devices do more to encapsulate how it *feels* to experience time than to determine what it actually is. Thus, I take as my subject not so much "time" in Woolf's fiction as I do how she depicts *temporality*: that is, one's subjective movement through time, which relationship varies from individual to individual.

In her book, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely*, Elizabeth Grosz shows that this relationship between subject and time not only varies from individual to individual, but also from time to time. To paraphrase some of the idioms with which it is most often associated, time can fly, nick, crunch, freeze, or simply go by. Or at least it can feel that way; as Grosz writes, "We can think [of time] only in passing moments, through ruptures... though it contains no moments or ruptures and has no being or presence, functioning only as continuous becoming" (5). At the heart of Grosz's claim in this passage is a distinction between temporality and time. Our temporalities consist of "passing moments" (e.g. momentary glances) and "ruptures" (e.g. sleep states), but time itself consists of neither of these phenomena, instead "functioning only as continuous becoming": the process of moments bleeding indiscriminately into one another.

But while time itself consists only of "continuous becoming," the temporal processes of habit, memory, and recognition all link us to the past. In the case of habit, the past sneaks into the present and takes control of our motor mechanisms, sometimes without our even realizing it (Grosz 170). In the case of memory, eidetic images of a persistent past superimpose

themselves onto the present. The same is true of recognition, in which we utilize images from the past in order to inform our future actions (Grosz 171). As a result, these mechanisms blur the line between our perceptions of the present and our memories of the past, such that we begin to feel as if we are occupying the past, present, and future all at once.

Henri Bergson, an early twentieth century philosopher, spatializes the concept of temporality in order to make sense of this concurrence between past, present and future. For him, the past continues to exist even as the present supersedes it, resulting in a temporal plane which “fan[s] out” into diverging threads (Grosz 221). Think of language: we are able to comprehend the sounds emitting from each other’s mouths because of a shared past, a past rooted in didactic tools like memorization, which over time have strengthened our abilities to translate our thoughts into phonic sounds. And in those rare cases where we are so in tune with the patterns of each other’s words that we are able to finish each other’s sentences, time reveals itself as a cycle that grants us access to the future. It is important to keep in mind, however, that this is only one kind of temporality; just as time can be cyclical, it can be dynamic too—static only in the sense that it is constantly changing.

It makes sense, then, why, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Woolf experimented extensively with temporality in her novels. After all, no two characters experience time identically, so temporality must be an essential consideration for any novelist concerned with exploring the outer limits of subjective expression. 1931’s *The Waves* finds Woolf overhauling traditional narrative modes, opting to restructure temporality as a fractured plane of existence shared between six narrators, some of whose individual temporalities are at complete odds with each other. On one hand, Bernard typifies the Nietzschean concept of the “eternal return,”

which is to say that he understands himself as embodying the cyclical recurrence and development of the great men who came before him (Grosz 107). Conforming to the logocentric ideal that language is the fundamental expression of one's external reality, he consistently relies on the use of language as a way of understanding the world around him ("Logocentrism"). Furthermore, he sees language as the unifying force which can connect him to the past and canonize him in the future. As a writer and as a storyteller, he is the inheritor of a burdensome past, struggling to be a torchbearer for generations to come.

On the other hand, Jinny and Rhoda are only able to conceive of their temporalities in terms of particular activities, the former finding it in sex and the latter finding it in dreams. Unlike Bernard, who interacts with the past via storytelling, Jinny's sensual disposition tethers her to the present moment. For Rhoda, neither the past, the present, nor her fellow narrators make much sense, so she retreats to her own detemporalized world in order to find meaning. In both cases, I argue, Jinny's and Rhoda's departures from the logocentrism of men like Bernard are examples of feminism. This has to do with the fact that men have been the primary creators of symbolic representations throughout history. When Jinny and Rhoda depart from logocentrism's reliance on symbols for meaning, they in turn depart from phallocentrism as well, an ideology which regards men (or more specifically, men's sexual organs) as the central authorities of society.

In *Orlando*, published in 1928, Woolf explores temporality by way of different "eras," which are themselves contrivances of the historical genre. The titular protagonist ages about fifteen years over the course of more than three centuries, living through the reign of Elizabeth I, the invention of the car, and everything in between. Each era, whether it be the Elizabethan,

Victorian, or Edwardian, adopts its own distinct tone, at least according to the historian who narrates the novel. And as historians are wont to do, the narrator frames Orlando within the singular zeitgeist of each ensuing era. Of course, anybody who has ever lived through more than one so-called ‘distinct’ era knows that such an approach to temporality is reductionist at best. Such is the unwieldy predicament of Orlando, whose body’s job it is to bridge the gap between the rigid boundaries of history and the continuous flow of time.

One process by which Orlando bridges this gap is his gender transformation, in which he wakes one day to discover that he has inexplicably become a woman. This momentous development defies the traditional notion that gender is an immutable facet of personal identity, thereby restructuring *Orlando*’s temporal considerations entirely. The critic Pamela Caughey, for example, finds Orlando’s gender transformation to be so central to the novel’s essence that she goes so far as to classify it as a *transnarrative* (503). Orlando’s trans identity, then, is not simply a topic of consideration, but the very “organizing principle” of the novel itself (507). Using queer temporality as her lens, which she defines as being “outside the structure of reproductive and family time, of generational inheritance and capital accumulation,” Caughey goes on to show how *Orlando*’s narrative defies traditional understandings of temporal progression (519). The concept of queer temporality proves crucial to my analysis, in which I argue that *Orlando* probes and even satirizes the fabricated disparities between history and temporality, narrator and protagonist, and ultimately, objectivity and subjectivity.

Finally, in 1927’s *To the Lighthouse*, temporality figures so heavily to the point that it becomes something of an auxiliary character, always looming within the symbols as well as its

structure. Two of the novel's most central symbols, the titular Lighthouse and the waves, are tied to notions of temporality, but in varying ways. For example, for Mr. Carmichael and William Banks the waves evoke repetition, but for Mrs. Ramsay they evoke destruction. And for James Ramsay, the Lighthouse's meaning changes depending on when he is looking at it. Beyond the immediate experiences of the characters is the overall form of the novel itself, which shapes temporality as anything but a steady and linear progression of events. Organized into three sections, "The Window," "Time Passes," and "The Lighthouse," *To the Lighthouse*'s format envisions a universe in which particular days stand out and proceed with agonizing slowness, while others flit by like ellipses. "The Window" and "The Lighthouse" comprise almost all of the novel's narration, yet the intervening "Time Passes" comprises almost all of its ten-year timeline. As Liesl Olson argues, this bizarre organization of the three sections allows Woolf "to contrast the settled order of the traditional nuclear family with the freer but more chaotic relationship of modern life, and the narrow corridor of 'Time Passes' serves to emphasize the tenuous connection between old and new" (193-194). In effect, between these three sections Woolf not only explores the temporalities of her characters, but the temporalities of modern life as well. Tasked with depicting the newly "chaotic" climate of modern life as authentically as possible, Woolf must deviate in a number of ways from "the settled order" of her Victorian forebears. With *To the Lighthouse*, she does this by experimenting with new structural modes.

Various theorists have developed their own ways of understanding the dynamic configurations of time in these three novels. Joel Burges and Amy Elias note time's fluctuation between what they term "multiplicity," in which time diverges into threads of past, present, and future, and what they term "simultaneity," in which a singular present subsumes all other

threads (3). Elizabeth Freeman develops Burges and Elias' structure, exchanging their "simultaneity" and "multiplicity" with her own terms, "synchrony" and "anachrony," Synchrony is synonymous with simultaneity, whereas anachrony highlights the discrepancy between events themselves and the historiographical relation of those events ("Synchronic/Anachronic" 129). Much like multiplicity, anachrony is about reconciling the "not-present" with the "present," an issue which has become increasingly relevant in recent centuries.

Modernity's shift towards globalization has tightened these multifarious notions of temporality. The process of "chronobiopolitics," or as Freeman defines it, "the institutional arrangement of the time of life itself," has divided temporality into distinct parts, embellishing the sun's path across the sky with arbitrary divisions such as hours, minutes, and seconds ("Synchronic/Anachronic" 130). This relatively recent development of "clock time" has given rise to "labor time," which measures itself in terms of how long it takes a person—or more often, a group of people—to complete a certain activity (Canales 114). As a result, modern societies are more synchronous than ever before, connecting disparate individual temporalities to a universal temporality (the workday schedule), one which is much larger than any single one of them (Burges & Elias 8).

But at the same time, modernity has nudged time out of sync as well. For example, by way of the technique David James refers to as "periodization," historians have divided the past into increasingly narrow periods and eras, each with its own distinct customs and values (20). In recent centuries, History has become such a respected field that we have begun to conflate it with fact, treating it as tantamount to the past. But oftentimes, history says more about the present than it does about the past, as when the lexicon of a historian's own era contaminates

the era about which she writes ("Synchronic/Anachronic" 134). This fraught relationship between historians and the past is not unlike the one between novelists and reality, wherein words always fall short of capturing life's indescribable nuances.

Noticing this incongruity between literature and life, in her own writing Virginia Woolf seeks to modernize existing modes of expression so as to make them more accordant with reality. The traditional novelist depicts time as a singular and linear progression of events, but a modernist such as Woolf seeks to upset that traditional notion of temporality entirely. For example, free indirect discourse—a type of third-person narration which flits between the consciousnesses of different characters—is a cornerstone of modernist novels, particularly those of Woolf (Burges and Elias 11). With this type of narration, Woolf is able to compare and contrast the unique temporalities of different consciousnesses within the narrative of a single novel. This thesis compares and contrasts the temporalities of Woolf's characters and narrators on an even wider scale, exploring time's movement through and between *The Waves*, *Orlando*, and *To the Lighthouse*.

## Chapter 1: *The Waves*

### Telling Time

Of *The Waves'* six narrators, Bernard is far and away the most prolific. An aspiring writer as well as an extensive reader of literature, he believes that words hold the key to unlocking the meaning of the world. Unsurprisingly, then, he overwhelms the novel with descriptions of his surroundings and interpretations of his experiences, as if time will stop unless he tells it into existence. Not only that, but he repeatedly alludes to the everlasting endurance of writing as well as his place in the pantheon of great writers, both of which betoken his claim to immortality. His mostly self-assured relationship with language, however, is complicated by his inkling that actions speak louder than words, which slowly germinates in his mind as the novel progresses.

As a child, Bernard relies on language in order to connect to his fellow narrators. In the first section of the novel, while the other children are preoccupied with what they see and feel, Bernard is drawn not to the objects surrounding him, but to the descriptions of those objects. Listening to the other narrators, Bernard marvels at how they all “melt into each other with phrases” (*The Waves* 10). The world around him is significant, but only insofar as he and his fellow narrators verbalize their perceptions of it. Bernard’s analysis of his and others’ expressions, however, is not ordinary for a child. Susan, for example, “see[s] the beetle,” and ends her observation there (10). For her, language is merely an efficacious tool, the purpose of which is to convey her cognitive awareness of a sensation. Her perception itself—rather than her articulation of it—is of primary significance. Bernard, by contrast, takes it a step further, interpreting language as the unifying factor by which he and his fellow narrators can “melt into

each other." Noticing this, Susan reproaches him with the statement, "Now you lag" (10).

Unlike Susan's utilitarian use of language, Bernard's tendency towards a metaphysical interpretation of language causes him to "lag" behind his cohorts. They continue existing in the present because they only use words in order to express their immediate perceptions, while he becomes enamored by language's ability to rein him to the past experiences of others.

As the novel progresses, this communal trait of language allows Bernard to use it as a mode of travel between past and present. Sometimes he even travels between identities as well. Of his time as a student, for example, he says, "[I] was Hamlet, was Shelley, was the hero, whose name I now forget, of a novel by Dostoevsky; was for a whole term, incredibly, Napoleon; but was Byron chiefly" (*The Waves* 192). When he was a child, language united Bernard with his fellow narrators. But as a student, language unites him with the hidden worlds of poetry and novels. Written down in books decades and sometimes even centuries before his birth, these words transmute the past into his mind by way of *influence*: the movement of ideas from one thinker to another. And while influence itself is what Rachel Haidu calls a "detemporalized" process, its transmission is not (324). What this means is that influence is the process by which Dostoevsky's words transmute into Bernard's mind, and transmission is the process by which Bernard reacts to them. Consequently, influence is not an identifiable event; Bernard internalizes everything he reads, and these internalizations exist outside our notions of temporality. The transmission, however, is where the time travel occurs; when Bernard learns from, reacts to, and ultimately borrows from the works of these authors, the past's recurrence manifests itself.

Elizabeth Grosz's reading of the Nietzschean concept of the "the eternal return" provides a useful interpretation for this recurrence. The presupposition of the eternal return is that probability always leads to necessity. Given an endless amount of time, what can happen will happen. Grosz specifically applies this line of reasoning to greatness: those select few who pursue and achieve greatness signify its eternal return. They are "monumental historians" who emulate and add to the greatest achievements of the past (Grosz 107). She makes a point, however, of differentiating these historians from "antiquarian historians," whose pitfall is that they respect and revere the past for its own sake, consequently miring themselves too deeply in it (119-120). Beyond a certain point, this second type of historian will forget to apply the past to the present, losing track of newness in the process. To be monumental is to recognize the importance of the past, but only insofar as it provides a springboard for the future. The eternal return, then, requires a balance of what Grosz calls "the historical and the ahistorical, the timely and the untimely, the past and the future" (116). For those pioneers of the eternal return, history provides a useful precedent for untimeliness. Nietzsche's vision of greatness requires that we partially dissociate ourselves from the present, looking back in order to move forward.

By reliving the lives and works of these great humans before him, Bernard temporalizes his own existence as a kind of eternal return. After impulsively purchasing a framed picture of Beethoven despite not being a fan of his music or even music in general, Bernard justifies his decision. He says, "The whole of life, its masters, its adventurers, then appeared in long ranks of magnificent human beings behind me; and I was the inheritor; I, the continuer; I, the person miraculously appointed to carry it on" (195). Alongside Shakespeare and Dostoevsky,

Beethoven joins an elite rank “of magnificent human beings behind” Bernard. This depiction of temporality formulates it as a sort of timeline, except not quite, because “timeline” suggests a stillness that is not there. Timelines are the formulations of antiquarian historians, who surgically amputate the past from the present in order to study it for its own sake. But Bernard perceives himself as a monumental historian, intending to inherit and continue the past rather than simply study it. His temporality is more like a train than simply a line, with the conductor of the present pulling the caboose of the past towards an uncertain future. Yet even this formulation does not capture the full picture; still unaccounted for is the mysterious higher power that “miraculously appointed” him. Bernard’s use of the passive voice suggests that even he does not have a clue. But despite its ambiguous source, he nevertheless recognizes this “miraculous” appointment as an esteemed prerogative, worthy only of a person who can match the magnificence of those who came before him.

Louis likewise exhibits multiple identities that transcend time. He refers to his past lives on more than a few occasions throughout *The Waves*, particularly one where he dwelt with the Egyptians on the shores of the Nile. Even as a child, he says, “My roots go down to the depths of the world... down there my eyes are the lidless eyes of a stone figure in a desert by the Nile” (7). Louis’ “roots” reach all the way back to “the depths of the world”—or more specifically—a “desert by the Nile.” But what exactly is the form of these “roots,” when stripped of their figurative language? And why do they stop at a “stone figure” by the Nile? Still a child, Louis does not yet have the answers to such questions; all he has are these dislocated memories. But as he matures, the memories do as well. As an adult, he says, “Every day I unbury—I dig up. I find relics of myself in the sand that women made thousands of years ago, when I heard songs

by the Nile... I was a great poet in the time of Elizabeth" (95). Much like the "stone figure" with which he identified as a child, in this passage Louis finds tangible "relics" of himself. The commonality between these two identities is one of form; both are historical artifacts that he digs up like an archaeologist. But unlike an archaeologist, he embodies them as well. In keeping with these themes of historicity and embodiment, Louis goes on to identify with an unspecified Elizabethan poet. In this particular iteration, he historicizes himself much like Bernard did when he equated himself to Hamlet, who was the creation of one such poet.

But while also temporalizing his existence as a sort of eternal return, Louis characterizes it as more of a burden than a privilege. Reflecting on the history of time, he struggles to ascertain his purpose in its grand scheme. A middle aged man, he says, "My destiny has been that I remember and must weave together, must plait into one cable the many threads, the thin, the thick, the broken, the enduring of our long history, of our tumultuous and varied day" (154). Louis's eternal return is a matter of *musts*. In order to enact the future, he "*must weave together*" the oftentimes divergent "threads" of history. His destined purpose is one of *teleological* proportions, a word Tamlyn Monson defines as, "the threading together of events and phenomena" (185). This teleological responsibility—the "threading together" of the "threads" of history—overwhelms Louis, but he is not aberrant for feeling this way. After all, as Monson goes on to elucidate, no *narrative* or *order* can be known to exist, so to thread history together as if one does is a moot approach. The present moment is the only certainty; everything else exists only in terms of signifiers. For Louis, these signifiers take the forms of old relics like the "stone figure" by the Nile, while for Bernard, they take the forms of characters in plays and novels. In both instances, time does not reveal itself as a neat sequence. Instead,

sculptors and authors merely interpret their own “tumultuous and varied” temporalities, using stonework and language as their mediums. It is from these dubious sources that Louis must formulate his own teleology, and ultimately enact it.

Providing a voice of reason, Neville doubts Bernard’s teleological pretension to the eternal return, implicating Louis in the process. On holiday in their adolescent years, Bernard regales a group of schoolboys with stories as they relax on a playing field. Neville comments, “And now, let Bernard begin. Let him burble on, telling us stories, while we lie recumbent. Let him describe what we have all seen so that it becomes a sequence. Bernard says there is always a story” (27). With each ensuing story he tells, Bernard further refines his craft of subjugating the world to his words (Monson 179). But Neville is unimpressed. To him, Bernard is no raconteur; he is merely a “burbl[ing]” fool. This is because language, and more broadly, stories, signify time’s recurrence without actually demonstrating it. They inevitably oversimplify and misidentify time, missing their mark in the process (Monson 179). In Bernard’s case, he misidentifies time by forcing it to conform to his parochial teleology, treating it like a “sequence” rather than what it truly is: an infinitely unraveling unknown.

Neville ultimately distances himself from Bernard’s sequential reading of time, regarding it as an egotistic temporal mode. After Bernard finally finishes his slew of stories, Neville rejoices. He says, “Yes the appalling moment has come when Bernard’s power fails him and there is no longer any sequence and he sags and twiddles a bit of string and falls silent” (28). Of especial significance is his use of the word “power,” which according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* is the “capacity to direct or influence the behaviour of other(s)” (“power n2c”). In this case, Bernard’s stories form his “capacity,” while time itself represents the “other.” By the

process of storytelling, he means to impose a sequence—*his* sequence—on time itself. This, of course, leads to failure, as Neville observes. Bernard and Louis both, in effect, envision themselves as teleology itself, as the “miraculously appointed” individuals whose purpose it is to “weave together” the disparate threads of history, to locate and effectuate the underlying sequence. But Neville sees them differently, not as living out their destinies, but as hopelessly struggling to derive meaning from “a bit of string.” Neville understands what Monson means when she recognizes Bernard as being “seduced by language” (178). He might construct sequences with endless chatter, but not because he was “miraculously appointed” to do so. Such sequences supply his life and its associated sensations with meaning, seducing him as they inspire him.

Language’s contradictory capacities for seduction and inspiration rest upon a self-threatening process that Julia Kristeva terms “abjection.” According to Kristeva, the abject includes anything “opposed to *I*” (1). This opposition, however, proves to be much more complicated than the simple binary dissociation of self from other. Kristeva uses the example of food to illustrate this complication by asking herself, “at which point does food join with the self?” “The moment of ingestion” is probably the most rational response, but then how does one account for vomit and excrement? In order to make sense of this question, Kristeva interprets abjection as a rejection of not only the other, but the self as well (3). To vomit is to spit oneself out: to abject oneself in order to establish oneself more fully. Also blurring the border between the self and the abject is literature, which reimagines the self as an object. Even Bernard seems to recognize this abject quality among the books he reads. “If I wake in the night,” he says, “I feel along the shelf for a book... now and then I break off a lump, Shakespeare

it may be" (209). He sees literature for what it is: an object, a disembodied "lump" to be broken off and handled, yet nevertheless he also regards it more abstractly as "Shakespeare."

Shakespeare's words both are and are not "Shakespeare" himself. Like Kristeva's vomit, they are a regurgitation of self and other, transmuted as a cluster of words on a page. This abjection of self lies at the root of all literature, and even implicates Bernard's stories as well.

In telling stories, Bernard falls prey to abjection, intending to protract his selfhood according to the very same means by which he harms it. Just as the literature he reads is disembodied from its authors, his stories are severed from his own experiences. He talks of his life as something separate from himself, calling it "a many-sided substance cut out of this dark; a many-faceted flower" (175). If the "substance" or "flower" is his life, then the many sides or facets are the stories which comprise it. Taking a cue from the novelists and poets who inspire him, Bernard comprehends his life as being ostensibly "cut out of this dark" whenever he tells a story, thereby preserving the subjective totality of his existence. But what Bernard does not realize is that these stories do not comprise his life; they merely symbolize it. Language is not a tool that preserves him, but a symbolic defense he institutes in order to protect his own teleological worldview from the abject "dark" surrounding him. And as Kristeva reminds us, the irony is that these symbols are abjections of Bernard himself. She writes, "I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself," before finally concluding that abjection "is a precondition of narcissism" (3-13). "Narcissism," a form of neurosis in which the narcissist in question has an inflated sense of her own self-worth, requires that she *beholds* herself. The task of beholding oneself is, of course, impossible to fully realize without the interference of some other object (a mirror, for example). Consequently, narcissism depends

upon self-abjection, even if the narcissist's intent is to "establish" herself. A narcissist of sorts, Bernard abjects himself when he tries to establish himself through the medium of storytelling, erroneously recognizing himself in his words.

The most prolific of *The Waves'* six narrators, Bernard believes that his prodigious narrative presence has a direct impact on the passage of time. At a dinner party with the other narrators, Bernard marvels at the lasting impact of their conversation. He concludes:

"We have proved... sitting talking, that we can add to the treasury of moments. We are not slaves bound to suffer incessantly unrecorded petty blows on our bent backs. We are not sheep either, following a master. We are creators. We too have made something that will join the innumerable congregations of past time. We too... stride not into chaos, but into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illumined and everlasting road." (109-110)

For Bernard, time is not a continuous flow, but a "treasury": a growing repository that privileges the past as much as it does the present. Those who spend the most time "sitting talking," then, leave the largest lasting impact on "the innumerable congregations of past time." Of note is that Bernard does not accord this same sense of permanence to other actions and events. The hypothetical "petty blows" he describes, for example, go "unrecorded"; they exist only in the present moment but then are extinguished. Language, however, is a unique "force" capable of subjugating the "chaos" of everyday life. Apart from our own parochial memories, the past as we know it would cease to exist without the archival powers of language. The "illumined and everlasting road" that Bernard describes is one comprised not of actions, but of the words that interpret those actions.

Phenomenology, a school of thought which identifies a link between human consciousness and reality, provides a useful framework for analyzing Bernard's temporal interpretation of language. Reality, according to a phenomenological interpretation, hinges on the self; phenomena, i.e. any perceived objects, facts, or occurrences, are only significant insofar as they appear *to somebody* ("Phenomenon"). Saghar Najafi takes it a step further, linking phenomenology to *intentionality*—the process of attentively perceiving an object—ultimately identifying it as a "fundamental characteristic" among many of Woolf's characters (32). At its essence, intentionality is an assertion of the ego because it reminds a person of the active role they play in their surroundings. In Bernard's case, this egocentrism manifests itself in his self-identification as a "creator." When he speaks, the phenomenon of time hinges on and is subject to his intentions. So, if time is the "everlasting road" he so firmly believes it to be, then in order for this road to continue, each new generation of individuals must be prepared to pave it into being. And due to the fact that it is the recording device which binds the individual consciousness to the common consciousness, language acts as the network of cobblestones which constitute this "everlasting road." When Bernard dies, his words will live on as a precedent for the next generation of writers. As such, only language has the power of binding the present to the past.

As a tool that privileges more voluble voices like Bernard's, language cannot provide a neutral reading of the past. In her examination of the history of philosophy—which she defines as that which "orders and reproduces all thought"—Hélène Cixous recognizes womankind as illimitably relegated to a passive role in recorded history (288). Throughout this history, men have been the arbiters of philosophical truths, consequently paving time's "everlasting road"

without the input of women. Jacques Derrida coined the term *phallogocentrism* to describe this phenomenon, a portmanteau of *phallocentrism* (which regards the phallus as the central authority of society) and *logocentrism* (which regards language as the chief expression of reality). Cixous, however, considers the term “phallogocentrism” to be a tautology. According to her, phallocentrism is “the rock upon which” all philosophical systems are founded, so to disentangle logocentrism from phallocentrism would require an absolute dissolution of recorded time (289). Any logocentric understanding of time, then, is inherently phallocentric, and Bernard’s language-based understanding of temporality is no exception. His reliance on language is inextricable from his identity as a man.

So when Bernard begins to cast doubt on the efficacy of language, he implicates aspects of his identity as well, including the aforementioned eternal return. Well into his middle age, he struggles to pinpoint his life’s purpose while vacationing in Rome. He says, “I have made up thousands of stories; I have filled innumerable notebooks with phrases to be used when I have found the true story, the one story to which all these phrases refer. But I have never yet found that story. And I begin to ask, Are there stories?” (143). All his life, stories have surrounded Bernard on all sides. He has “made up thousands of stories,” the purpose of which has been to “[find] the true story.” This recurrence of storytelling has provided the basis for his lifelong goal of enacting the eternal return; after all, it is upon the narratives of the master storytellers of previous generations that he has intended to become a master storyteller himself. But this teleology falls apart if the stories of those prevenient authors do not really exist, as Bernard begins to suppose when he dubiously asks himself, “Are there stories?” If there truly are no stories, then his supposed embodiment of the eternal return would become meaningless. No

longer would he be the preeminent man whose fate it is to carry the torch of time forward into the next generation; in fact, such a man would cease to exist. Without stories, words would lose all their meanings, toppling phallogocentric interpretations of the past and present such as his in the process.

In these rare moments in which Bernard begins to question his seemingly unshakable faith in the power of storytelling and language, he falls back on the realm of action in order to make sense of his place in the world. For example, earlier in the same monologue, he says, “I do not wish to be a man who sits for fifty years on the same spot thinking of his navel. I wish to be harnessed to a cart, a vegetable-cart that rattles over the cobbles” (142). The sentiment of this passage brings into focus a dichotomy between inaction and action. To be inactive, to be nothing but a navel-gazing circulator of stories, is to succumb to inertia. But to be active, to be “harnessed to a cart,” satisfies some sort of “wish” for Bernard in a way that stories cannot. Elsewhere in the novel, for example while he is preparing for a dinner with his friends, Bernard elaborates on the impetus for this “wish.” He says, “Who is to say what meaning there is in anything? Who is to foretell the flight of a word? It is a balloon that sails over tree-tops. To speak of knowledge is futile. All is experiment and adventure” (88).

Bernard’s loss of faith in storytelling, and his subsequent compulsion towards action, above all else arises from a disillusionment with “meaning” and “knowledge.” Meaning, after all, is the root of all language; without it, words are just sounds. But meaning is also subjective; it requires a “who”: someone whose job it is to write the dictionaries which assign meanings to words. If we continue along with this line of reasoning, language quickly reveals itself to be an example of the logical fallacy known as *circular reasoning*; a word’s meaning is comprised of

words, and the meanings of those words are comprised of even more words, ad infinitum. So if we chase after the concrete meaning of a word for long enough, before long we become entrapped within a vicious cycles of words whose meanings include each other. As such, the search for meaning is a “futile” endeavor, one as subject to uncertainty as the people who conduct it. And words, which only carry as much weight as their meanings do, consequently sail “over tree-tops,” out of reach of the storytellers who in vain wish to clinch them.

This is why, as the reality of his death dawns on him in his final monologue, Bernard becomes disillusioned by his one true love: storytelling. Like the great authors who came before him, all his life Bernard thought that he could live forever through his stories. But this is not the case. Sitting at a restaurant and reflecting on his life, he concedes: “When the storm crosses the marsh and sweeps over me where I lie in the ditch unregarded I need no words... I have done with phrases” (227). Due to its approaching nearness, Bernard finally stops regarding his death as an abstract concept in this passage. Very soon he will be lying in a “ditch” somewhere, to be increasingly forgotten with each ensuing day that his body goes “unregarded” by the senses of other men. Under such circumstances, his younger self’s preoccupation with enacting the eternal return, with inheriting and continuing the legacies of the great writers who came before him, comes across as fatuous. Once situated in his grave, forevermore he will “need no words,” so what use can they serve him here, on the eve of his death? With their continuous becoming, sentences do little more than spell his own end, reminding him of his life’s sequential and inescapable cyclicalities.

In place of storytelling, as he ages Bernard begins instead to lean towards the task of simply enjoying his own existence while he still can. As he says soon after his aforementioned

dismissal of phrases, “Let me sit here forever with bare things, this coffee-cup, this knife, this fork, things in themselves, myself being myself” (227). More so than mere words, these “bare things” can escape the trappings of traditional notions of temporality. Language has its foundation in narrative, in the pattern of words succeeding words in a predetermined sequence, whereas a “coffee-cup,” for example, is simply a thing in itself. It begins and ends with the non-narrative of its own static existence, just as Bernard hopes for his own existence when he refers to “myself being myself.” But Grosz understands such “bare things” a little differently. She asserts that, “time’s capacity to hide within objects, through and as things in time, means that to the extent that we focus on the nature of objects, we obscure the nature of temporality” (244). According to her, these “objects”—coffee-cup, knife, and fork—actually do contain evidence of time’s movement “through and as” them, but according to more hidden processes.

*Spatialization*, for instance, which refers to the transmutation of abstract phenomena into spatial phenomena, is one such process by which humans have been able to objectify time despite its ineffability. Geologists, for instance, frequently spatialize time in their research as a way of determining the age of a fossil; by analyzing the physical characteristics of a fossil relative to the characteristics of the fossils under which it is buried, or by analyzing its geographical relationship to the nearby soil’s degree of radioactive decay, geologists can quite accurately determine the age of a fossil (Bouton 10). Locating proof of time’s passage within either the nearby fossils or the surrounding soil, geologists have, in effect, “obscure[d] the nature of temporality” by treating it as something it is not. So as much as Bernard hopes to “sit here forever” with his knife and his fork, perhaps he cannot divorce such objects from time as

easily as he thinks. Through the process of spatialization, proof of time's passage seeps into the identity of every object.

As the preceding few passages reveal, Bernard attempts to free himself from the temporal constraints of storytelling in his old age, but it is worth acknowledging that these attempts are mere forays rather than concerted efforts of meaningful consequence. For the vast majority of his life, his restrictive predilection for language and storytelling has restrained him from truly transcending temporality, and it is only in his old age that he has begun to strive towards reforming his old ways. Furthermore, even as he attempts to transcend temporality in the final years of his life by liberating himself from the confines of language, the text of *The Waves* itself seems to be at variance with his self-described attempts at "being done with phrases." After all, the final chapter of the novel is forty-five pages comprised exclusively of Bernard's voice. It is a monologue of epic proportions, a paean to the very language with which he claims to be done. So, disenchanted though he may be by it, storytelling remains an integral part of Bernard's identity from the beginning of *The Waves* to the very end.

## Resisting Language

Two of *The Waves'* female narrators, Jinny and Rhoda, have consistently epitomized Bernard's senescent ambition of being "done with phrases" throughout their entire lives. Always concerned with the present moment, Jinny's two dominant preoccupations are her self-presentation and her bodily sensations; she dances to the beat of time's drum, always focused on some new courtship and never preoccupied with the preceding ones. Although she goes about her life much differently, Rhoda also defies Bernard's logocentric approach to temporality in her own unique way. She regards time with a deferential resignation, thereby providing a much needed departure from Bernard's self-assuredness, while also using dreams as a way of eschewing the normative temporalities of English society.

Not unlike a caricature, Jinny's distinguishing feature, her sensuality, is arguably her only notable feature as well. For example, amid a dinner party with her fellow narrators, she compares herself to a "mountain goat, leaping from crag to crag" (*The Waves* 133). This metaphor succeeds at conveying Jinny's one-track mind; much like a mountain goat, at any given moment only two thoughts occupy her: the "crag" on which she stands, and the "crag" onto which she will soon leap. We see evidence of this goat-like sense of concentration when, further along in the same monologue, she stands up from the dinner table. "All my senses stand erect," she says, "now I feel the roughness of the fibre of the curtain through which I push; now I feel the cold iron railing and its blistered paint beneath my palm" (135). Within the confines of her mind, nothing exists in this passage except what her five "senses" reveal to her; she feels "the curtain," and after that she feels the "cold iron railing," but no retrospective analysis

accompanies or follows either of these sensations. She is little more than a composite of her sensations.

This relative lack of complexity is a frustrating truth of Jinny's characterization, and it perhaps explains why, of *The Waves'* six narrators, she is the one about whom scholars have written the least. From a scholarly perspective, she poses a challenging topic for analysis because she does not express herself quite as loquaciously as a character like Bernard, whose long-winded monologues provide ample material for critique. Nearly the entire narrative of *The Waves* is comprised of first-person impressions, so the text creates a bit of an analytical impasse when one of these narrators tends to prefer the act of showing to the act of telling.

Noticing this conundrum in her own analysis, Hermione Lee writes: "The six voices are not equally important and complex. The images that identify Jinny... are less suggestive than those for Rhoda or Bernard, since characters whose lives are dominated by their bodies require physical images which can be literally applied" (172). As a form of self-expression, "bodies require physical images," not prose, in order to match the "suggestive[ness]" of the more verbal forms of self-expression (stream-of-consciousness in Rhoda's case, and storytelling in Bernard's). As a modernist novel, *The Waves* is always preoccupied with the task of bridging the gap between reality and its literary representation, but Jinny's characterization provides an example of when such a gap is impassable; prose, not images, remains the novel's primary mode of communication. From a literary perspective, she is neither as "important" nor as "complex" as Rhoda or Bernard, but her unique form of self-expression provides a refreshing alternative to the paradigm nonetheless.

Relying on her body as her point of reference, Jinny inhabits a space which she cannot delimit according to standard notions of temporality. As she succinctly states early in the novel, “I move, I dance; I never cease to move and to dance... I cannot follow any thoughts from present to past” (30). In contrast to Bernard, whose expressive mode is storytelling, her expressive mode consists of “mov[ing]” and “danc[ing].” Movement is a perplexing form of self-expression because it exists in the temporal space between one moment and the next, yet it cannot be preserved. As a result, it is simultaneously tethered to sequential notions of temporality in the momentary sense and untethered from sequential notions of temporality in the comprehensive sense.

Jinny’s movements are only impactful insofar as they move through time. When she moves and dances, the only audience for whom she can possibly be performing is made up of herself and those people immediately surrounding her. One consequence of this is that the only temporal mode in which she can confidently reside is the “present,” while the “past” is like a trail that she “cannot follow.” With his own stories as his ushers, Bernard can confidently explore the past, but his central shortcoming is that he cannot explore it as it really happened. By his account, time is like a story, with one event following another in a linear and straightforward sequence. Jinny is incapable of comprehending time so simplistically, and as a result, she is perpetually captivated by the present moment.

If the present moment delimits Jinny’s temporal framework, then her preferred dwelling place within that framework is her body. At the dinner party that bounds the fourth section of the novel, for example, the physical force of her entrance is remarkable. As another narrator, Susan, describes it, “Everything seems stayed... [Jinny] seems to centre everything; round her

tables, lines of doors, windows, ceilings, ray themselves... She brings things to a point, to order. Now she sees us, and moves, and all the rays ripple and flow and waver over us... We change" (90). The rapt attention with which the rest of the room regards Jinny as she enters is palpable; as "the rays ripple and flow and waver" in concord with her movements, she physically makes her presence felt. Furthermore, from the beginning of the passage when "everything seems stayed," to the end when "we change," this physical thrust of her presence is so powerful that it even seems to manipulate the temporalities of the people and objects surrounding her, who undergo pauses and changes according to the rhythm of her movements. Like some kind of sun around which other planets orbit, she "seems to centre everything."

Woolf underscores this point when, still at the dinner party, Jinny describes the scene in her own words. She says, "I can imagine nothing beyond the circle cast by my body. My body goes before me, like a lantern down a dark lane, bringing one thing after another out of darkness into a ring of light. I dazzle you; I make you believe that this is all" (96). Just as nobody and nothing else in the room can release themselves from Jinny's arresting presence, neither can she release herself. Always tethered to the present moment, she "can imagine nothing beyond" her "body" and the "circle" of its immediate influence. Like a gifted raconteur who can momentarily transport her listeners to the past via language, Jinny's medium is her body, and her gift is that she can momentarily tether her milieu to the present—*her* present. As Bernard and Louis have shown, the present moment need not be one's primary temporal focus; literature, for example, has the power to transport the reader to an abstract past. But for Jinny and her audience, the present moment is the only possible focus. The reason she is so good at making her onlookers "believe that this is all" is that she herself believes "that this is all"; for

her, nothing exists beyond the present moment, and in her presence, all are inclined to assimilate their disparate temporalities to hers.

As a topic of analysis, Jinny's attachment to the present is made even more compelling by the fact that none of the other narrators share this trait. If there is a "scale of ways in which the body can be lived," as Mark Hussey suggests, then Jinny is positioned "at one extreme of the scale," where "her sense of unity projects itself [exclusively] through her body" (Hussey 7). In contrast, each of the other five narrators exhibits a sense of personal "unity" not only through the body, but through the mind as well. Derek Ryan provides proof of this mental distinction between Jinny and the other narrators when he recognizes her as "the only character who never directly refers to 'my life' at any stage in the novel" (195). This is a crucial distinction because it encapsulates how the other five narrators tend to recognize their existences as *omnitemporal*, or involving all time—past, present, and future. Packed within the phrase "my life," after all, is a multitude of past memories and future expectations. Jinny, however, does not apprehend her own existence in such an omnitemporal way. She exists only within her body, a body which is an extension of the present moment. So for her to speak of her "life" like Bernard does, as something to be broken off "as one breaks off a bunch of grapes," is to infiltrate her presence of mind with mental estimations of the past and future (*The Waves* 183).

Distinctions such as these serve as reminders of why it is so important to refrain from making sweeping claims about *The Waves'* narrators as if they are all one and the same. Such is the mistaken assertion that Eric Warner, for example, makes when he writes, "the focus of these characters throughout is on the present moment of experience, and they concentrate

with a grim intensity on sifting that experience and extracting its fundamental meaning" (48).

While many of the narrators sift their experiences in order to extract their "fundamental meaning[s]," their focus is rarely "on the present moment of experience." Jinny alone is almost always focused on the present moment; of the six narrators, she is the least concerned with "sifting" anything. In the figurative sense, to "sift" a moment is to "scrutinize [it] narrowly, so as to find out the truth" ("sift v3a"). This being the case, it is worth asking how someone is expected to "scrutinize" a moment so "narrowly" as to be able to determine its "truth," while at the same time living through that moment. Only a master multitasker could perform such a feat without becoming ensnared by the inscrutability of any given passing moment.

In many of his monologues, Bernard dedicates himself to the task of rereading his past in order to make sense of it, i.e. "sifting" it, while Jinny continuously moves from moment to moment. What Warner does not seem to understand is that, in order to truly focus on the present moment as Jinny does, one cannot also concentrate one's attention on extracting something as elusive as "meaning." Sure, Bernard sifts his memories for meaning, but in the process he also loses focus of the present; this is a natural byproduct of the pursuit of meaning, because to pursue meaning is to bog oneself down in any given moment, rather than to dance forward into the next one. I don't mean to say that focusing on the present is a mindless endeavor, only that keeping pace with it requires one's complete and undivided attention. One must choose between either focusing on the present, or on sifting its meaning once it has become the past; one cannot do both simultaneously, as Warner would have us believe. Each of *The Waves'* narrators spends at least some time in the present moment, but none do it as

frequently as Jinny; they are all too preoccupied with the business of extracting the “meaning” of “life,” an undertaking which never fails to remove them from the present.

So, while the other narrators often engage in *transtemporal* or time traveling practices such as reflection and projection, Jinny’s noninvolvement in any of these practices leaves her with ample time to pursue other occupations. As I mentioned earlier, her distinguishing feature is not just her body but her *sensuality*, and this has much to do with one of her favorite occupations: courting. When not applied to humans, the term “courting” is most often associated with birds, who will go to great lengths—flaunting their plumage, performing a dance, or singing a song—in order to attract a mate. Jinny also goes to great lengths to attract a mate, and because she is so accustomed to the present moment, she is quite good at it. While she is travelling on a train, for example, the act of strutting to her seat causes the eyes of the surrounding men to settle on her. Noticing their interest, she says to one of them, “‘Come.’ He approaches. He makes towards me. This is the most exciting moment I have ever known. I flutter. I ripple. I stream like a plant in the river, flowing this way, flowing that way, but rooted, so that he may come to me. ‘Come,’ I say, ‘come’” (76). As Jinny describes it, this moment is loaded with the energy of a potential courtship. Wholly engaged with its electric excitement, she flutters, ripples, and streams, but always remains “rooted.” This is because, for the courtship to succeed, it is essential that she not uproot herself; to do so is to leave the present moment and extinguish the energy that she has developed ever so carefully with each ensuing utterance of the word “come.”

As the courtship continues, Jinny remains firmly rooted to its fulfillment, never once deteriorating into unrelated thoughts. Describing the coitus itself, she says, “I am broken off: I

fall with him... My blood runs on but my body stands still. The room reels past my eyes. It stops" (76-77). Here, for a moment Jinny seems to transcend her own temporality. "Broken off" from the world around her, at first her "body stands still" before the entire room "stops." Post-coitus, she remains focused on the man and the continual unraveling of this moment. She says, "I do not care for anything in the world. I do not care for anybody save this man whose name I do not know" (77). In this blissful moment of post-coital relaxation, Jinny does "not care for anything in the world"; sated for the moment, the idea of another courtship does not interest her in the slightest. All that interests her is the present moment and "this man" with whom she shares it. But like all moments, this one cannot last, and soon Jinny is back on the hunt for another transcendent moment like the one she just lost. "O come," she says to another suitor soon afterwards, "'Come,' and he comes towards me" (78). Leaving little time for reflection (Bernard would have written and spoken extensively about such an escapade), in this passage Jinny charges once again into the present moment. This second interplay is almost an exact repetition of the previous one, with Jinny repeating the word "come" until the second man comes towards her. Although courtship, sex, and its aftermath allow her to truly inhabit the present—and even to stop time, or so it seems—she performs these rituals with a regularity which perhaps attenuates their effects.

But as praxis, Jinny's perpetual openness to the erotic depicts a somatic approach to temporality. Thumbing her nose at the ostensibly repetitive nature of Jinny's eroticism, Hermione Lee writes, "Jinny is a sensual creature, living from one orgasm to the next. But the physical images which describe her... suggest a barren nerve-racked sexuality, not a rich, warm bodily life" (173). Lee's claim in the first half of this statement—that Jinny is "sensual" and

impelled by her desire to orgasm—is perhaps true. But her claim in the second part of this statement—that the “physical images” of her sexuality are “nerve-racked”—is unfairly reductive. To be “nerve-racked” is to be overwhelmed with feelings of nervousness, tenseness, and worry; these are not characteristic emotions of Jinny, especially as she appears in her courtships. The transcendence and ensuing serenity that Jinny experiences on the train with the unnamed man, for example, completely lacks the racked nerves Lee describes. Bernard’s depiction of himself and Jinny in the moment of orgasm evokes a similarly carefree image of her. He says, “There was no past, no future; merely the moment in its ring of light, and our bodies; and the inevitable climax, the ecstasy” (194). The image Woolf creates here is antithetical to Lee’s reading of Jinny. Unconcerned with “past” and “future,” Bernard and Jinny are wholly engaged in the “moment” of “climax,” which implies that they are also wholly free from any extrinsic stresses. Despite what Lee thinks, this is the apotheosis of a “rich, warm bodily life.” Jinny and her body are one and the same, engaged in a carnal harmony which shuts out the transtemporal stresses tormenting the rest of human society.

Taking this concept of carnality one step further, Carrie Rohman argues that Jinny’s sensibilities are distinctly animalistic. She writes, “We should not overlook the aesthetic-evolutionary aspects of Jinny’s fantasy... She is indeed center stage in this pirouetting presentation of self, and we know from Grosz’s work that performance can be a central element of animal aesthetics” (19-20). Formative to Rohman’s interpretation of Jinny’s fantasy as being “aesthetic-evolutionary” is Elizabeth Grosz’s understanding of aesthetics. Aesthetics, according to Rohman’s interpretation of Grosz’s work, emerges from the “intersection of life itself with earthly or even cosmic forces,” which results in it being “dynamic rather than static,”

and so “always opening towards the new and the future in a process of becoming” (Rohman 12-13). Grosz’s favorite example of aesthetics, which also happens to be the one Rohman uses for her own analysis of Jinny, combines her own ideas with Darwin’s theory of evolution; she posits a sort of “aesthetic-evolutionary” approach to life, like a bird who dances or grows lavish plumage in order to attract a mate (Rohman 19). As some theorists in the field of evolutionary biology understand it, a living organism’s choices are dictated by the selfish gene’s drive to replicate itself as much as possible, and the aesthetic implications of such a theory are immeasurable. Everything about us, from how we dress to how we walk, ultimately serves the greater function of sexual self-presentation.

Jinny’s own fixation on sexual self-presentation serves this aesthetic-evolutionary theory well. If Jinny’s entrance at the dinner party is any indication, then it is certainly accurate to say that she sees herself as being “center stage” in the “performance” of life. Aesthetic-evolutionary self-presentation is her modus operandi, and given the derivation of the word “presentation,” this is hardly surprising. One cannot present oneself without also inhabiting the present moment, and because the present moment has always been Jinny’s preferred temporal mode, performance is her “central element.” Like our animal kin, she is always on the hunt for a prospective mate, and this hunt brings a sense of direction to her life, a sense of direction lacking in characters such as Rhoda.

While Rhoda’s life lacks direction, her sense of temporality is refreshingly flustered in comparison to Bernard’s and Louis’ self-assured notions of the eternal return. Rhoda regards time as an elusive and relentless concept, not one that can be reduced to anticipatable cycles of

returning greatness. As a young woman, she predicts her life's outcome, but in a dispirited way contrary to the predictions of Bernard and Louis. She says, "I am the youngest, the most naked of you all... I am not yet twenty-one. I am to be broken. I am to be derided all my life. I am to be cast up and down among these men and women, with their twitching faces, with their lying tongues, like a cork on a rough sea" (79). The simile at the end of this passage, "like a cork on a rough sea," encapsulates Rhoda's directionless prospects for the future. As a woman, she recognizes her relative lack of autonomy within such a patriarchal society, and in the face of this recognition, feels hopeless about her future. Men like Bernard, men who regard the world as something "that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illumined and everlasting road," cause Rhoda to feel "broken" and "derided" by virtue of their forcefulness (*The Waves* 110). If time is a commodity, then surely it is Bernard's for the taking. In the face of such temporal hopelessness, a woman has few options. As I have already explained, she can follow after Jinny and avoid the bigger picture, always situating herself firmly in the present moment. But Rhoda proposes a different alternative.

Dissociating herself from the normative temporal plane, Rhoda is able to escape the hopelessness of her own downtrodden existence. Her favorite escape from this normative reality is the realm of dreams, where logocentrism falls to the wayside and her own personalized paradigms take over. Reflecting on her life and its resignation to the realm of dreams, she says:

"So terrible was life that I held up shade after shade. Look at life through this, look at life through that... I implored day to break into night. I have longed to see the cupboard dwindle, to feel the bed soften, to float suspended, to perceive lengthened trees,

lengthened faces, a green bank on a moor and two figures in distress saying good-bye... I desired always to stretch the night and fill it fuller and fuller with dreams." (157)

Unhappy with the natural mode of her existence, Rhoda holds up "shade[s]" through which she can behold her life differently in order to make it appear less "terrible." One such "shade" is nighttime, which she vastly prefers to daytime because contained within it is the ability to stretch and morph reality. As she grows tired, trees and faces lengthen, mundane everyday objects such as cupboards "dwindle," and the bed softens as it beckons her. In this alternate reality of stretched proportions, dreams fill the intervening space, forming a sanctuary of sorts. As Rohman notes, Rhoda "retreat[s] toward a more artificial and representational world of her own because the forces that surround her are too overpowering" (17). Rhoda does not merely prefer the "more artificial and representational world" of dreams, she needs it; due to the "forces" of men like Bernard, the daily stresses of normative temporality are "too overpowering." Dreams are her best alternative to these stresses.

In this way, dreams for Rhoda serve much the same purpose as courting for Jinny. Both activities allow these women to inhabit temporalities more aberrant than normative, which serve to liberate rather than control their feminine identities. At times, Rhoda even bears a striking resemblance to Jinny when her sexual yearning reveals itself. In one such rare instance, for example, she says, "Now my body thaws; I am unsealed, I am incandescent. Now the stream pours in a deep tide fertilizing, opening the shut, forcing the tight-folded, flooding free. To whom shall I give all that flows through me, from my warm, my porous body?" (41-42). As she waxes poetic about her "porous body," which "thaws" and becomes "unsealed" when she becomes "incandescent" with sexual desire, for a moment Rhoda's textual presence closely

resembles that of Jinny. Rhoda's crossover here into the world of sex is hardly surprising, because like the world of dreams, the world of sex bestows Rhoda a passing sensation of "flooding free" from the constraints of everyday life. This particular passage, however, ends with a question, and not one of the sort that a truly sexually liberated character like Jinny would ever ask. Rhoda does not know "to whom" she should "give" herself in the sexual sense, and so unlike Jinny, her desire for sex ultimately remains unconsummated. She sometimes wishes to be a sensual being like Jinny, but this only ever remains a wish. Her identity as a dreamer prevails.

So, while Rhoda serves as a reminder that women in the twentieth century are marginalized so much that they "must exile their dreams to another world," it is important to keep in mind that she and Jinny deal with this marginalization differently (Oxindine 220). Most evidently, Rhoda lacks Jinny's ability to navigate the real world successfully. Madeline Detloff chocks this up to Rhoda's inability "to externalize herself," and I am inclined to agree; "overwhelmed by her interiority," she wanders through life as if in a daze, sated by her own thoughts and dreams (54). And when the time eventually comes for her to desire human contact—as it does when she asks, "To whom shall I give all that flows through me"—she fails to achieve her aim of giving herself to somebody else. She does not regard time as others do, and this results in a schism between herself and everyone else. "I cannot deal with it as you do," she says to her fellow narrators at a dinner party. "I cannot make one moment merge in the next. To me they are all violent, all separate; and if I fall under the shock of the leap of the moment you will be on me, tearing me to pieces" (97). Rhoda feels isolated from the other narrators, and crucially, this isolation is temporal. While the others are perfectly able to "deal

with" the progression of normative temporality, Rhoda regards this same progression from one moment to the next as "violent." In the violent fantasy detailed above, which is actually quite characteristic of Rhoda, she imagines the other narrators "tearing" her "to pieces" as soon as she falls out of sync with them. This fantasy epitomizes her fear of "the torture of 'here and now,'" as Hermione Lee puts it, from which she always feels the need to escape back into her own detemporalized interiority (174).

Rhoda's temporal isolation from the other narrators in part owes itself to her separation from the symbolic order. By "symbolic order," I mean of course the order sustained by language, whether informally spoken or formally written. This concept originates with Julia Kristeva's claim, as paraphrased by Monson, that "language is instituted as a symbolic defense against threats to the integrity of subjective totality, repositioning the subject within safe symbolic structures" (186). Of *The Waves'* narrators, Bernard is the most exemplary "subject" of this sort; language, and more specifically storytelling, is a crutch on which he leans throughout the novel in order to reassure himself of his own "subjective totality"—i.e. his unique intelligence. In this way, he joins a long line of mostly male authors who have helped shape the "structures" which contribute to the greater symbolic order. But because these authors have been mostly men, this symbolic order is naturally patriarchal, hence Derrida's aforementioned neologism: "phallogocentrism." Being a woman, Rhoda "exists only in the margins of the symbolic order," so overpowered by phallogocentrism's patriarchal structures to the point of feeling "excluded from the domain of propositions" (Minow-Pinkney 183).

We first see evidence of Rhoda as being "excluded" early in *The Waves*, when she is in class attempting to solve a math problem written on the chalkboard. The other narrators

appear to solve the problem with ease, but Rhoda cannot make heads or tails of it. She says, “I begin to draw a figure and the world is looped in it, and I myself am outside the loop... The world is entire, and I am outside it, crying, ‘Oh save me, from being blown ever outside the loop of time!’” (14-15). The reason this problem is so difficult for her is that she is “outside the loop” of the world; in other words, no matter how hard she tries, she cannot break through the margins in order to comprehend the universal language of mathematics. “The world is looped in” the symbolic order of mathematics, but Rhoda is isolated from it. This devastates her, because while mathematics is only one kind of symbolic order, her inability to understand it is representative of her inability to understand symbolic orders as a whole. She is excluded from the entire order from which all symbols originate, and this exclusion has temporal consequences.

As Rhoda implies when she equates being “outside the loop” of mathematical symbols to being “outside the loop of time,” to an extent her exclusion from the symbolic order accounts for her isolation from normative temporality as a whole. According to Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, there are three levels of temporality, and these three levels help to explain the nature of Rhoda’s exclusion. The first is “objective time,” which is composed of putative divisions such as hours, months, and years; the second is “subjective time,” which consists of internal but still sequential mental processes such as memory and anticipation; and lastly, the third temporal level is “the awareness of the subjective time,” meaning the individual’s simultaneous awareness of objective and subjective time (Najafi 33). Due to the fact that it requires one to reconcile objective and subjective time—in other words, world to mind and mind to world—this third temporal level is the nexus of selfhood. After all, in order to

describe oneself, one must describe oneself in relation to other selves. Accordingly, Rhoda's inability to comprehend the symbolic order which generates objective time results in her being unable to occupy Husserl's third temporal level. Instead, she is limited to the internal (and extremely isolated) level of "subjective time." This limitation poses a problem regarding her selfhood, because without the organized and universal framework of objective time, she is "infinitely decentred" from the temporalities of the selves surrounding her (Minow-Pinkney 183).

Rhoda understands her selfhood as somehow being incomplete. Thus, as she dresses for tennis alongside Jinny and Susan in front of a bathroom mirror, Rhoda marvels at her nonexistence, at least in relation to the existences of her two friends. "That is my face in the looking-glass behind Susan's shoulder," she says. "But I will duck behind her to hide it, for I am not here. I have no face... Other people have faces; Susan and Jinny have faces; they are here" (30-31). Paradoxically, at the beginning of this passage Rhoda sees her "face in the looking-glass," but declares only a few moments later that, in fact, she has "no face." Husserl's three levels of temporality, to which I referred earlier, might aid in providing an explanation for this paradox; while she has a face according to the second level of "subjective time," according to the third level of one's "awareness of subjective time" she does not. This oscillating nature of Rhoda's selfhood contributes to what Morag Shiach identifies as her "sense of disembodied, fractured and fragile subjectivity." While Rhoda exists as an individual insofar as she has a "subjectivity," the preceding passage also shows that she sometimes self-identifies as "disembodied," which is indicative of the fact that she is not always conscious of her subjectivity. Taking Shiach's "disembodied" concept one step further, Annette Oxindine sums

up Rhoda's overall presence in *The Waves* as being "spectral from the beginning" (204). This "spectral" metaphor, which equates Rhoda to a ghost, helps to elucidate the paradox of how somebody can simultaneously exist and not exist at the same time. A ghost might be conscious of its own subjectivity, but nobody—not even the ghost itself—can locate its corporeality, so the answer to the question of whether or not it exists remains elusive. Rhoda's estrangement from the symbolic order and consequent estrangement from her awareness of subjective time has similarly caused her to cast doubt upon her own existence. This dubiousness reaches its peak when she questions whether or not she possesses something as fundamentally human as a face.

Ultimately, while Jinny and Rhoda certainly offer two distinct departures from the normative, logocentric temporality of men like Bernard, whether or not these departures can be considered feminist is less certain. Toril Moi's feminist reading of Virginia Woolf's collective oeuvre might help to clarify this uncertainty. Moi identifies in Woolf's fiction what she describes as the two central tenets of feminist struggles. First, feminism consists of women who "demand equal access to the symbolic order," and second, it consists of women who "reject the male symbolic order in the name of difference" (141). As I have already shown, Rhoda feels marginalized by the existing "symbolic order," but the verbs Moi associates with feminists, for example "demand" and "reject," are much too strong for a character like her. When she finds herself "outside the loop" of the symbolic order while trying to complete the aforementioned math problem, for example, she reacts by "crying" helplessly. Similarly, while Jinny certainly rejects the "male symbolic order" by utilizing her body as her primary expressive mode, to say

that she “demand[s] equal access” to that order would not be entirely accurate. It would be more accurate to say that she *ignores* it, preferring not to use symbols or any form of abstraction at all. Furthermore, like Rhoda, she is much too passive to be associated with verbs as strong as the ones Moi uses. As she at one point says about herself, “I am going to be buffeted; to be flung up, and flung down, among men, like a ship on the sea” (*The Waves* 134). Her body is a powerful tool but only insofar as she tempts men into exploiting it. As she sees it, she is more suited for verbs which use the passive voice—e.g. “buffeted” and “flung”—rather than ones as active as “demand” and “reject.” She might be in complete control of her body, but how empowering can that be if her primary concern is with turning it over to the hands of men?

Still, I want to suggest that we make feminist claims regarding the characterizations of Rhoda and Jinny in different terms. Rhoda’s death, for example, possibly provides an opportunity for such a feminist analysis due to the fact that her ensuing post-mortem silence “subverts... the claim-making ‘phrases’ of Bernard... who dominates the end of the novel” (Ondek Laurence 169). Even though Rhoda is dead when she “subverts” Bernard’s reliance on language, such a subversion is nevertheless a forceful rejection of his overwhelmingly male symbolic order. In Jinny’s case, the creativity with which she courts men can come across as quite empowering. Rohman even makes the claim that “the formally or conceptually artistic in [*The Waves*]”—that is, writers like Bernard and Louis—“are potentially less creative than Jinny, who some suspect may be a call-lady” (22). A self-proclaimed author, Bernard “was Byron chiefly” throughout his college career, which is to say that he aped the style of an author greater than himself, so his identity as a “creative” is unquestionably marred. In contrast, while

Jinny “may be a call-lady,” at least she is not a counterfeit. In fact, when interpreted as an aesthetic-evolutionary woman who creates her own dynamic destiny by way of courtship, Jinny emblematises feminism precisely *because* she is a call-lady (Coleman 89). After all, a prevalent interpretation of sex work regards it as empowering women in a number of ways. It can be a source of financial independence, for instance, thereby accelerating the corrosion of the cultural stereotype that men are the “breadwinners” while women are financial burdens. Furthermore, sex work also normalizes female sexuality in a culture which tends to associate “proper womanhood” with extramarital chastity (Weitzer 7).

By classifying Jinny and Rhoda as “victims [and] silenced subjects,” Jane Marcus argues that *The Waves* cannot “be recuperated for feminism,” but her argument suffers from oversimplification (70). She goes on to label Jinny a “prostitute,” which label completely overlooks Jinny’s aforementioned aesthetic-evolutionary creativity (Marcus’ label for Rhoda, “hysteric,” is a bit fairer of an assessment). Furthermore, it is worth noting that while Woolf depicts these two female narrators as “victims,” it is not as if she champions *The Waves’* male narrators. Bernard’s final soliloquy, for example, satirizes him through to the final page when he “heroically” flings himself against “Death” only to become drowned out by the novel’s third-person narrator (*The Waves* 228). Even Marcus, amidst her argument against the possibility of a feminist reading of *The Waves*, refers to this soliloquy as “the swan song of the white Western male author with his romantic notions of individual genius... [singing] his last aria against death” (79). This invites the question: is it better to be a “silenced subject,” or to be desperately singing a “last aria against death”? The former cannot sing, while the latter sings in utter futility. At the very least, Jinny and Rhoda’s silence is certainly a more realistic and self-aware reaction

than Bernard's self-mythologizing superfluity of words. Thus, while Jinny and Rhoda do not entirely "demand" or "reject" the symbolic order as Toril Moi would expect of proper feminists, their relatively accurate perceptions of reality bespeak their brightness. *The Waves* might not be an overwhelmingly feminist text, then, but it is even farther from being a masculinist one.

## Depicting Modern Subjectivity

Virginia Woolf's writing testifies to the idea that language cannot adequately represent the complexities of lived experience. In her 1924 essay, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," she declares, "In or about December, 1910, human character changed" (10). Likely a reference to the first ever Post-Impressionist exhibition, which opened at London's Grafton Galleries in 1910, this date is representative of a growing predicament among novelists of Woolf's generation: how does one create *real* human characters, when *reality* is in constant flux (Kenney Jr. 45)? Reconciling this gap between fixed literary representation and actual dynamic existence is the modernist author's principle struggle (Froula 9). Monson calls this struggle the "Sisyphean task of trying to approach the Other" (188-189). Like Sisyphus' task of pushing a boulder up a hill, the writer's task of reducing human beings to words on a page is a struggle without a solution. No matter what the writer does, her characterizations will always reduce the complexities of life to an abject "Other." As Kristeva notes, literature is a form of this "abject other," due to the fact that writing is a process by which the self objectifies itself and other selves (5). Living humans experience time, but characters do not; they are nothing more than abjections existing outside the dimensions of time and space. As humans develop, characters remain unchanged, forever affixed to the page.

Despite knowing that the characters she writes will be detemporalized and despatialized, the modernist author must somehow "approach" them anyways, with language as her tools. As Bernard's own struggles as a storyteller have already demonstrated, true to life characterization is an impossible task; one always falls short of capturing the complexities of real life. But Woolf, ever the innovator, has a remedy. With *The Waves*, she holds the writer's

tools up for examination, thereby emphasizing her scrutiny of the literary form rather than her reliance upon it.

Woolf employs linguistic ambiguity—particularly metaphor—as a self-conscious response to this irreconcilable gap between literary representation and reality. Language will not allow her to accurately portray the passage of time on a page, so instead, she oftentimes compares time's passing to something more concrete. Thus, when one of her characters, Susan, reflects on the passage of time, she says, "Summer comes, and winter. The seasons pass. The pear fills itself and drops from the tree. The dead leaf rests on its edge... I have lost my indifference, my blank eyes, my pear-shaped eyes that saw to the root. I am no longer January, May or any other season" (130). Pears are in season between summer and winter, so when Susan describes the pear that "fills itself and drops from the tree," what she really means is that "the seasons pass." Her metaphor, however, which grounds the abstractness of the seasons in a tangible reality, enlivens what would have been a bland depiction of the passing seasons. As the passage continues, however, the metaphor becomes muddled. The figurative pear appears again, but this time in Susan's "pear-shaped eyes." While it originally represented the changing seasons, the pear now represents Susan's embodiment of those seasons. Consequently, what was at first a straightforward one-to-one comparison between a pear and the seasons has become a vague hodgepodge of a pear, the seasons, and now Susan. As a figurative device, metaphor can serve to illuminate something indescribable, but its undoing is that it can also be disorienting. It displaces the reader from the immediate circumstances of the narrative, and in doing so, can create more obscurities than it resolves. With this metaphor about the pear,

Woolf demonstrates a very real shortcoming of metaphorical language, namely that it can only describe phenomena by way of imperfect comparisons.

Richard Rorty identifies a significant divide “between realists, who think the notion of truth as correspondence to reality can be saved, and pragmatists, who regard it as hopeless” (qtd. In Quigley 105). On one hand, “realists” believe that they can depict life exactly (or close to) as it happens, naively holding fast to their literary pursuit of some “notion of truth.” “Pragmatists,” on the other hand, regard this same “notion of truth” as an impracticable ideal. Words are utterly inadequate at conveying a realistic truth; such a pursuit is as “hopeless” as Sisyphus’ task of rolling a rock up a hill. So Woolf, herself more of a pragmatist than a realist, proposes a new strategy. Rather than write a purportedly clear and specific narrative, she embraces and even resigns herself to language’s inherent vagueness. As a departure from her realist contemporaries, she depicts time not as an exacting sequences, but as a sprawling landscape of subjective temporalities. Her self-conscious reappropriation of narrative tools such as metaphor allows her to upset the more sequential temporalities employed by other fiction writers.

In *The Waves*, the six narrators form the foundation of Woolf’s preoccupation with subjectivity. Outside of a few moments, the entire novel is written from the first-person perspective, and this allows Woolf to displace her narrative difficulties onto her character-narrators. When Percival dies, for example, Neville’s reaction is true to life in some ways, but not true to life in others. He says, “[Percival] is dead... All is over. The lights of the world have gone out... We are infinitely abject, shuffling past with our eyes shut. But why should I submit? Why try to lift my foot and mount the stair? This is where I stand; here, holding this telegram”

(115). The jarring shifts from description (“[Percival] is dead”) to reflection (“All is over...”) and back to description (“I stand... holding this telegram”) are necessary for the passage to be comprehensible, but not in alignment with Neville’s actual thought process, which Woolf could have more accurately depicted with the “stream of consciousness” technique. But such is the writer’s difficult decision; if Woolf wants to maximize the comprehensibility of her novel, then she must do so at the cost of authenticity. Had Woolf relied entirely on stream of consciousness when she wrote Neville’s reaction to Percival’s death, it certainly would have been more authentic, but authenticity hardly matters if we as readers cannot make sense of it.

In the early twentieth century, a growing number of literary modernists, Woolf among them, began employing stream of consciousness as a new way of approximating the thought processes of their characters. As Lawrence Edward Bowling defines it, this technique “introduce[s] us directly into the interior life of the character without any intervention by way of comment or explanation on the part of the author” (345). Ideally, then, stream of consciousness ought to completely conceal the narrative voice “of the author” in order to spotlight “the interior life of the character.” This streamlined approach to characterization makes it an obvious solution to the “Sisyphean task of trying to approach the Other,” and before long modernists were touting it as the most accurate of all narrative techniques; James Joyce utilized it throughout the majority of his magnum opus, *Ulysses*, as did Woolf throughout her own magnum opus, *Mrs. Dalloway*. This popularity of stream of consciousness among the era’s most celebrated novelists was closely linked to what Suzanne Raitt calls the “Efficiency Movement,” which also emerged during the early twentieth century. Summarizing the zeitgeist of this movement, Raitt writes, “Gone were the days of the decadent era when art could

represent itself as useless and extol the wastefulness of those who produced it... Art had to be modern and to be modern meant to be accurate, stream-lined, and efficient" (836). Rejecting the inaccuracy and inefficiency of their forebears, modernists such as Woolf improvised new methods of characterization which would be truer to life than any of the existing methods, and stream of consciousness remains one of the finest examples of such a method.

But while *The Waves* chiefly concerns itself with the interiorities of its six narrators, Neville's reaction to Percival's death demonstrates Woolf's deviation from the stream of consciousness technique she once helped to innovate. When Neville mentions that Percival "is dead" or that he is "holding this telegram," for example, his words come across as contextual clarifications for the reader's sake rather than streamlined representations of his "interior life." Even when his soliloquy shifts to reflection, as when he refers to us all as "infinitely abject, shuffling past with our eyes shut," he still shies away from the raw and unfinished quality which distinguishes stream of consciousness from the more traditional narrative mode of the "interior monologue" (Fernihough 66). His words here are too polished, too poetic, and too performative to come close to approximating the jumbled thoughts of a human being. Woolf may have once hoped to solve the "Sisyphean task of trying to approach the Other" by way of stream of consciousness, but with *The Waves*, it is clear that she has given up her reliance on this technique. Instead, as Eric Warner notes, "the intermittence of description and reflection forms a progressive rise and fall" in each of the narrators' soliloquies (57). These cyclic vicissitudes between description and reflection render the soliloquies more intelligible to us as readers, enriching the text with a reassuring sense of rhythm while anchoring it to a semblance of narrative structure. But they do so at the cost of giving up the stream of consciousness

technique's naturalism, a sign that Woolf has lost faith in the realist author's idealistic notion that the characters in novels can accurately represent the people of reality. Like any other narrative technique, stream of consciousness is only an approximation of life rather than a full realization, and Woolf's relinquishment of it here reveals her recognition of this disappointing truth.

Just as Neville's soliloquy demonstrates Woolf's disenchantment regarding stream of consciousness and narrative in general, Bernard's overall character arc mirrors Woolf's modernist disenchantment regarding the Victorians' pursuit of truth. As a child, for example, he wishes "to add to my collection of valuable observations upon the true nature of human life" (*The Waves* 50). Like the Victorian realists from whom Woolf departs, at a young age he recognizes value in his "observations." He compartmentalizes these observations as individual stories, and mistakenly believes them to be reflections of "the true nature" of reality. But as he ages, truth loses its luster, and he eventually reappraises reality as possessing an "incomprehensible nature" (205). As Bernard looks back on his wasted lifetime of truth-seeking, the modernist's skepticism begins to seep into his language. "What end can there be," he asks as an old man, "or what beginning? Life is not susceptible perhaps to the treatment we give it when we try to tell it" (205). In sequential narratives, "end" and "beginning" are clearly demarcated realms. But Bernard resists the urge to demarcate his own narrative in the same way. In order to truly make his own "life" known to us as readers, he cannot merely "tell it" in terms of beginnings and endings. As he himself reminds us, life is far too "incomprehensible" to be circumscribed by such orderly narration.

Furthermore, Bernard's role as an author-narrator allows Woolf to explore and even critique the ways in which she and other modernist authors imitate the styles of their literary forebears. As he himself acknowledges, throughout his school years Bernard "was Hamlet, was Shelley... but was Byron chiefly," which is to say that during his most formative years, he consumed the styles of three of the most well regarded authors in all of English literature—Shakespeare, Shelley, and Byron—assimilating them into his own identity to the point of himself becoming a "pastiche of quotation from the 'master' texts of English literature" (Marcus 61). While Bernard's mimicry of his literary heroes is a tad hyperbolic, he nevertheless exemplifies a problem which all authors must face: *how can one create a truly original piece of literature?* Whether they want to or not, all authors end up responding to and conforming to a literary tradition, a tradition which Maria DiBattista envisages as "a panorama of pinnacles, a simultaneous order continually renewed and altered by the successive works of individual talents" (124). Authors do not just *create*, then, but also *renew* and *alter* what the past has already dispensed.

Emerging in the narrative as a representation of life's disorderly chaos, *The Waves'* third-person narrator at first appears to be the only one of the seven narrators capable of extricating herself from what Bernard determines to be the confines of traditional narration. Bookending the novel and forming interstices between each of its sections, this narrator presents itself in the form of ten italicized passages detailing the activities of natural phenomena over the course of a single day. The sun rises and falls, the waves break, the birds sing, but no human characters ever explicitly enter its focus. But by using figurative language, in

these italicized passages the third-person narrator nevertheless implicitly interacts with the rest of the novel's six first-person narrators.

The singing of the birds over the course of the day, for example, parallels how the lives of the six narrators intermingle throughout the rest of the novel. In the first italicized passage, one by one the birds "*sang their blank melody outside*" (20), but in the second, they "*now sang a strain or two together wildly*" (20). Similarly, in the first section of *The Waves'* actual narrative, the unsociable child narrators alternately deliver discontinuous monologues, but they become more sociable as adolescents in the second section, sometimes even responding to each other's monologues.

As the italicized passages progress in conjunction with the lives of the narrators, so too do the songs of the birds. In the third section, "*The birds that had sung erratically and spasmodically in the dawn on that tree, on that bush, now sang together in chorus*" (54), while the narrators, now young adults, grow increasingly intimate with each other. Bernard and Neville bond over a poem that the latter one wrote, while Jinny and Louis share a kiss. In the sixth section, "*The birds... paused in their song as if glutted with sound, as if the fullness of midday had gorged them*" (139). The narrators, meanwhile, have settled into the habitual monotony of midlife. The uprooted craziness of young adulthood has "gorged them," leaving them "glutted" and content with the quietude of their divergent stations in life; Bernard to Rome, Susan to her domestic life as a mother in rural England, Jinny to the embraces of nameless men, Neville to his success as a writer, Louis to his shipping firm, and Rhoda to Spain. Such is the aging process. We enter and leave the world alone, but in between that locus of points we experience the growth and then diminishment of our most foundational friendships.

The narrators are closest in the early-middle sections of the novel, just as the birds are closest as midday approaches its apex.

Considering the utter absence of human characters in these interludes, it is easy to interpret them as somehow transcending Woolf's modernist dilemma of characterization, but such an interpretation does not account for the crucial role which the third-person narrator of these interludes plays. Frank D. McConnell, for instance, calls these interludes "attempts to present a phenomenal world without the intervention of human consciousness, a world of blind things which stands as a perpetual challenge to the attempts of the six monologists to seize, translate and 'realize' their world" (qtd. in Rohman 14). Yet, by assuming that no "human consciousness" inhabits the interludes, McConnell overlooks the very human narrator who narrates them in such a way as to parallel the lives of the "six monologists." It is no coincidence that the birds sing in unison with the six monologists, or that the rising and setting of the sun corresponds with their births and deaths.

These interludes, then, are not challenges to the attempts of the monologists to "seize, translate, and 'realize' their world," but rather the complete opposite; they are the narrator's romanticized depictions of nature, which we as readers then manipulate into neat little metaphors befitting the six narrators' lives. As Michelle Levy explains, the interludes represent "the nonhuman world of the sun, waves, and birds, while at the same time drawing attention to the way that this is necessarily a human apprehension of the external world" (153). While McConnell's interpretation only accounts for what is being narrated, Levy makes the important qualification that every narration has a narrator. Even if one were to maintain that the interludes are not metaphors, and instead simply descriptions of "the sun, waves, and birds,"

they nevertheless remain the “apprehension” of a human narrator who cannot avoid projecting her own subjective interpretation onto “the nonhuman world.” Furthermore, our readerly voices permeate the interludes alongside the narrator’s voice. Jane Goldman expresses it best when she writes, “The interludes are not ‘objective’ phenomenological accounts of the natural world, but pastorals over whose interpretation various voices vie (including ours as readers). They tell many stories, identifiable both with individual soliloquies and with narratives beyond them” (71-72). Every piece of writing presupposes a reader, and these interludes are no different. To assume that these interludes evade the dilemma of characterization because no characters explicitly appear in them is to underestimate the narrator’s inclination to humanize nonhuman phenomena, as well as our readerly inclination to interpret these phenomena as personifications which relate to our own lives. The problem of characterization is everywhere, even in the most naturalistic sections of *The Waves*. By offering a metaphorical backdrop to the lives of the narrators, the chaotic interludes help to convey the complex and various temporalities of modern life.

In her 1919 essay, “Modern Novels,” Woolf asserts that life is full of “vague general confusion.” Thus, it follows that her narratives ought to be more “vague” than plot-driven. This vagueness is indexed in *The Waves* by how she privileges the first-person perspectives of her six narrators. The expressions of these narrators are at times so removed from one another to the point of being, as Megan Quigley puts it, “pushed to the brink of solipsism” (105). In other words, when the narrators supersede but do not respond to each other, they challenge not only their awarenesses of each other’s existences, but the very notion of sequence as well. Just because Louis’ narration comes after Susan’s on the page, for example, it does not necessarily

follow that he heard what she said, or even that his narration comes after hers temporally. And by fragmenting the rest of the novel into nine distinct sections, the interludes reshape time similarly.

Perhaps the best example of this fragmentation is the novel's final sentence. Bernard says, "Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!" A double line space follows, and then a final interlude from the third-person narrator ends the novel: "*The waves broke on the shore*" (228). By appearing on the very same page as the last sentence of Bernard's final monologue, in a way these breaking waves interrupt him. At the very least, the gap between his monologue and the interlude's description "necessitates the reader's own associations," leading us to wonder about what has been omitted (Quigley 112). Clearly something must belong in this intervening space (it would not exist otherwise), whether it be the actualization of Bernard's death or some other radical passage through time. Either way, a gap such as this one fragments the narrative, thereby forcing us as readers to form vague "associations" of our own in order to fill said gap. Time can best be described as a "continuous becoming," so when an author attempts to depict it as anything but continuous, as Woolf does here, it disrupts our comfortable state of "temporal continuity" (Grosz 5). In one sentence, we are beside Bernard in his dying moments, but in the next we are on the shoreline of some body of water. The only way in which to bridge this gap is by undergoing some kind of mental travel through time and space. By pulling us away from the lives of the other narrators and towards the shore, again and again the interludes require that we embrace discontinuity.

Even as the third-person narrator embodies disruption, she nevertheless submits to the cyclical confines of temporality. Much like how *The Waves'* central narrative must bend to the

strictures of life and death despite resisting the most crucial elements of plot, this secondary narrative begins and ends all within a single day. Nine out of ten of the third-person narrator's sections begin with a sentence about the sun's position in the sky. The novel begins with the words, "*The sun had not yet risen,*" but by the second section, "*The sun rose higher*" (3, 20). Almost exactly halfway through the novel, "*The sun had risen to its full height,*" which description mirrors how the central narrators have all reached the apex of adulthood (111). The narrators all eventually decline, developing illnesses and other infirmities. This waning is paralleled in the final mention of the sun: "[it] *had sunk*" (181). The matter-of-factness with which the third-person narrator charts the sun's path across the sky registers an ability to transcend certain features of time. That the sun "*rose*" and "*sunk*" is a fact to which even *The Waves*, with its revolutionarily discontinuous narrative, must conform. Language can only depart from traditional notions of sequence to an extent, but not completely. After all, such a becomingness, of always moving towards *something*, forms the essence of existence and time in general. Even narrative is not exempt. Just as night follows day and death follows life, a noun must follow 'a' or 'the.'

So, while *The Waves* is an important development in the history of modernist literature and a valuable addition to Woolf's oeuvre, it still struggles with the limitations of narrative. Woolf experiments throughout the text with a variety of techniques, from metaphor to monologue, but these techniques do more to highlight the limitations of her medium rather than to break through them. With *The Waves*, she ultimately fails in her intention to transpose the messy subjectivity of life onto the page, but to have done so would have been a miracle. At

the very least, she has succeeded in writing a novel which pushes the narrative possibilities of subjectivity, encouraging us to rethink temporality in new ways.

## Chapter 2: Narrating Queer Temporality in *Orlando*

Despite being what Woolf called a “writer’s holiday” (it was published just over a year after *To the Lighthouse*, arguably her most somber novel), *Orlando* is much like *The Waves* in that it experiments extensively with narrative modes and subjectivity. But whereas *The Waves’* primary narrative mode was the first-person, *Orlando* is a third-person account of the life of someone named Orlando. This decision to present Orlando’s life by way of a third-person biographer occasions numerous temporal perplexities. For example, many centuries separate Orlando’s life from his biographer’s life, but this temporal disconnect does not stop the biographer from narrating Orlando’s life in great detail. In fact, wherever there is a dearth of material, the biographer will contrive plot developments in order to maintain the narrative’s continuity. The most significant of these developments is Orlando’s sex change, which is central to the novel’s experiments with subjectivity. Such a development defies traditional notions of sexuality, and in the process gives rise to an emphatically queer understanding of temporality.

Punctuated by moments of tension between the narrator’s conception of time and ours as readers, *Orlando* is deeply concerned with questions of temporality. Doubling as a biographer, the narrator’s duty is to chart Orlando’s life from beginning to end, “to plod... on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads” (*Orlando* 65). Such a task becomes problematic, however, when the “beginning” and “end” of that subject’s life are indistinct. Take, for example, the first of many moments in the narrative where Orlando purportedly dies and then comes back to life. In narrating this inexplicable rebirth, the biographer confesses, ““But now we come to an episode which lies right across our path, so that there is no ignoring it” (65). When Orlando proceeds to go seven

days without waking, eating, or even breathing, it defies our conception of life as it relates to time; all three of these operations are necessary for the continuity of human life, so their abeyance would cause a rupture of time as we know it. Unsurprisingly, then, such an occurrence “lies right across” the “path” of the biographer, due to the fact that their principal obligation is to faithfully depict Orlando’s life. From this moment forward we as readers must choose between distrusting the biographer on one hand, and restructuring how we understand the movement of time on the other.

If life is capable of ending for a period of seven days and then recrudescing, then perhaps time is capable of an equivalent rupture. This is because we can only understand time as existing in relation to ourselves and other objects. As Elizabeth Grosz explains, “we ‘naturally’ think of time through the temporality of objects, through the temporality of space and matter, rather than in itself or on its own terms” (5). This universal inability among humans to extricate time from our relationships to “space and matter” leads to a codependency between time and life. Time as we know it only exists in terms of our own renderings of its abstract formlessness. Grosz attempts to describe time in terms of itself when she refers to it as a “continuous becoming,” but such a pursuit is ultimately futile because even a word like “becoming” is inextricable from life (5). As she explains, “life is essentially linked to the movement of time... being is transformed into becoming” (7). No matter how hard we try, we cannot divorce time from life; even when we simplify it into its most essential function of “becoming,” it still remains “linked” to the selfsame “becoming” of life. So, when Orlando’s weeklong suspension from life splits his biography in half, it opens up a similar avenue for the narrative expression of time itself.

Such temporal ruptures form gaps in the biographer's account of Orlando's life. In addition to the seven-day hiatus, there are even longer narrative spans where the source material runs dry. For example, during one of Orlando's most hermetic stretches, the biographer admits, "Solitude was his choice. How he spent his time, nobody quite knew" (68). This gap in the narrative, spelled out by the fact that "nobody quite knew" what Orlando was doing with his time, ruptures the biography's continuity. We have come to expect continuity from time, particularly narrative time, yet in this particular instance, the biographer's depiction of Orlando's passage through time is anything but continuous. In order to reconcile this incongruity between Orlando's life and its depiction, we as readers must briefly assume a creative role usually reserved for the author. As Kathryn Benzel explains, "In order to discover a reading identity appropriate for [*Orlando*], the reader becomes a 'second author' sharing the creative activity with the writer" (170). *Orlando* is full of discontinuities, so if we as readers wish to resolve these discontinuities, then the most "appropriate" identity with which to read it is partially authorial. After all, between a novel's beginning and ending, the central character must always be doing *something*; it defies our most basic notions of temporality for Orlando to cease to exist and then become existent again. So, when the biographer omits entire chunks of Orlando's life, the impetus is on us as readers to fabricate our own narratives of what Orlando is doing in the meantime. But because such creative liberties contribute to the fictionalization of a text which is supposed to be a "biography," this can be a problem.

Further increasing the discrepancy between Orlando's life and its rendering is the biographer's proclivity for segregating time into distinct eras. The biography spans multiple centuries, so it follows that it spans multiple eras too. But these eras—as delimited by the

successive reigns of English monarchs—are only arbitrary dividers of time, as quickly becomes clear from the biographer's depictions of them. The Elizabethan era, for example, which was delimited by Queen Elizabeth I's reign from 1558 to 1603, "was different... Sunsets were redder and more intense; dawns were whiter and more auroral. Of our crepuscular half-lights and lingering twilights they knew nothing. The rain fell vehemently, or not at all" (*Orlando* 26-27). Societies change over time, of course, but these changes come about slowly, and they do not affect all components of earthly existence. The entire history of humanity is a mere blip in the lifetimes of the sun or the earth, for example, so to assume, as the biographer does in this passage, that "sunsets were redder and more intense" some three-hundred years before her own lifetime is inane. To think that eras, many of which are shorter than a typical human lifetime, are so distinctly "different" that their sunsets, dawns, and rainfalls do not resemble each other, is to fall prey to what David James calls "periodization" (66). The issue with periodization, as he explains, is that it suffers from anachronism (67). In other words, it is impossible for Orlando's biographer to describe the Elizabethan era with an impartial lens; with each and every word, she inevitably imposes the lexicon of her own era (presumably the Interwar Britain period) onto a previous one, muddling the past with the language of the present.

Moving beyond a lexical tendency towards periodization, the biographer even goes so far as to project her own experiences onto Orlando's life. When, in the middle of writing his poem, Orlando succumbs to writer's block, the biographer pulls from her own well of experiences for the sake of embellishing the scene. The passage begins, "Orlando now saw spoilt his rhyme and split his metre," but soon spirals into, "one drops the pen, take's one's

cloak, strides out of the room, and catches one's foot on a painted chest as one does so" (17).

As the above passage progresses, the subject morphs from "Orlando" to an ambiguous "one." It is appropriate to read this distortion of subject as a substitution of sorts, with the biographer supplanting the space of her biographical subject. A writer herself, the biographer takes no issue with elaborating on Orlando's writer's block—a state of mind she knows so well—even if it means blurring the line between narrator and subject.

While the biographer's projection in the preceding passage is vague and universal enough to avoid the pitfall of anachronism, the same is not true elsewhere. In describing an early seventeenth century theatre performance, for example, she calls it "something like our Punch and Judy show" (56). This comparison between a performance contemporary to the narrator and an antecedent one forces us as readers to think of the past not on its own terms, but rather in terms of the present. Much like the aforementioned periodization, such a comparison rejects the past's capacity to exist in and of itself, instead favoring the illuminating power of the biographer's own time.

But by disrupting the past with these anachronistic observations, the biographer violates the laws of time. Elizabeth Freeman elucidates the essence of this violation in her juxtaposition between "synchronic" and "anachronic" conceptions of time. According to her, synchronic events are simultaneous or otherwise rhythmically cooperative, whereas anachronic events are related in an unchronological order ("Synchronic/Anachronic" 129). She takes the comparison of these two temporalities one step further when she writes, "Whereas there may be biological modes of synchrony, anachrony is fundamentally unnatural" (134). In other words, synchrony is the natural language of time, whereas anachrony is not. Examples of synchrony in

nature are numerous; an animal's heartbeat must coordinate itself with the lungs' need for oxygen; night follows day, but never overlaps it; seasons change, but always in the same order. The language of anachrony, on the other hand, almost exclusively belongs to historiographers such as Orlando's biographer ("Synchronic/Anachronic" 135). Her willingness to compare a seventeenth century theatrical performance to a nineteenth century "Punch and Judy show," for example, upsets time's chronology and thereby violates the synchronic order of nature.

But what separates Orlando's biographer from the rest of the flock is her self-awareness. She takes no issue, for example, with admitting that, "we have done our best to piece out a meagre summary from the charred fragments that remain; but often it has been necessary to speculate, to surmise, and even to make use of the imagination" (119). Most other historiographers would shudder at the idea of using their "imagination." After all, to do so is to explicitly and intentionally disregard veracity, which is widely considered to be a fundamental part of historiography. But as Freeman reminds us, any attempt to illustrate the past will only further disrupt time's synchronic nature. So when Orlando's biographer resorts to the use of her imagination, she simply acknowledges a contradiction, one that others of her kind will not: despite being fundamental to it, veracity is incompatible with historiography.

Perhaps the most significant example of the biographer's reliance on imagination is her depiction of Orlando's sex change. In this jarring scene, three very symbolic "Ladies"—"of Purity," "of Chastity," and "of Modesty"—descend upon Orlando while he sleeps, speak some obscure passages, and then depart (*Orlando* 134). Most crucially, despite its relative exceptionality, this scene does not have a single witness. As the biographer explains, "We are, therefore, now left entirely alone in the room with the sleeping Orlando... and while the

“trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but confess—he was a woman” (137). In perhaps the most momentous event of the entire biography—Orlando’s sex change—“we,” the anachronic observers, “are... entirely alone.” Nobody, not even “the sleeping Orlando,” can verify the veracity of this scene, and yet the biographer not only includes it, but embellishes it with inexplicable ladies and “trumpets.” The biographer can repeat the word “Truth!” as much as she pleases, but the fact remains that her anachronic impositions have no bearing on Orlando’s actual life as it happened, at least according to conventional notions of temporality.

But perhaps it is more accurate to refer to this tale’s ostensible violation of the traditional notions of temporality as a triumph: a rare instance of anachrony overturning the intolerant order of synchrony. From a synchronic perspective, a phrase such as “he was a woman” upsets the very rhythm of life; unless by anachronically mixing the present with the past, one cannot assume the pronoun “he” and be “a woman” simultaneously. But the issue with such a reading is that it silences Orlando’s transsexual identity, regarding it as being somehow unnatural. As Pamela Caughey writes, transsexual life writing “disrupts conventions of narrative logic by defying pronominal stability, temporal continuity, and natural progression” (503). It is no coincidence that all three of these conditions—“stability,” “continuity,” and “progression”—also happen to be three of the most central conditions of synchrony. Occurring all across the natural world, synchrony might very well be the most logical form of “narrative,” but it does not follow that it is the only one.

As an alternative to the synchronic tradition, Caughey goes on to classify *Orlando* as a quintessential example of what she terms the “transnarrative,” which presents transsexuality

not merely as an element within a given narrative but as its very “organizing principle” (503-507). Accordingly, it is important to understand the transnarrative as doing more than just paving the way for new discourses regarding gender and sexuality, but as paving the way for new discourses regarding the more expansive aspects of biographical narrative, particularly subjectivity (502). Moreover, Orlando’s sex change expands the limits of not just gendered but narrative subjectivity within the biographical genre, such that questions of factual accuracy become increasingly moot. Consequently, the biographer’s aforementioned violations take on new meanings in the aftermath of Orlando’s reawakening as a woman. The biographer’s unfettered imagination, for example, or their penchant for periodization, or even the narrative gap which results from Orlando’s weeklong sleep, all make more sense when considered within the context of a larger transnarrative.

Following her momentous sex change, Orlando remains the same person but in a different body, provoking deliberation about the relationship between sex and gender. Apart from the obvious biological differences, she does not notice anything different about herself. “The change of sex,” the biographer notes immediately afterwards, “did nothing whatever to alter [her] identity... her memory went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle” (138). Soon after her seemingly seismic “change of sex,” Orlando is able to console herself with the admission that everything else about her is very much the same as it was when she was a man. Her “memory” of her manhood remains intact, so it follows that her “identity” remains unaltered. Despite now being female, she is still masculine, and this disjunction between her sex and her gender identity helps to explain why, in the immediate aftermath of her sex change, the phrase “he was a woman” does not contradict itself.

But as Orlando slowly reincorporates herself into society, she is forced to acknowledge certain societal realities of her new sex. As the patriarchal English society of which she is a part reminds her, “Women must be obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely appareled... [even though they] are not [these things] by nature” (*Orlando* 156-157). Despite the fact that her “nature” remains very much the same, Orlando “must” change her manner, odor, and clothing, all for the sake of conforming to society’s expectations of her sex. From this point forward in the narrative, a split begins to form between Orlando’s sex, which is biological, and her gender, which is imposed on her by extraneous factors. What it means to be a woman, after all, is much different from what it means to be a female, and this is especially true within a seventeenth century English setting. A female’s womanhood is determined by cultural expectations, whereas her femaleness is determined by her reproductive organs. For most of Orlando’s life, society treated her like a man and presupposed masculine actions from her; but now that her sex has undergone a sudden change, just as suddenly this same society has begun to presuppose feminine actions from her—actions to which she is not yet accustomed. Orlando’s sex change required very little labor from her, whereas becoming a “woman” in eighteenth century England’s sense of the word ends up being the source of a series of complications.

After beginning the process of altering her personhood in order to align more closely with the expectations heaped upon her sex, Orlando undergoes a crisis of identity. On one hand she identifies with her past self as a man, and on the other hand she identifies with her present self as a woman. After witnessing a sailor nearly fall to his death because he was distracted by the sight of her bare ankle, for example, Orlando begins to reflect deeply on the shortcomings of each gender. “For the time being,” Woolf writes, “she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she

was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each" (158). In one sense, she empathizes with the sailor's blunder because it stems from his "weaknesses" as a man, which weaknesses she personally remembers falling prey to when she was a man. But in another sense, because she also personally knows the "secrets" of her current gender—namely that catching sight of a woman's ankle is not worth risking one's life over—the sailor's "weaknesses" strike her as more ludicrous than relatable. When both sides of the gender binary assert themselves in scenes such as this one, Orlando "vacillate[s]" between the two opposing sides, understanding and feeling alienated from the sensitivities of each simultaneously.

Due to the fact that this discord between her two gender identities is inextricable from the discord between her past and present, her gender vacillation has temporal consequences. As a way of classifying this temporal discord, Elizabeth Freeman employs the expression "analog temporality." According to her, analog temporality consists of "gears jam[ming] momentarily when things change," which malfunction represents the "imperfect sutures between past and present" (*Time Binds* 110-111). The most notable example of such an "imperfect suture" in Orlando's life is probably her gender change; the pivotal moment of this change—when the three ladies of purity, chastity, and modesty descend on her sleeping body—raises more questions than it answers, demonstrating the scene's incompleteness. Afterwards, even the biographer's "gears" seem to "jam momentarily"; long after the sex change takes place, they continue to refer to Orlando with the pronoun "him" rather than "her" (*Orlando* 138). Similarly, as she waffles about whether or not to cry in the aftermath of her sex change, Orlando encounters temporal difficulties of her own. "Do what she would to restrain them," Woolf writes, "the tears came to her eyes, until, remembering that it is becoming in a

woman to weep, she let them flow" (165). Still conscious of her past, Orlando's initial impulse is to "restrain" her tears because society regards that as the appropriate masculine response, while her newfound impulse is to "let them flow" because society regards that as the appropriate feminine response. Like the biographer who faces a moment of indecision regarding which pronouns to use when writing about her subject, initially Orlando cannot decide whether or not to cry; the manhood of her past has imperfectly bled into the womanhood of her present. As this passage shows, even in the present her past remains integral to her identity.

With regards to how it complicates her past and present identities, Orlando's sex change rearranges the entire text within queer temporal modes rather than heteronormative ones. *Queer temporality*, which Caughey defines as being "outside the structure of reproductive and family time, of generational inheritance and capital accumulation," defies heteronormativity's most significant social structures (Caughey 519). The nuclear family, for instance, has shaped the traditional notions of temporality, but Orlando's biography completely flouts these traditions.

For example, by never marrying or bearing children of her own, Orlando experiences time much differently than her female contemporaries traditionally do. As her biographer explains, "The life of the average [nineteenth century] woman was a succession of childbirths. She married at nineteen and had fifteen or eighteen children by the time she was thirty; for twins abounded" (229). In order to bear "fifteen or eighteen children" in the eleven-year span between the ages of "nineteen" and "thirty," a young woman must adhere to a strict schedule. She must marry, and after marrying, must almost always be pregnant. Life becomes a cycle of

pregnancies, and consequently, procreation becomes a sort of natural timepiece akin to the seasons. Conversely, Orlando's temporality is relatively unbridled because it is utterly dissociated from this constraining cyclicality.

Heteronormative temporality is linear; but as theorized by Halberstam, Freeman, Dinshaw, etc., queer temporality is not. By and large, heterosexual men and women have always married between adolescence and menopause, and likewise have always borne children in the thirty-year range demarcated by those two periods of their lives. Furthermore, many among us are familiar with the general rule that parents do not outlive their children, but underlying that rule is the assumption that there are parents at all. Parents exist within the margins of heteronormative societies, the main concerns of which are reproduction and the ultimate goal of "generational inheritance." From generation to generation, this sequence of events remains fixed. Queerness, however, resides on the fringes of these heteronormative societies. Unconcerned with the at times constraining aspirations of reproduction and inheritance, queer temporality is capable of transcending these linear notions which tend to confine heteronormative temporality.

Aside from the momentous sex change, queer temporality provides a useful framework for other untraditional developments which occur over the course of Orlando's lifetime. For example, some periods of Orlando's life are more eventful than others; accordingly, the biographer writes at much greater lengths about the fleeting spell of Orlando's first time falling in love than about the innumerable seasons during which Orlando writes poetry alone at home. As an explanation for why she devotes so much more narrative space to some intervals of Orlando's life than others, the biographer cites temporality's queerness. "An hour, once it

lodges in the queer element of the human spirit," Woolf writes, "may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second" (98). The essence of the biographer's claim here is not unlike the claim of this very thesis; time and temporality represent two very different notions because the former is objective while the latter is subjective. Temporality—"the timepiece of the mind"—is what allows "the queer element of the human spirit" to become entwined with the objective phenomenon of time itself.

Queer temporality is not some sort of objective phenomenon, but rather the subjective experience of an objective phenomenon. Nonetheless, the stretching and shrinking of time that peppers *Orlando's* narrative can still be said to "accurately represent" one's subjective experience of time passing. As Melanie Micir writes, "[*Orlando*] protests the tyranny of temporal logic" (12). While some critics have convinced themselves that the temporalities of all people and characters ought to harmonize with the dominant heteronormative temporalities, this is a logical mistake. At the root of this conviction is a tyrannical assumption that all other temporalities will accord with its criterion, despite the fact that temporality is a subjective experience. With *Orlando*, Woolf boldly "protests" such a misguided assumption.

According to Carolyn Dinshaw, queer temporality allows for "touching across time," which accurately describes what *Orlando* does over the course of the novel (21). When *Orlando* is reunited with her gender nonconforming friend Shelmerdine at the end of the novel in the year 1928, for example, time bends so that these two queer friends can share one final moment together in the great house of *Orlando's* long-gone youth. "There stood the great house with all its windows robed in silver," Woolf writes. "All was phantom. All was still. All was lit as for the

coming of a dead Queen... A Queen once more stepped from her chariot" (328). When last the biographer mentioned this "great house" or this particular "Queen," it was prior to Orlando's run-in with King Charles II, who reigned in the mid-seventeenth century. Many centuries have passed since Orlando last laid eyes upon this house or this Queen, yet their recrudescence in this passage is representative of what Dinshaw calls "a queer historical impulse, an impulse toward making connections across time between... cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and... those left out of current sexual categories now" (1). In effect, "left out of sexual categories" for her entire life, Orlando's "queer historical impulse" is so strong that she can breathe life back into a "phantom" house and "a dead Queen" from centuries past. In moments like this one, *Orlando* brings to light the fresh new possibilities which queer temporalities can generate.

Furthermore, *Orlando* defies what Micir refers to as "reproductive time," or the supposedly inviolable progression of birth, marriage, reproduction, and death (12). As far as we readers are aware, Orlando engages in none of these four practices, advancing through her entire life without ever surrendering to the restrictions of reproductive time. The novel opens with him in middle of "the act of slicing at the head of a Moor," and ends with her watching "a single wild bird" fly away into the distance (1, 329). Nowhere in between does the biographer mention a date of birth or a date of death, both of which traditionally bookend biographies. To do so, the biographer would need to conform to the normative understanding of human life which "undergirds the generic structure of standard biography," but clearly such standardization is not a practice which *Orlando* espouses.

Instead, *Orlando*'s framework of queer temporality resists and even critiques this standard temporal framework, compelling us to question why we so easily accept some arbitrary script as being authoritative enough to govern all of our disparate and subjective experiences of time (Micir 11). *Orlando* stretches the temporal boundaries of the biographical genre, adhering to the modernist agenda of dissociating the individual's experience from the homogeneity which we have come to expect from historical records. Like many of her modernist contemporaries, Woolf seeks to write a new script, the temporal boundaries of which are as unique as the protagonist around whose life *Orlando* centers.

When Orlando runs into her old friend Nick Greene at the end of the nineteenth century, for example, their interaction satirizes this standardized temporality to which too many writers adhere. Approximately two hundred years after they first met, in this scene Greene speaks exactly as he spoke to her in the seventeenth century. He says, “[This] is an age... marked by precious conceits and wild experiments—none of which the Elizabethans would have tolerated for an instant” (278). Much earlier in the novel, he made a nearly identical comment, only swapping the “Elizabethans” for the “Greeks” (89). The Elizabethans were conceited and wild when Greene was still living among them, but now the Victorians are the ones who are conceited and wild, while the Elizabethans are relatively normal. This inconsistency between Greene’s nineteenth century comment and his seventeenth century one is hyperbolic for comedy’s sake, but it is nevertheless characteristic of a much larger issue at play in literary criticism: authors who conform to the standard frameworks tend to be the most celebrated in their own times, but the authors brave enough to devise avant-garde frameworks are the most celebrated in the times beyond theirs. Like the forgotten critics who disparaged

Woolf's genre-pushing fiction because it was not normal enough, Greene reveres the standards of the past while dismissing the unconventionalities of the present simply because he does not recognize them as normative.

Reflecting upon her conversation with Greene sometime afterwards, Orlando uncovers an inconsistency between literature and this man who is supposed to represent literature. “[Orlando] had thought of literature all these years,” Woolf writes, “as something wild as the wind, hot as fire, swift as lightning; something errant, incalculable, abrupt, and behold, literature was an elderly gentleman in a grey suit talking about duchesses” (280). In this observation, Orlando envisions literature as “wild” and “errant,” but is met with the reality of a sterile and “elderly gentleman” such as Greene, a literary critic who represents the very antithesis to these queer qualities. A servant to the standards established by heteronormative temporalities, he is an idle foil to what Orlando had once “thought of” authors as representing. As a knee-jerk reaction, he rejects the new and lauds the old, but in doing so, exposes himself as an utter hypocrite when the time inevitably comes that the new he thoughtlessly rejects becomes the old he thoughtlessly lauds. Between Greene’s two interactions with Orlando, for example, the literary customs have shifted to the point that he must reverse his opinion regarding the Elizabethan era’s literature; what was once “marked by precious conceits and wild experiments” when it was hot off the presses, has all these centuries later become the standard against which all other literature is measured. For customs to change this significantly, it is impossible for literature to behave anything like Greene, who tends to follow rather than lead. Instead, as Orlando initially believed, literature is “wild as the wind”; literary customs could not rewrite themselves every couple hundred years otherwise. Conversely, Greene only

represents the tame scholars who ride on literature's coattails, always behind the times but never in sync with them.

Woolf's underlying commentary in this depiction of Greene, then, is that by deviating from what many of her contemporaries regarded to be normal (Victorian literature, namely), she is establishing a new normal—one that the critics of succeeding generations will regard as normal. Like the Elizabethans who deviated from what the Greeks established to be the boundaries of normativity in order to establish their own boundaries of normativity, Woolf deviates from the heteronormative temporalities of the past in order to establish a newly queer one. Throughout modern history, literature has always proceeded in such a way; otherwise, how would the medium have transformed as rapidly as it has over the course of the past few centuries? With *Orlando*, Woolf is expanding the temporal limits of fiction, which is to say that she is doing what the great authors who came before her did. By not following in the footsteps of literature's greatest authors, she paradoxically does exactly that: she follows in their footsteps.

Echoing the tension between queer temporality and heteronormative temporality, a constant tension between what Jimena Canales refers to as "lived time" and "clock time" permeates *Orlando*. Originally created in order to count and divide time astronomically, clock time consistently clashes with lived time. Unlike clock time, lived time knows no division, only continuance (Canales 114). As we observed earlier, one's own personal perception of time can stretch and shrink, while clocks are firm and exacting. In Orlando's case, "Time when he is thinking becomes inordinately long; time when he is doing becomes inordinately short" (*Orlando* 98). There is not always this much rhyme or reason to one's experience of time, but it

is always personalized and flexible in ways that clock time is not. Like queer temporality, lived time escapes the weight and expectations of normative time, modeling a new structure independent of the “social scripts of standard time” (Micir 12). Lived time does not acquiesce to what is commonly regarded to be normal, but rather marches to the beat of its own drum.

Two of the central tenets of modern temporality, according to Joel Burges and Amy Elias, are “multiplicity” and “simultaneity,” which like clock time and lived time, struggle to move in synchrony. Simultaneity, or “the temporal register of the singularity,” most often displays itself on economic, cultural, and technological registers (Burges and Elias 8). Furthermore, because it is tied to the industrial concept of time as being synonymous with capital, simultaneity is often associated with clock time (Burges and Elias 3). For example, most of the US population conforms to a nine to five workday schedule, ever faithful to the clocks ticking all around them. Multiplicity, on the other hand, favors the individual over the group; each person conforms to his or her own internal rhythms, rather than some exogenous industrial timepiece.

In *Orlando*, clocks represent simultaneity’s totality, while Orlando represents the quiet defiance of multiplicity. Originally a product of the sixteenth century, Orlando feels more and more threatened as she struggles to resist assimilating to the nineteenth century’s surging campaign towards simultaneity. Standing on the streets of London, her personal temporality inevitably comes into contact with clock time, and it shakes her to her core. Woolf writes:

“The clock ticked louder and louder until there was a terrific explosion right in [Orlando’s] ear... For what more terrifying revelation can there be than that it is the

present moment? That we survive the shock at all is only possible because the past shelters us on one side, the future on another." (298)

In this moment, the loud ticking of the clock forces Orlando to conform to the tyranny of simultaneity. In big cities like London, each hour brings with it an orchestra of church bells, which orchestra serves as a "terrifying revelation" to individuals like Orlando. Over the course of her life, the steady rise of urbanity has given rise to the simultaneity of clocks, and here they tick "louder and louder" to the point of forcing some kind of revelation upon her. For urbanity to prevail and gain its grip on society, it is necessary for all temporalities—Orlando's included—to become a single temporality. All multiplicities must assimilate to the authority of a single simultaneity, or otherwise drown beneath the rising currents of modernity.

By the time the twentieth century rolls around, Orlando can barely keep pace with the modern world. While shopping at a department store, she smells a candle and mistakes it for her friend Sasha, and while standing in an elevator, mistakes the sound of its descent for "a pot broken against a river bank" (*Orlando* 304). In both cases, she seems to forget when or where she is; by this point in the narrative, Sasha has been dead for at least a few centuries, while every au courant Londoner knows that elevators and river banks do not overlap. But Orlando is anything but au courant. As she marvels to herself soon after these two occurrences, "Time has passed over me... this is the oncome of middle age" (304). She has lived through five centuries and barely aged in all that time, but the intensity of modern London, with its unfamiliar smells and magical elevators, has finally exposed her to the dissociated feeling of "middle age." Temporally, she can no longer keep up with the increasing efficiency of modern London, the synchrony of which consistently outpaces her. By this point in the narrative, as Nicky Hallett

explains, “Orlando’s past and present run together bewilderingly,” and before long, her entire life becomes so unraveled that the biography must end (509).

Yet, despite what *Orlando*’s subtitle, “A Biography,” might suggest, Orlando’s life is not meant to be taken literally. Ending on the same day that *Orlando* was published—“the eleventh of October, Nineteen hundred and Twenty Eight”—Orlando’s life is symbolic of England’s literary history. As Jean Guiguet explains, “*Orlando* is a biography in so far as the hero’s life is consubstantial with history” (266). While Orlando is clearly a fictional “hero” of Odyssean proportions, history figures substantively in the novel nonetheless. This explains, for example, the ongoing tension between the novel’s precise structure, which is replete with exact dates, and its protagonist, “whose life extravagantly defies the effects of time,” living well beyond her life expectancy (Dick 64). On one hand, history is chiefly a veracious form of narrative, while on the other, literature is chiefly creative, so in order to write a literary history which does justice to both, Woolf must employ equal amounts of veracity and creativity.

This balance between veracity and creativity is especially prominent in the Victorian portion of *Orlando*. When Orlando first meets her future husband, Shelmerdine, for example, the scene is overtly inspired by the definitive Romantic novels of that period. While running through a moor, Orlando trips and breaks her ankle, whereupon Shelmerdine happens upon her, “Towering dark against the yellow-sashed sky of dawn, with the plovers rising and falling about him” (*Orlando* 250). Exaggerating the colors of the dawn and accentuating Shelmerdine’s appearance with a bunch of birds, this description creatively captures the overblown essence of Romanticism. At the same time, it is also historically accurate in the sense that it gathers its core elements from real novels of the Romantic period. *Sense and Sensibility*, for example,

which ranks among the most influential Romantic novels, contains a scene where one of the protagonists sprains her ankle while running through a moor, only to be saved by a man on horseback. It speaks volumes to the attentiveness with which Woolf regards literary history that the nuts and bolts of her own scene in *Orlando* so perfectly match up with the nuts and bolts of this scene from *Sense and Sensibility*. By carefully integrating the novelistic tropes of the nineteenth century into her own novel's blueprints, with *Orlando* she has created something both historical and creative.

Furthermore, Orlando's faithful adherence to the stereotypes of the Victorian era give Woolf a chance to take a short vacation from her own modernist tendencies. While most of Woolf's oeuvre showcases her rejection of many of the Victorian era's most significant literary conventions, the anachronic nature of *Orlando* allows her to embrace these conventions. "Materialism," for example, is central to the Victorian conception of reality, whereas Woolf repeatedly employs the stream-of-consciousness technique throughout her oeuvre in order to escape this Victorian idea of material objects as distinct from the mind (Whitworth 151). According to Michael Whitworth, Woolf and her modernist contemporaries truly believed that "changes in the modern world had changed subjectivity itself," and as writers of fiction, they felt it was their duty to match these "changes" with changes of their own (160). In this way, they revolutionized fiction not because they found the Victorian style to be inadequate, but rather because they found the Victorian style to be insufficient at capturing the shifting subjectivity of their own modern world. In fact, the Victorian style very well may have been sufficient in its own time, and Woolf's reliance on it throughout the nineteenth century portion of *Orlando* implies her agreement with this theory.

Woolf's representation of the Victorian era in *Orlando* illustrates this intertwining relationship between one's writing style and one's era. When Orlando gazes upon a statue of Queen Victoria at the beginning of the nineteenth century, for example, she is overwhelmed by the materialism which typifies not just Victorian literature, but the Victorian era itself. A timeworn newcomer to this era, never before has she ever "seen anything at once so indecent, so hideous, and so monumental" (*Orlando* 232). Her reaction aligns with Victorian Studies scholar Richard Altick's own impression of Victorian statues, who writes, "The Victorians had built imposing monuments to themselves, not only civic statuary but public buildings that were exuberant, ornate, and eclectic" (88). With monumental statues such as this one of the Queen, rampant materialism truly came to define the zeitgeist of that era.

At first this Victorian materialism strikes Orlando as "hideous," but as she becomes more and more acculturated to the era, she has no choice but to embrace this kernel of the zeitgeist. And by the late nineteenth century, so taken by this new era into which she has been thrust, she cannot help but write like a Victorian: "The pen made one large lachrymose blot after another, or it ambled off, more alarmingly still, into mellifluous fluencies about early death and corruption" (*Orlando* 243). With their over-the-top Victorian exuberance, it is as if these "imposing monuments" have had such a forceful impact on Orlando's mental state that she no longer remembers how she used to write. As Bernard Blackstone explains, "The Zeitgeist has [Orlando] in its grip. Even her verse, when she tries to write, is morbid and mournful and clinging like ivy... following the Victorian romantic ideals to its limits" (137). Entangled in the Victorian era's "grip," Orlando's helpless inability to locate her own authorial voice showcases

Woolf's own understanding that authors are powerless to transcend the conventions of the eras in which they are caught.

Woolf herself came of age during the Victorian era, so to strictly pinpoint her as a modernist is to overlook the nineteen years in which she lived under the rule of Queen Victoria. It is important to keep in mind that Victorian literature was her foundation, so even though she abhorred the “imperialism and patriarchy” of Victorian England, she could not help but be “attracted by the idea of English history and of England” (Beer 96). Make no mistake, *Orlando* is a satire; for proof, look no further than Shelmerdine’s ridiculous liberation of Orlando from the moor. But in Woolf’s historical moment, the most empowering literature a woman could hope to find still appealed to the patriarchy; as such, rejecting the patriarchy and the imperialism of Victorian literature meant rejecting English literature altogether, which of course Woolf could not do. After all, in order to write anything of literary import, even something which defies the conventions of one’s time, one must nevertheless interact extensively with those conventions. No, Woolf did not reject the Victorian era; she never would have written something as deeply involved in English history as *Orlando* if she had. Instead, “she persistingly rewrote” it, familiarizing herself with its customs so as to enliven her satire of those same customs (Beer 94).

On the surface, *Orlando* is a biography of a gender bending and age defying protagonist, but it is also a history of English literature itself. A continuous thread, the thread of *fluidity*, unites its first page to its last; Orlando’s gender fluidity, for example, is a natural extension of the fluidity of England’s customs, and these fluidities combine to reveal the ever-changing nature of life, and of the literature which refracts it. With its fun-loving defiance of biographical

guidelines and normative temporalities, *Orlando* is a natural foil to *The Waves'* sober struggle with the impassable limitations of narrative.

### Chapter 3: Symbolizing and Structuring Time in *To the Lighthouse*

As the preceding chapters have shown, the central symbols of *The Waves* and *Orlando* serve to enforce distinct notions of temporality. In *The Waves*, the waves represent time's inescapable cyclical, while in *Orlando*, Orlando's death-defying gender transition represents time's bold fluidity. But, to further complicate the boundaries between these seemingly distinct notions of temporality, a third novel by Virginia Woolf posits a hybrid notion of its own. By putting time in direct conversation with its two most central symbols, the waves and the titular Lighthouse, *To the Lighthouse* synthesizes these two notions of cyclical and fluidity into an even more indefinable conception of time.

Using the rising and falling sun as her axial point, Woolf suggests that days, like waves, are cyclical. In an effort to describe nighttime in particular, she writes, "But what after all is one night? A short space... like a turning leaf, in the hollow of a wave. Night, however, succeeds to night. The winter holds a pack of them in store and deals them equally, evenly, with indefatigable fingers" (94). Before and after she explicitly states that "night... succeeds to night," Woolf employs different kinds of figurative language in order to solidify her point that time, particularly nighttime, is endlessly recurring. She does this first by drawing an analogy between "one night" and "a turning leaf, in the hollow of a wave." By comparing a night to a crashing wave like this, she amplifies and calls attention to the brevity of a single night, and the rapidity of time's most major cycle: the rise and fall of the sun. At most, the duration of a wave is about thirty seconds, but even this very generous estimate still pales in comparison to the dozen or so hours which comprise a night. But to Woolf, both are such brief periods of time that they nevertheless remain worthy of comparison. Later in the passage, Woolf employs

figurative language again, this time by personifying wintertime. She describes its “indefatigable fingers,” which deal out approximately one-hundred nights over the course of a season, all at an even rate. This time, rather than calling attention to night’s brevity, she calls attention to its endless repetition with her use of the word “indefatigable.” Like waves, nights are short, but also like waves, they are unceasingly followed by others.

Also recognizing the waves as symbolic of time itself, the character of Mr. Carmichael reaches a similar conclusion of understanding time to be cyclical. A poet himself, Carmichael serves as a channel through which Woolf can project her own cyclical notion of temporality. She writes, “Gently the waves would break... tenderly the light fell... And it all looked, Mr. Carmichael thought, shutting his book, falling asleep, much as it used to look years ago” (106). Once again, in the first half of this passage, Woolf draws parallels between the breaking of “the waves” and the falling of “the light.” But when the narrative transitions to Mr. Carmichael’s consciousness in the second half of the passage, this fixation on time’s repetition escalates. When he claims that not just some of his world, but “all” of it looks “much as it used to look years ago,” Mr. Carmichael perceives time as unchanging in its cyclical repetition, not unlike the interminable breaking of waves on a seashore.

Reflecting on the trajectory of his friendship with Mr. Ramsay, another character named William Bankes arrives at a similar conclusion about time’s redundancy. “The pulp had gone out of their friendship,” Woolf writes. “Whose fault it was [William Bankes] could not say, only, after a time, repetition had taken the place of newness. It was to repeat that they met” (15). With words like “repetition” and “repeat,” this foray into Bankes’ consciousness once again calls attention to time’s cyclical nature. Furthermore, he takes issue with “repetition” in the

sense that it stands in stark opposition with “newness,” a feeling he only ever experienced at the beginning of his friendship with Ramsay. Time assumes the shape of repetition, Banks conjectures, and this inevitably leads to familiarity and even stagnation.

In some of *To the Lighthouse*'s darker moments, Woolf draws further parallels between time and the waves instead to highlight time's destructive rather than its cyclical nature. When the philosophically minded Mrs. Ramsay looks out at the waves, for example, she sees them much differently than Mr. Carmichael sees them. Entering Mrs. Ramsay's consciousness, Woolf writes, “[The waves] remorselessly beat the measure of life, made her think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and warned her whose day had slipped past in one quick doing after another that it was all ephemeral as a rainbow” (12). While the repetition of the waves is still present when Woolf compares the breaking of the waves and the passing of time to the steady rhythm of a song with the phrase “the measure of life,” this repetition differs from previous examples because it eventually leads to destruction. Just as the beating and rising current of the waves will eventually lead to the future “destruction of the island,” the passing of time continuously contributes to Mrs. Ramsay's aging process and eventual death. So despite time's never-ending cycle, it is “all ephemeral” for the people who must experience its cataclysmic reverberations. Anny Sadrin intensifies this relationship between the waves and time when she writes, “It is as if the weather were busy murdering time” (99). This talk of “murdering” is particularly relevant to Mrs. Ramsay, who, by dying midway through the novel, is a casualty of the waves. By murdering time with their remorseless beating of the measure of life, the waves are therefore indirectly responsible for Mrs. Ramsay's own mortal death.

The destructive and even murderous aspects of the waves and time reach their breaking points in the second section of *To the Lighthouse*, “Time Passes,” wherein the central narrative falls to the wayside, only to be supplanted with aimless descriptions of waves. The majority of this section consists of long and characterless scenes briefly interspersed with veiled references to characters who die during its decade long span. In one such characterless passage, Woolf writes:

“[The waves] mounted one on top of another, and lunged and plunged in the darkness or the daylight (for night and day, month and year ran shapelessly together)... until it seemed as if the universe were battling and tumbling, in brute confusion and wanton lust aimlessly by itself.” (100)

Unlike the previously mentioned passages, which all compare the sequential passage of time to the breaking of waves, this description of the waves does not allude to a sequential order in the slightest. Instead of gently breaking one after another as they had before, here the waves mount “one on top of another” in a chaotic frenzy.

This aimless chaos of the waves symbolizes time’s passage throughout “Time Passes.” Woolf herself makes note of this in the passage’s parenthetical statement, wherein “month and year ran shapelessly together.” Just as the waves can sometimes be a disorganized mess, so too can time. Writing about “Time Passes,” Paul Sheehan concludes, “The ‘nonhuman’ aspect of [‘Time Passes’] is also conveyed more implicitly by depicting almost constant change separated from any pattern of accordance, consolation, or even meaning... In other words, there are events in this section, both implied and actual, but no story” (54). By removing the human characters from “Time Passes,” Sheehan argues, all semblances of comforting emotions such as

“consolation” disappear. While “Time Passes” contains some of the novel’s most fraught narrative developments—Mrs. Ramsay’s death, Andrew Ramsay’s death in battle, Prue Ramsay’s death in childbirth—many of these developments are contained within brackets, the grammatical function of which is to show that what is inside is subordinate to what is outside (Olson 61). The overwhelming bulk of “Time Passes” exists outside these brackets, narrating mundane commonplaces rather than actual developments. So by removing the “story” from this section, in an abstract way Woolf is able to evoke the traumatic sense of disquietude surrounding the deaths of Mrs. Ramsay, Andrew, and Prue. As a constant reminder of time’s chaos, all she portrays is the indiscriminate crashing of waves.

But, surrounded on both sides by two much longer sections, “Time Passes” only constitutes a fraction of *To the Lighthouse*, and as such, its overwhelming sense of chaos is only a temporary phenomenon. In the section succeeding “Time Passes,” “The Lighthouse,” Lily Briscoe’s character emerges as a figure whose function is to rein in this sense of chaos, supplanting the deceased Mrs. Ramsay who performed a similar function in the novel’s first section. While Lily reads one of Mrs. Ramsay’s posthumous letters, for example, we observe evidence of this passing of the baton. According to Lily, reading this letter “was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs Ramsay said” (*To the Lighthouse* 120-121). Although the symbolic waves do not explicitly appear in this passage, other natural phenomena such as “the clouds” and the leaves” behave like surrogates. At first “the leaves” are “shaking,” for example, but the power of Mrs. Ramsay’s

words seem to strike them “into stability,” thereby extricating us from the “brute confusion” which characterized the universe of “Time Passes.”

With passages such as, “[The house] was left like a shell on a sandhill to fill with dry salt grains now that life had left it,” a sense of lifelessness pervades “Time Passes” (102). Like the “shell on a sandhill” to which Woolf compares it, the house in this passage is utterly devoid of “life,” but lifelessness does not stop the section’s emotionally withdrawn narrator from focusing her attention on it anyways. In fact, such lifelessness almost seems to facilitate the focus of the narrator, who is concerned less with the lively interiority of human consciousness than with the deadened interiority of an empty house. As David Sherman puts it, it is “as if the house itself were remembering from within its own emptiness.”

In the section succeeding “Time Passes,” “The Lighthouse,” Mrs. Ramsay’s letter is able to extricate us from this lifeless chaos by superseding the foregoing vagueness with a narrowly focused sense of subjectivity. Her letter in “The Lighthouse” is concerned only with conveying the interiority of her own consciousness, with making her “life stand still” in the form of her words. As such, it serves as a “revelation” for Lily Briscoe, who by being exposed to Mrs. Ramsay’s stream-of-consciousness through an epistle, is able to more fully realize her own. Lily’s stream-of-consciousness goes on to overwhelm the rest of “The Lighthouse,” revitalizing the novel following its brief foray into the lifeless interiority of a house.

Like Lily’s stream-of-consciousness, Cam’s stream-of-consciousness becomes more pervasive in *To the Lighthouse*’s third section, and her symbolic interpretation of the waves therein proves to be more hopeful than the aforementioned interpretations provided by Mr. Carmichael and William Banks. Carmichael and Banks both focus on how the repetitive

nature of the waves can inform the repetitions of their own lives, but for Cam, the waves evoke the limitless possibilities of the future. Dipping her hand into the ocean, she asks herself, “What then came next? Where were they going?... drops fell here and there on the dark, the slumberous shapes in her mind; shapes of a world not realized but turning in their darkness, catching, here and there, a spark of light: Greece, Rome, Constantinople” (*To the Lighthouse* 140). Not only does the ocean prompt Cam to ask herself such open-ended questions as ‘*what next*’ and ‘*where to*,’ but it conjures in her mind images of three historic places only reachable by sea. Greece, Rome, and Constantinople all witnessed their imperial peaks more than a millennium prior to this moment in which Cam kneels on the seashore, but such temporal distance does not stop her from imagining the “slumberous shapes” of their bygone greatness.

These reveries hint at the restorations of some of Europe’s greatest empires—Greek, Roman, Byzantine—but one where women like Cam will have the opportunities to play more central roles. In 1920s England, Cam’s social status is impinged upon by her gender, but it remains a possibility that things will not always be this way. After all, stream-of-consciousness is *To the Lighthouse*’s dominant mode of narration, and the vast majority of the characters through which Woolf evinces the stream-of-consciousness technique therein are women. To quote Alex Zwerdling, “The underlings have seized control of the instruments of communication,” imbuing the novel with their own underrepresented feminine voices (197). Soon, perhaps, these same “underlings” will also effectuate the restorations of bygone empires. But while the essence of this restoration at which Cam hints is cyclical, it is not equivalent to the cycles experienced by Mr. Carmichael and William Banks. Their cycles came across as trite and predictable, but the cycle Cam envisages as she gazes out at the ocean offers a variation:

for the first time ever, women will join the cycle, reawakening the “slumberous” Empires of times past.

But when Woolf puts time in conversation with the symbol of the Lighthouse rather than the waves, time’s transformative ability emerges as a challenge to this repeated focus on its cyclicality. The Lighthouse figures in the first and last sections of the novel, and the ten years in-between those two sections transform it into something different, at least according to the Ramsays’ youngest son, James. Ten years older than he was at the beginning of the novel, James looks at the Lighthouse and sees it anew:

“The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening. Now—James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the whitewashed rocks, the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it... So that was the Lighthouse, was it? No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing.” (*To the Lighthouse* 138)

In his younger years, James only saw the Lighthouse as “a silvery, misty-looking tower.” Due to the fact that at that age he had not yet refined his attention to detail, this is nothing more than the hazy description of a child. But when he returns to the Lighthouse later in life, his description of the Lighthouse is utterly different, leaping off the page with details such as the “windows” and “the whitewashed rocks.” In this second instance, James experiences a moment of confusion with regards to which perception of the Lighthouse represents the *true* Lighthouse, but eventually concludes that “nothing” is “simply one thing.”

James' conclusion that "nothing" is "simply one thing" at first appears absurd, but when considered in conjunction with Ludwig Wittgenstein's analysis of the famous duck-rabbit illusion, it begins to make more sense. At first glance, the duck-rabbit illusion is simply a drawing of a duck, but when the viewer tilts his head, it becomes a drawing of a rabbit (the duck's bill doubles as the rabbit's ears). Most viewers would attribute this change from duck to rabbit to a change of interpretation and nothing else, but this begs the question, "Was it the same image both times?" Wittgenstein's answer is a resounding "no" (25). According to him, it is not just the viewer's interpretation, but the viewer's "*aspect*" of perception that changes, which change he understands to be "conceptual, and not psychological" (68). For this change of aspect to be "conceptual," then by definition, the "mental representation of the essential or typical properties" of the duck-rabbit must also change when the aspect changes ("concept n2"). On one level, the viewer's "mental representation" changes, but on an even deeper level, the duck-rabbit's "essential or typical properties" must change as well in order to facilitate this first change.

Reapplying the duck-rabbit illusion to James' two distinct perceptions of the Lighthouse, it becomes clear that just as his mental representation of the Lighthouse changed over the course of those ten years, the Lighthouse's very properties changed as well. In other words, when our perceptions change, *all things* change, because as far as we are concerned, our surroundings only exist insofar as we perceive them. Shortly after he posits that the Lighthouse constitutes the central symbol of *To the Lighthouse*, John Graham argues, "What [the Lighthouse] means depends on who is looking at it; it has no single limited meaning, hence its power as a symbol" (191). He is justified in thinking that the Lighthouse's meaning "depends on

who is looking at it"; after all, we perceive and interpret things according to our associations and memories, both of which differ from person to person. But I would also add that the Lighthouse's meaning *depends on when someone is looking at it*. In James' case, at least, the *when* is as central to the Lighthouse's meaning as the *who*. The Lighthouse, then, is paradoxically both unchanging and changing, or, as Wittgenstein writes regarding the duck-rabbit illusion, "the *same*—and *yet not the same*" (26). It all depends on who is looking at it, and when.

As epitomized by the waves and the titular Lighthouse, time bears many faces in *To the Lighthouse*, none of which are more or less legitimate than the rest. A series of clichés can be deployed here—that time can be your best friend or your worst enemy, that it is in the eye of the beholder, that it is a flat circle—with which Woolf, or at least her characters, would heartily agree. Everybody experiences and perceives time differently, and as such, it eludes definition. It can be cyclical and repetitive, but it can also be transformative and even destructive. Just as the Lighthouse changes in conjunction with when James is looking at it, or as the waves change in conjunction with the weather, time is always *changing*. At first it is disconcerting that, of *To the Lighthouse*'s three parts—"The Window," "Time Passes," and "The Lighthouse"—the one that depicts the longest span of time, "Time Passes," also contains the fewest words. But this dissonance only reflects time's variability. Sometimes time speeds up and sometimes it slows down, sometimes it recycles and sometimes it transforms; its only constant is that it passes.

## Conclusion

Throughout *The Waves*, *Orlando*, and *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf's characters reiterate the sentiment that life and literature are incompatible. "I am astonished," Bernard says in *The Waves*, "as I draw the veil off things with words, how much, how infinitely more than I can say, I have observed" (62). Between beginning and end, life doles out an infinity of observations, so that even as Bernard surmises himself to be "draw[ing] the veil off" these observations every time he writes about them, his fanciful words cannot come close to matching reality's boundless scope. As she alternates between reading a newspaper and looking up at the sky, Orlando expresses a similar feeling in *Orlando*. "Life? Literature?" she asks herself, "one to be made into the other? But how monstrously difficult!" (285). In this moment, the newspaper, with its cluttered formation of abstract symbols, strikes her as diametrically opposed to the sky, clear and bare in its meaning. And finally, in *To the Lighthouse*, Lily reaches the conclusion that Bernard and Orlando only hinted at: "No, one could say nothing to nobody. The urgency of the moment always missed its mark. Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low" (132-133). While Orlando only went so far as to judge the task of converting life into words as "monstrously difficult," Lily takes it a step further; for her, words dilute life so significantly that we would be better served if we simply said "nothing to nobody." Any given moment is too *urgent*, with its barrage of sensations and contextual considerations, for even the most poetic combination of words to ever come close to matching it.

Yet, in spite of these sentiments, Woolf cannot abandon the novel. She experiments endlessly within her genre, combing its boundaries for some means of making the two mediums—life and literature—compatible. In *The Waves*, she tests out a narrative technique

which is a sort of hybrid of the dramatic and the stream of consciousness techniques; the novel's narration almost entirely takes the form of dialogue, but bizarrely, these character-narrators exhaustively voice their sensations aloud, as if their minds have learned to speak without filters. "Look how our eyes," Rhoda says aloud to her fellow narrators, "as they range round this room with all its tables, seem to push through curtains of colour, red, orange, umber and queer ambiguous tints" (101). This is hardly an ordinary observation to make, yet Rhoda makes it anyways without any of the other narrators commenting on its weirdness ("Yes... our senses have widened" is Jinny's only response to it [101]). Meanwhile, the remainder of *The Waves'* narration not only inhabits an entirely different time and place, but operates within an entirely different narrative mode; without a single person in sight, waves crash indiscriminately on a seashore while some unnamed omniscient entity narrates. But despite these forays into disparate narrative experimentations, *The Waves* nevertheless capitulates to the stance that life and literature are incompatible; Bernard's development over the course of the novel, from an aspiring author and avid storyteller to a jaded old man, is testament to this capitulation. But just as Bernard continues to deliver long and sprawling monologues in the face of this growing realization, Woolf continues to write because it is all she can do to keep from succumbing to the hopeless conclusion that her life's work is a heap of nonsense.

Like Bernard, whose growing pessimism regarding language's meaninglessness mirrors Woolf's own pessimism, *Orlando*'s titular character embodies Woolf's writerly affect. But whereas Bernard's development ultimately leads to anticlimax when his voice eventually becomes drowned out by the sound of waves crashing on a seashore in the novel's final lines, *Orlando*'s writing develops in a slightly more optimistic direction. For more than three-hundred

years, she struggles with the challenge of capturing life's fluidity within the confines of a single poem—entitled *The Oak Tree*—but emerges victorious on the other side with a published work (Abel 55). For Orlando, writing *The Oak Tree* is like “a voice answering a voice,” or more specifically, a “stammering answer... to the old crooning song of the woods” (*Orlando* 325). Despite being a manufactured piece of writing, her poem somehow appears to measure up to the natural world sufficiently enough to correspond with it, albeit in the weakened form of a “stammering answer.” And yet, while *The Oak Tree* succeeds at responding to the woods, the woods’ nonresponse to *The Oak Tree* hints at the possibility that this correspondence is less mutual than Orlando thinks. When Orlando attempts to bury a first edition copy of *The Oak Tree* next to the titular oak tree, for example, the tree rejects it because “the earth was [too] shallow” over its roots for any such burial to take place (*Orlando* 324). In keeping with the hopeless ending of *The Waves*, then, this failed interaction between life and literature—between the real-life oak tree and Orlando’s contrived poem, *The Oak Tree*—only adds further evidence to the incompatibility of the two.

In his essay, “Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside,” the French philosopher Michel Foucault makes an attempt to go “outside of [him]self” so as to more critically evaluate his thoughts and ideas (16). This exercise in thinking about thinking eventually leads him to the concept of language, which strikes him as increasingly absurd the more he thinks about it. He writes:

“For a long time it was thought that language had mastery over time, that it acted both as the future bond of the promise and as memory and narrative; it was thought to be prophecy and history.... In fact, it is only a formless rumbling, a streaming; its power

resides in its dissimulation. That is why it is one with the erosion of time; it is depthless forgetting and the transparent emptiness of waiting." (55)

Foucault's point here is that language is nowhere near being the authoritative arbiter of truth we so often assume it to be. When Christians read the Book of Revelation, John the Apostle's matter-of-fact statements regarding the future bespeak "prophecy," just as Ron Chernow's 2004 biography of Alexander Hamilton bespeaks "history." But it is important to keep in mind that neither of these texts are perfectly prophetic or historic. Language is too "formless," too wishy-washy, to convey such monolithic truths. In fact, language is doomed to fall short of "mastery" from the start; what begins as a thought ends as a sequence of words, and inevitably much becomes distorted over the course of this transition from the interiority of one's mind to the exteriority of symbols. It is a mistake to assume that language—with its "emptiness" of substance—has "mastery over time," that we can reliably access the past via history and the future via prophecy. In reality, neither history nor prophecy can objectively describe much of anything, not even the subjective interiorities of their authors.

Foucault's thoughts regarding the relationship between language and time help to explicate Bernard's failure to reconcile his stories to real life, as well as Orlando's failure to reconcile *The Oak Tree* to the oak tree. Bernard and his fellow narrators experience many significant life events over the course of *The Waves*—"marriage, death, travel, friendship; town and country; children and all that"—and although they can retell them endlessly, the unwavering truth remains that none of these events will ever recur (175-176). As readers, we are privy to the narrativized details of Percival's death, for example, but to say that we "remember" his death is to mistake the map for the territory. Similarly, Orlando wants her

poem to do justice to the titular oak tree, but such a harmony between language and reality could never happen. All the words in the English language cannot add up to the inexplicable power of an actual oak tree.

But while her depiction of Bernard is at times reproachful of his naïve loyalty to language, and although she satirizes *Orlando*'s biographer for sometimes taking written history at face value, Woolf nevertheless understands herself as being just as seduced by language as any of her characters. She once told a friend of hers, "nothing has really happened until it has been described," before going on to encourage him to "write many letters to family and friends" (Nicolson 2). She was, after all, a novelist. Deep down, she must have truly believed that well written literature could fairly approximate actual phenomena, otherwise she never would have taken the time to write *The Waves*, *Orlando*, or *To the Lighthouse*.

A storyteller and a critic of storytelling, a historian and a critic of history, Woolf's relationship to language is complicated. It may be impossible to reconcile life to literature, but it does not necessarily follow that all attempts to reconcile the two are equally inadequate. Some attempts to narrate life itself very well may be more authentic than others, and from this presumption arise Woolf's experimentations with subjectivity and, more specifically, temporality. If no two experiences of time are the same, then no two figures of time should be the same either.

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