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# So Much Depends Upon Distance: Selfhood & Temporality in *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando*

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“So Much Depends Upon Distance”:  
Selfhood & Temporality in *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando*

by

Wade Linebaugh

A Thesis  
Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee  
of Lehigh University  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
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This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in English.

“So Much Depends Upon Distance”:  
Selfhood & Temporality in *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando*  
Wade Linebaugh

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“THE Futurist can live a thousand years in one poem”  
– Mina Loy, *Aphorisms on Futurism*

“The Fascist poem, one may fear, will be a horrid little abortion such as one sees in a glass jar in the museum of some county town.”  
-Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

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## Abstract

Combining mainly an analysis of *To the Lighthouse* with one of *Orlando*, this paper argues that Virginia Woolf theorizes a revision of the dominant modernist paradigm of subjectivity. Theoretical portions of the essay compare F.T. Marinetti's Futurist texts to Woolf's nonfiction and theories of temporality and subjectivity from Anthony Giddens and G.M. Hyde. In so doing, I theorize a model of subjectivity—backward subjectivity, based partially in Heather Love's *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*—that treats identity as both individualist and ontologically unstable. Woolf's revision of subjectivity is especially important in consideration with theories of temporality, as Giddens suggests. However, borrowing from Michael Hollington's conception of Bergsonian modernist time, I argue that Woolf's provocative reimagining of subjectivity is the product of elastic, rather than reified, time.

## I. Introduction

“So much depends, then...upon distance,” Lily Briscoe begins to muse as she labors to reach the elusive completion of her painting near the end of *To the Lighthouse* (284); and the same is true for the project at hand. Distances, both physical and temporal, provide the basic structure for this study. For Lily Briscoe, distances interfere compositionally with her painting—what moments ago “seemed miraculously fixed, was now unsatisfactory. The wind had blown the trail of smoke about; there was something displeasing about the placing of the ships” (286)—while also reminding her of something more personal, as “her feeling for Mr. Ramsay change[s] as he sail[s] further and further across the bay” (284). Here, distance is a fact of physical space that shapes experience, that is, both compositionally and emotionally, Lily is situated in a position of trying to mediate and interpret distances. As she struggles to focus, Lily realizes that she cannot “achieve that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces; Mr. Ramsay and the picture; which was necessary” (287). For Lily, distance is not merely the placement of objects in space or even in time, but the intersection of spatial/temporal distance and her feelings of closeness to other people. In other words, Lily’s struggle to create is not simply one about the process of mediating between observed landscape and the paint on the canvas; it is about something more complex. Mr. Ramsay’s presence in the tenuous balance that Lily describes signals us to situate the text’s portrayal of the creative process in some larger context.

It is this attempt to understand creativity in the context of human relationality that launches this study. In both *Orlando* and *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf examines characters situated at the intersection of temporal space and the creative self. Both

Orlando and Lily, that is, navigate the self and human relationships via their role as creators. The ways in which both of these novels feature experimentation with temporality is key to understanding how these two characters understand and perform selfhood. Indeed, the fact that these two novels were released in such swift succession is no accident: I treat them here as two very different but ultimately related instantiations of the same paradigm of subjectivity.

In deciding to yoke *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando* together for this project, I mean to address a few voids in criticism's discussions of Woolf. As Makiko Minow-Pinkney points out in her *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject*, *Orlando* is "perhaps the most neglected of Woolf's novels among her critics," or it used to be, at any rate (117). Admittedly, a lot has changed critically since Minow-Pinkney's book was released, but I include this slightly anachronistic criticism not because it remains true but because it isolates *Orlando*'s status as a "joke," at least in certain critical treatments of the text (cit. in Minow-Pinkney 117). Although she cautions us not to confuse that with "mere insignificance," Minow-Pinkney largely lets this formulation stand, presumably because Woolf herself is the origin of the statement. Though it risks arrogance, it is worth considering the considerable pressure for Woolf to deride a text as transgressive as *Orlando* in this way. In short, I do not accept the minimalization of *Orlando* in Woolf's oeuvre; by way of Minow-Pinkney's point that critics have "suggested a certain continuity between *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando*" (121), I consider them together here in order to claim that the two texts ought not to be thought of as one of Woolf's headiest on the one hand and one of her most lighthearted on the other, but as two pieces doing very much the same work, particularly in the realm of temporality. Not only are the two

texts published in swift succession, they think coextensively. Without glossing over their differences, this project generally wants to encourage critical conversation about *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando* as variations on a theme: as two of Woolf's most meditative novels, but also as two texts using different manipulations of time to theorize selfhood and its relation to modernity.

The secondary critical intervention that I mean to make is inspired first by Merry M. Pawlowski's engaging collection, *Virginia Woolf and Fascism*, as well as by the literary tumult that Filippo Tomasso Marinetti's founding of Futurism caused at the beginning of the twentieth century. Pawlowski's text serves as an instructive example about a small but crucial hole in Woolf scholarship that this paper attempts to address: In thirteen essays, the collection mentions *To the Lighthouse* barely a handful of times and *Orlando* not at all. I do not mean to imply that this particular instance of inattention is a glaring critical oversight. It actually seems pretty understandable to me: what could two of Woolf's most philosophical and meditative novels have to do with fascism, especially given works significantly more ripe for the comparison? *Three Guineas*, for instance, appears *in the titles alone* of four of the essays in Pawlowski's collection. As I will explore more fully later, the reason that even novels like *Orlando* and *To the Lighthouse* might make interesting additions to such a conversation lies at least partially in the discourse inaugurated by Italian Futurism<sup>1</sup>. Considering both its intense cultural impact<sup>2</sup> and its polemicist bent toward misogyny and warmongering, it is actually quite *difficult*

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter referred to simply as *Futurism*. As Mary Ann Caws points out, the term *Futurism* encompasses a broad variety of aesthetic and political movements in a variety of nations throughout the early decades of the twentieth century. "There are, of course, many Futurisms even in Italy," Caws points out (168-9). For the sake of simplicity, I am confining my use of the term to reflect only a relatively basic and narrow set of texts written by or responding to Marinetti.

<sup>2</sup> q.v. Caws, 169.

to ignore Futurism's literary and cultural influence, especially when we consider academics' long history of feminist readings of Woolf's texts and even Woolf's own adoption of a pacifist stance by 1938, when *Three Guineas* is published (Gordon). Of course, I do not mean to propose any direct correlation between the discourses of Futurism and Woolf's novels, but rather that in defining the concept of subjectivity at hand here, such texts prompt us to ask indispensable contextual questions. It is in this sense that I think a critical conversation about the relationship between Woolf's novels and Futurism—as ostensibly unrelated as the two may be—is utterly crucial to Woolf scholarship.

In the coming sections, I will argue that taken together, *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando* provide us with a theorization of selfhood that engages with and alters the archetypal high modernist version of selfhood. Instead of the forward-driving, antihistorian figure cut by so many personalities of British and Continental modernism, Woolf describes subjects that partake only partially in such a discourse of avant-gardist individualism. As creator-characters—and specifically as women—Orlando and Lily *do* both stand, in some fashion, alone against literary history that they reject, but they simultaneously—and paradoxically—reject the personality-cultish version of self that often goes along with such a position. Specifically by examining the relationship between these characters and the concept of temporality, I argue that Woolf theorizes a backward subject that is both distinctly modernist and yet ontologically indefinite. I do not mean to argue that Woolf obliterates the stability of the individual self, but rather that she troubles it, querying—and queering—the dominant mode of self-fashioning.

I first define the archetype of the modernist “I,” the dominant mode of self-styling available to modernist subjects, by looking at a series of examples—including those from Woolf’s own nonfiction writing—of such a paradigm. I follow that discussion up by putting this definition into conversation with political and aesthetic manifestoes by Marinetti and Valentine de Saint-Point, which serve as instructive—if hyperbolic—cultural touchstones for Woolf’s revision.

The third section, *Modernist History*, defines Woolf’s revision of the paradigm laid out previously. In detailing my theorization of the subject-position that Orlando and Lily Briscoe share, I lay the theoretical substructure for the close readings of Woolf’s novels that follow. Much of this section is indebted to critical conceptions of subjectivity by Heather Love and G.M. Hyde, among others, but the lynchpin of the argument is in the differences between those critics and the models of self-styling that the second section attends to.

In my fourth section, *Time Stretches: Accretions and Identity*, I shift the focus of the paper to the literary texts at hand, spending the majority of the space attending to *Orlando*. The focus here on stretched temporality contrasts with the technique that the next section describes for *To the Lighthouse*. Brief treatments of “Modern Fiction” and *A Room of One’s Own* help to catalyze the dual function of this piece of my argument. In one sense, much of this section is spent finalizing a definition of backward subjectivity and building it into a working interpretive model, while in the other, that model is put to use in producing backward readings of the text. The section concludes by considering what ethical imperatives the use of backward subjectivity as a critical tool suggests.

The fifth and final section of the paper treats *To the Lighthouse* with attention to the differences in temporal character between that text and *Orlando*. By contrasting the stretchiness of the latter's temporal elasticity with the density of the former's, I argue that the two different experiments with time ultimately produce the same theorization of subject. The paper concludes by reflecting once again on the ethical and methodological potential for a model of backward subjectivity, especially as it relates to theories of modernity and temporality.

## II. The Exclusionary Basis of Self-Styling *or* What Futurism Can Teach Us About the Rest of Modernism

An essential part of my argument has to do with one traditional concept of how the “I” works in modernism, a movement that Mina Loy called “a prophet crying in the wilderness that Humanity is wasting its time” (330). Loy's modernist is a contrarian, a highly individualized subject for whom identity is inherently based on the notion of separation from the greater social body. The archetypal modernist statement is, like Loy's aphorism, bold and individualistic, dependent on the idea of the modernist creator-subject as not just unique, but prophetic. The dominant archetype of the high modernist sees himself (and they are largely “*himselves*”) at the cusp of some radical new moment. We can see this quite concisely in Pound's famous formulation: “make it new.” Newness invokes not just innovation but an implicit dissatisfaction with the old. Pound's *A Pact* describes this present-past antagonism with further clarity by figuring it as a function of his one-time distaste for Whitman, and is brief enough to be worth quoting in full:

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman—  
I have detested you long enough.

I come to you as a grown child  
Who has had a pig-headed father;  
I am old enough now to make friends.  
It was you that broke the new wood,  
Now is a time for carving.  
We have one sap and one root—  
Let there be commerce between us.

While it is distinctly conciliatory, Pound's sentiment is only charitable to a certain extent: The "commerce" that Pound envisions between himself and Whitman is, at best, fairly one-sided. Pound reserves the "carving" for himself, that is, he distinctly retains an authorial control that supersedes Whitman's voice. Pound does gesture benevolently at the "one sap and one root" that the two poets share, but something about this burgeoning literary friendship does not sit quite right. The source of this is the conditional nature of Pound's conciliation: even with this olive branch extended, the poem implies, Whitman's writing is still only worth encountering provided that Pound mediates it for us. Pound, ever the "potent" editor—as he was with his "wholesale cuts" in *The Waste Land*—cannot relinquish enough control to make a convincing case that the "commerce" with Whitman is too much more than lip service (Kelly). There is respect here—I do not wish to undermine the careful position this poem takes—but its general attitude toward literary predecessors adheres closely to the dominant paradigm of the modernist creator. Here, Pound styles himself as a herald of progress, a figure uniquely enabled by the historical moment of modernity to perform this particular mode of subjectivity. Such a model of individuality envisions a disjointed relationship to history; the idea of a break—with antiquated politics, with literary history, with aesthetic forms—informs this basic paradigm of modernist subjectivity.

Before beginning to describe the way in which Virginia Woolf refashions this paradigm, it is crucial to spend time examining a few moments in Woolf's own writing that engage with this precise "make it new" styling. Not only do I wish to forge a definition complex enough to be useful to work with (and against), I also want to highlight the somewhat paradoxical and even counterintuitive nature of the argument I am making here.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf's optimism and hope for modernity, at least in contrast to the past, is palpable. For Woolf the opening decades of the twentieth century seem to spur her toward that archetypal modernist attitude hailing its singularity as a historical moment. Whereas "in the nineteenth century a woman was not encouraged to be an artist" and furthermore, "she was snubbed, slapped, lectured and exhorted" if she even dared to try, the twentieth century is a time where even a woman author of average talent can succeed largely by virtue of "ha[ving] certain advantages which women of far greater gift lacked even half a century ago" (*Room* 61-2, 97). Physical and emotional violence, given a slight glossing-over by Woolf's largely playful tone, is at the heart of what Woolf clearly rejects about not just the nineteenth century, but all of European history. At this point in the text, that is, Woolf is unequivocal: the twentieth century is a distinctly special time. Woolf frequently cites not just the titular room but the recent advantage of women's right to vote, of the freedom for a woman to "go out alone," to travel, to "drive through London in an omnibus or h[ave] luncheon in a shop by herself" (74-5). The sort of freedom opened up to women by such direct experience is crucial for the development of female authorship, which—as Woolf points out—makes Jane Austen's brilliance without the advantages of modernity even more stunning.

By no means is this lionization of modernity confined to *A Room of One's Own*, either: it clearly informs her essays “Modern Fiction” and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” which use a similar exceptionalism to co-develop a distinction in fiction writing between the “materialists” and the “spiritualists,” the Edwardians and the Georgians, respectively. In these essays, modernity seems to very clearly force a confrontation between two varieties of writers, old and new: for the Georgians, “the tools of one generation are useless for the next...and so the smashing and crashing began” (“Mr. Bennett” 754-5). The “smashing” of *Ulysses*' indecency and the “crashing” of *BLAST* are ostensibly the natural results of what Woolf draws up as a very simple diagram: modernism is predicated on a literary-historical encounter between two camps that necessitates the destruction of the old for the sake of the new.

Perhaps nowhere is just such an attitude toward modernity more perfectly articulated than in Marinetti's founding text of Futurism, the aptly named “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” as well as the collaborative Futurist poster, the “Futurist Synthesis of the War.” In discussing Woolf's work and Futurist discourse in the same breath, I should again point out that I do not mean to imply that Woolf responds directly to—or ever even read—Marinetti. Even so, Futurism is an undeniable force in early twentieth century Europe: as Mary Ann Caws points out, the movement “made such a noise that it reverberated around Europe and became a legend even as it was still sounding” (169). So when Marinetti “traveled all over Europe” giving lectures about Futurism (*ibid*), he largely explained a binary scheme; the iconic poster “Futurist Synthesis of the War” describes it succinctly: “**FUTURISM** AGAINST PASSÉISM” (Marinetti et. al.). Centrally, under that main claim, the poster reads, “8 PEOPLE-POETS

AGAINST THEIR PEDANTIC CRITICS” (*ibid*). Various nations find their way into to the good graces of Marinetti’s scheme for their good qualities—“energy” and “elegance,” in one case, “sense of duty,” in another—but the visual implication of alliance is belied by the small text near the top of the poster. There, we find out that the “GENIUS” listed under Italy’s qualities licenses a unique aesthetic agency to only *one* of the so-called “people-poets.” The text reads: “The Futuristic right to destroy works of art. This right belongs solely to the Italian creative Genius, capable of creating a new and greater beauty on the ruins of the old” (*ibid*). Although the imagery and language draws on reality in synthesizing the war, it also makes little pretension toward the idea of unification by setting Italy in a separate realm of agency from the other nations included. The cherry-picked qualities referred to earlier reinforce this separation: the alliance is first predicated on the premise that the named nations perform the desired qualities listed next to their name and second, and more importantly, on the premise that the qualities listed near Germany and Austria are worse. There are two instances in the body of the poster of words that are printed larger than those directly above them: those two phrases are “GENIUS” and “CREATIVE GENIUS” (*ibid*). In privileging Italy as the poster does, it is important to notice the archetypal modernist stance that I have so far described. While there is a level of alliance diminishing the individuality of these voices shouting in the wilderness, the literal glorification of the “respect for individuality” that the poster values should not go unnoticed: we have here a mode of aesthetic and political self-styling defined by oppositionality, especially to history. Germany and Austria, who take a beating in the piece, are criticized primarily for qualities such as “rigidity,” “brutality,” and a “constipation of industrial Camelots” (*ibid*). Ossification is what offends the

Futurists, that is, everything that is in any way stuck in the past. Even more than the dominant modernist stance, however, “Futurist Synthesis of the War” directs us to look at more than the basic oppositional element of that paradigm. Because the poster’s rhetoric is both political and aesthetic and its design is distinctly phallic, with the Futurists typographically penetrating the passéists, it none-too-subtly invites us to think about Futurism’s approach not just to gender politics but also to gendered aesthetics.

Two texts speak even more directly to this gendered politics and aesthetics, which Mary Ann Caws calls Futurism’s identification of “the dynamic of the male vertical” against the “‘effeminate’ pastness” and its “supine” position (168). By examining these two texts—Marinetti’s founding manifesto and a response to it, the “Manifesto of Futurist Woman” by the French Futurist writer and artist Valentine de Saint-Point—the often-hyperbolic discourse of Futurism makes apparent a key secondary feature of what I have already described as the oppositional paradigm for modernist identity: namely, that it is a gendered one that can be, at times, violently exclusive. A lot of elements of Marinetti’s “Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” may be beginning to sound like boilerplate oppositional-paradigm discourse: there is the glorification of “aggressive action,” of “ardor” and “splendor” and “speed,” as well as the image of the Futurist standing “on the last promontory of the centuries” about to “break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible” (187). Marinetti’s oppositionality is intense, thorough, and systematic. Deeply invested in technology, the “splendor” and “speed” he revels in ultimately tie in to automobiles, about which he rhapsodizes breathlessly that “a racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath—a roaring car that seems to ride of grapeshot—is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*”

(*ibid*). The car, a snorting, flying hunk of metal, effortlessly outdoes what passed for beauty in the past; for Marinetti, exhaust pipes will always beat out wings, even those on the *Victory of Samothrace*. Not content enough to “glorify war,” Marinetti is quite careful indeed to take a contrarian stance on issues political, aesthetic, moral and academic. The common ground here, as the name of the movement implies, is a systematic rejection of everything that catalogues or memorializes the past: the scorn for the Winged Victory, the declaration that Futurists “will fight moralism,” and the now-classic impetus to “destroy” libraries and museums all share this common assumption (*ibid*). It can be easy to discount the ardor of such a text as immature or nearly parodic, even, but besides Marinetti’s lifelong dedication to Futurism, the unity of the stance suggests its seriousness. That is, Marinetti’s text is conscious of precisely what it proposes in severing itself from history: even if we suspect, he says, “that we are the revival and extension of our ancestors—perhaps!...If only it were so!—But who cares? We don’t want to understand!” (189). This informed rejection of the past makes its defiance even more significant. When we read item number nine in the manifesto, one of its most famous, we might now understand it as a clearheaded and willing conflation of systematic violence and misogyny: “we will glorify war—the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman” (187). It is in that last addendum, nearly tacked-on as it is, syntactically, that we understand how sincere the Futurist bent for that male/virility/dynamism knot of terms is. “Scorn for woman” is as necessary as other tenets of literature and artistic blazon. While most wouldn’t put it the way Marinetti does,

glorifying war is not much new<sup>3</sup>, but the shock of it is its blatant disregard for women, who end up on the scrapheap with the rest of the regressive, turgid past.

Three years later, in 1912, Valentine de Saint-Point publishes a bold response to Marinetti's founding text, going so far as to use Marinetti's contentious section number nine as an epigraph for her own piece. Saint-Point's "Manifesto of Futurist Woman" proposes a model of womanhood around her primary assertion that "all humanity is mediocre" (213). For Saint-Point, Marinetti's "scorn for women" is not a problem, but an opening premise to match her own: "heroes and geniuses" come from both sexes but those occurrences are rare. Instead, everyone "merit[s] the same scorn" (*ibid*). Saint-Point goes on to describe her vision of women's role in modernity, namely that women, like men, lately suffer from a lack of virility. Still, her piece is important in its effort to carve out a space for women's agency inside of Futurism, "even with all its exaggerations" (214). For Saint-Point, that agency is diametrically opposed to feminism—"we must not give woman any of the rights claimed by feminists" (215 *emph. orig.*)—and can only be accessed through reproductive sexuality. Motherhood "makes" men and so makes "power over them," but only insofar as it is combined with a pronounced antisentimentalism (216). Saint-Point theorizes a useful version of the Futurist counter-stance that adapts to Marinetti's scorn for women by spreading the blame for cultural and political malaise, asking women to become "*sublimely unjust*," to return "*to violence, to cruelty*" (215-6 *emph. orig.*). Saint-Point's manifesto offers us a vision of adapting the modernist paradigm, which we have seen is largely built to exclude women, to women's desire to self-style. What we have, then, is essentially the same counter-stance as Marinetti's, but

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<sup>3</sup> Consider, e.g., Horace's "*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*" or any given piece of military portraiture.

adapted to discourses of women's rights at the turn of the century: Saint-Point rejects the entire premise of both political rights and social and household duties in favor of a manipulative model of agency, one that entirely glosses over the material difficulties of political disenfranchisement. While I do not want to eradicate the sense of radical possibility Saint-Point's text presents—prefiguring radical movements that would not emerge for decades more—I do want to highlight the fact that even the “combative women” her text glorifies never give us a clear model for thinking beyond a role of subjection for the Futurist woman. The rhetorical similarities to the oppositional stance of Marinetti are more than just that: in the end, Saint-Point's text still “scorns” as its mode of self-fashioning.

That spaces left in such texts for women to self-fashion through the dominant modernist paradigm are few. For Saint-Point, the role of the woman-as-creator is unclear, with agency only to be had mostly through an oppositional theorization of motherhood, while with Marinetti, women don't even register beyond the level of scorn. What these Futurist writings let us see is that the dominant mode of self-styling, the modernist at odds with his past that Futurists take to the extreme, leaves little room for any other identificatory practice. Crucially, not all texts that partake in this aesthetically and historically oppositional paradigm are misogynist; such a formulation goes much too far. Rather, what I mean to do in examining such texts in detail is draw out something that is minimally implied in *any* oppositionalist ethic: that it necessarily functions on the exclusion of others.

Furthermore, Futurist texts like those we have just examined also demonstrate that when considering the exclusionary dimension of a contrarian self-stylization, we would

do well to keep in mind the regularity with which women are precisely those excluded others on which such a practice hinges. This should cause us to look back at *A Room of One's Own*, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” and “Modern Fiction” differently.

Undeniably, Woolf has a special faith in the twentieth century as a moment in time that—especially at the level of rights and material conditions—makes a real difference for women in the world. So in keeping with that, she does seem to embrace an element of this individualistic self-stylization. At the same time, given the way that exclusion seems to function in (at least *some* of) the texts that spontaneously generate such identifications; we have to register Woolf’s engagements with the dominant paradigm as fleeting. We talk of such identifications in *moments* in Woolf’s texts rather than in *systems* because, as Saint-Point’s manifesto demonstrates, adopting the oppositionalist paradigm as a woman—and retaining enfranchisement, rights, or creativity—is nearly impossible. The cultural current that we see at its most extreme in Futurism, like Charles Tansley, endlessly seems to mutter, “women can’t write, women can’t paint”—at least, not the way men do (*TL* 130).

### III. Modernist History: The Backward Subject

With a firm understanding of the dominant paradigm I am referring to established along with the specific notion that its adoptability is contingent on gender, we can begin considering Woolf’s radical changes to that norm. The fact, that is, that Woolf revises this model of modernist subjectivity, taking it apart and reassembling creative self-fashioning anew, makes much more sense now that we have established the limited availability of that subject-position. In this light, the formal and linguistic play in *To the*

*Lighthouse* and *Orlando* can be treated not as mere experimentation but a theorizing of selfhood that thinks beyond the violence proposed by oppositional stances like—but not limited to—Futurism. In that way, then, the theorization of selfhood that I want to describe below stands in stark contrast to the exclusionary stances we have seen so far. What we will find in Woolf is neither an uneasy pact with the past nor library-burning, but a model of self-fashioning that extends the subject into the past, articulating what Marinetti teases us with when he nearly admits to our being “the revival and extension of our ancestors” (Marinetti 189). For Woolf, though, that’s no joke.

But is stark contrast the only side to this story? The short answer is no. As much as the model of backward subjectivity that I will describe opposes the exclusionary ideas above, there is a lingering debt to the brashness and individuality of the traditional paradigm. It is important not to lose sight of the power that a text like Saint-Point’s, for instance, generates. The reason that I see Woolf’s intervention as taking apart and reassembling rather than altogether obliterating the dominant paradigm is indeed because the counter-stance may be a mode of self-representation worth having. The other way to put this point is that this study does see Woolf as being at odds with many of her modernist contemporaries, at least in so far as she theorizes subjectivity, but I do not want to ignore the fact that Woolf was still a modernist, and one who saw power in the oppositional stances of her colleagues, at that. As I will describe this model of subjectivity, a definite sense of the counter-stance remains, but Woolf’s turn backward maintains a form of that individualist subject while working to mobilize a sense of modernist history in order to recover from a literary past marked by gendered exclusion.

In attempting to describe this model, it is perhaps best to begin by making a few theoretical borrowings.

The bedrock for the model I want to articulate is Heather Love's concept of queer history—or at least a version of it. From Love, I adopt the assertion that “the idea of modernity—with its suggestions of progress, rationality, and technological advance—is intimately bound up with backwardness” (5). For Love, “progress” and “regress” are not antitheses but inextricably intertwined because of modernity's “reliance” on “excluded, denigrated or superseded others” (*ibid*). Supersession, in other words, is less about true progress than a convenient oppositional stance. Contrarian modes of self-fashioning are identifications that build themselves out of nothing but rejection; without women to scorn, then, perhaps Marinetti's Futurism never quite gets off the ground. Of course, I am not literally interested in such speculations, but there's an important point there: in Love's view, those superseded others do not simply disappear, but remain spectrally even in what I have been calling the dominant paradigm. The vestigial trace of the other suggests that because exclusion only has meaning as a function of the identity of the excluded, even the individualist archetype is considerably less ontologically definite than it appears.

Though this understanding of modernism's relationship to its history is, as I have said, the bedrock for my theorization, I want to take it further than that. Love identifies a fundamental complication in the individualist paradigm, but I want to think beyond that paradigm altogether. If suppression is a form of identification, then what Woolf's backward subject models is how big that small complication can get. When, earlier, I described my model of subjectivity as ontologically indefinite and yet distinctly

modernist, this is what I was hinting at: that the complication Love introduces about the individualist model can be exploded into a wholesale instability of the subject. In this view, then, we are interested in a model of subjectivity that sees modernist history as an activation of the past into the lived present. This ancestral aspect of identity, the porous ontological relationship between the subject and its history, can take place either at the literal—as with an actual racial, national, or family ancestry—or at the literary level. When a backward subject is also a creator, as with Lily Briscoe and Orlando, selfhood hinges on a relationship between the creator-subject and his/her literary predecessors.

In “The Poetry of the City,” G.M. Hyde delineates a model of modern literature’s interaction with metropolitan spaces. His central concern is the relationship of the “unreal city” of Eliot and other modernists<sup>4</sup> to the identity of the writer, especially in poetry. While our concern is not with Hyde’s metropolis, we can still glean some theoretical material on subjectivity that compliments what we have already seen from Heather Love. Taken a certain way Hyde’s argument about the relationship between the modernist poet and the city suggest that identity is, perhaps, more contingent and less stable than we might expect. For Hyde, this means a specifically metropolitan contingency; in other words, the modernist poet’s voice is always invoking the dominant, individualistic mode of subjectivity, but in invoking the city, it is also mildly self-obliterating. The ever-present figure of the city lets us know that the modernist poet is always speaking for “myself and my race, my race and its past” (339). There’s nothing new about the modernist subject generating identity through their works (i.e., “myself”), but Hyde’s claim that the poet’s voice is more rooted in history gives us a certain amount of pause in

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<sup>4</sup> Mostly Crane and Mayakovsky, in this case.

that old formulation. Hyde points us in a slightly different direction, prompting us to put some pressure on the question of “the individual talent’s relation to the literary tradition<sup>5</sup>” (*ibid*). This particularly literary construction of identity is also a surprisingly ancestral one: subjectivity in Hyde’s argument is not entirely obliterated, but neither is it ontologically definite. Instead, the poet speaks with a voice that constructs selfhood through constant identifications with ancillary bodies. Crucially, these identifications are not negative: the backward self is an affirmation of the ancestral, both in terms of literal “race”—one’s ethnic/family/national history—but also in the literary sense of the word, a voice and a subjectivity built by speaking as one *in* and *of* (not *apart from*) many. In Hyde’s claim, the word “myself” is still first, which is important to maintain: this is not a diagram in which the individuality of the subject is completely subsumed by a deference to literary or cultural history, but rather a model that tones down the hyperbolic oppositionality of, in this case, the poet’s voice. Hyde’s argument reminds us that an important element to recognize about backward subjectivity is that the revision of modern subjectivity it entails does not completely dispense with the dominant paradigm. Hyde also helps us begin to see what that instability, the rooting of the self so much outside the self (in literary history, in this case), looks like.

The title of this paper emphasizes temporality as integral to the scheme of selfhood and, so far, I have largely been silent on this point. The dominant mode of self-fashioning, as I have framed it, does not ask many questions about temporality: the past has passed, especially for the Futurists. Futurism is an especially instructive example about this precisely because the entire movement assumes one important thing, namely

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<sup>5</sup> Hyde is, shockingly, *not* actually referring to the Eliot essay of almost that precise name, however.

that culture and aesthetics develop as time passes—and the corollary to that is that time is a linear, easily apprehensible concept. The backward subject troubles this scheme of temporality: by hinging on a radical re-conceptualization of time, backward subjectivity complicates what otherwise might not amount to much more than a collective shine for allusiveness.

A brief examination of critical studies of time's relationship to modernist writing will help to adumbrate the temporal dimension of my argument. Michael Hollington's essay "Svevo, Joyce and Modernist Time" helps our definition by providing a useful critical model regarding employments of time in the shift from realist to modernist fiction. Hollington identifies a particularly modernist progression away from nineteenth-century ideas that "time is the medium in which people grow, individually and collectively" and that "events mark the critical points of" such a "change" (431). Tolstoy, Hollington frequently explains, provides a good model of this uncomplicated, linear conception of time: events are "logical descendant[s]" of each other and of characters' coherent sensibilities; events obey "delicate laws of latent possibility" with respect to character (*ibid*). In other words, coherent and stable—even if not necessarily predictable—subjects experience life and develop according to a correspondingly coherent and stable sense of time. *Bildungsromane* are good examples of this: they end later than they begin and progress along that line toward a developmental endpoint that expresses the blooming of what was always latent in the character. In realist texts, we might say, endpoint is apotheosis.

Thinking briefly of modernist inversions and reconfigurations of *bildungsromane*—*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *The Metamorphosis*, *The*

*Picture of Dorian Gray*<sup>6</sup>—it should not surprise us, then, that Hollington figures modernism (partially) as a reaction against this temporal stability. Hollington ascribes this reaction first to what he calls narrative “non-events<sup>7</sup>,” frustrations of both plot and our desires for “satisfactory” endings common in modernist texts (430-1). These interruptions are important because they are literary manifestations of the philosophical shift in understandings of temporality that Henri Bergson’s rejection of a linear conception of time caused. For the scope of this project we do not need to fully enter into the complexities of Bergsonian time; the rudiments of Bergson’s intervention will do. One of the most basic of these interventions in thinking about time can be seen even in the language I just used: my use of the word “linear” necessarily operates within a spatio-visual metaphor for time, that is, events somehow precede and follow each other as though existing independently. As a result, we imagine them as though we can see them in a clear progression, with events discretely separated yet causally related. As Hollington explains, Bergson exposed the fallacy of such discrete spatial representations of time, explaining events as “imaginary spatial points in the uninterrupted, indistinguishable flow of time” (431). The representation of time via spatial metaphors is not useless, then, but is only useful insofar as it is constantly kept in mind as a metaphor, one that interrupts and alters the immeasurable and elastic way time really works. The non-event, then, usefully signals an intellectual shift in thinking about temporality. Frustrated plotlines and anticlimaxes are literary symptoms of an endemic shift in understanding time. After

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<sup>6</sup> For more about the Modern reconfiguration of the 19<sup>th</sup> century *bildungsroman* see Esty, Jed, “Virginia Woolf’s Colony.” *Modernism and Colonialism*. Eds. Begam, Richard and Michael Valdez Moses. Durham: Duke UP, 2007. 70-90. Print.

<sup>7</sup> On non-events, see Hollington 430. He gives as particularly instructive examples pretty much everything in *Waiting for Godot* and Stephen Dedalus’s not staying with Bloom at Eccles Street at the end of *Ulysses*.

this shift, time is significantly less distinct, a change that deeply troubles causality. If nothing else, it is important to note that this makes both literary forms (like the *bildungsroman*) and subjectivity based on reactionary stances toward the past considerably more troubled. Hollington characterizes modernist technique as reactionary, and that idea largely seems to make sense, especially in terms of the dominant paradigm. What we can see in Hollington—that he himself would likely not suggest—is that the shift in temporality signals deeper shifts than solely those of literary technique. While we doubtlessly do see such patterns emerge, we also see more fundamental changes—those that change the very structure of selfhood—as we will later examine in both *Orlando* and *To the Lighthouse*.

For Hollington, one of the core features of modernism as a result of an altered sense of temporality is “an ironic distrust of all absolutes, including those of temporal or spatial form” (432). Ambivalence, then, characterizes Hollington’s reading of *Ulysses*, which he argues against interpreting as a coherent, mythical narrative that stands outside of (or transcendent of) time. Instead, he argues that the myth-making project, too, is ambivalent. His reading, though flawed, is interesting enough to address in detail, only because the point on which he errs most helps explain the utility of backward subjectivity as a burgeoning theoretical tool. In rereading Hollington’s argument here, I mean to point out precisely how this model of subjectivity can prove theoretically useful, especially in the face of a text that presents such a complicated picture of time. While it is a somewhat secondary concern of mine, a brief examination of the Eumaeus chapter of

*Ulysses* ultimately gives us a fuller understanding of how to deploy backward subjectivity as a theoretical tool.

Hollington describes the proliferation of coincidences and minutiae in *Ulysses* as a consciousness “of *potential* significance,” of the ways in which petty details are only a coincidence away from being loaded with significance (438). For Hollington, repetition loads details with mythical significance but also the potential for arbitrary—and even comic—triviality. The details themselves, regardless of whether or not they are repeated, beg to be catalogued and repeatedly pored over, even if it turns out that the reader is cross-referencing lists of bathhouses and butcher shops rather than Biblical passages and historical figures. This view is useful but reductive in some respects, especially considered in close relation to *Ulysses*. The interesting point that humorous language is frequent in Joyce is well made, but the conclusion that such language necessarily makes the confluence of detail ambivalent does not follow; humor does not undermine metaphorical language so simply. The language connecting Leopold Bloom to Charles Stuart Parnell that he describes in *Eumaeus*, for example, is not the “flims[y]...recurrence” Hollington claims, even where it is humorous; the glib dismissal of a “weary” parallel constructed of “supposed relationships” is not particularly attentive to the complexities of the chapter and moreover, isn’t critically useful (440). A reading of *Eumaeus* considering Leopold Bloom as a backward subject would understand his identity as imbued with, even contingent on the history that the language invokes seemingly at random. The reading, then, would give us would be an elaboration rather than a dismissal of the “inexactness” and humorousness of Bloom’s “mythic” analogues in “Odysseus, Christ, Parnell, Moses” and “Rip Van Winkle” (*ibid*). It is as if Hollington

gathered all of the right parts, but put them together all wrong; his attention to Bergson ought to prompt an explanation of how identification and time function coextensively in modern texts rather than a dismissal of the confluences that characterize that relationship. Backward subjectivity, that is, apprehends just such those linguistic confluences and allusions as constructive of the character they are attached to. Just as Hyde's poet constructs himself ancestrally, so we can construct Bloom's subjectivity as fundamentally part of those figures in an elastic temporality that allows Christ, Parnell and Odysseus to be present *in* Bloom in June 1904. As the language dips and dodges about such allusions, a reading that understands the subject in modernity going backward understands that the ontological instability inaugurated by Bergsonian philosophy and suggested by modernist literary experimentation carries even into how identity works. Experiments with time, that is, help to disturb and open up the limits of selfhood.

In his book *The Consequences of Modernity*, Anthony Giddens offers an account of the conditions under which modernism comes into existence. While broadly contrasting with our account of modernist temporality, Giddens's text does offer some useful points in common with the goal of this paper. While Giddens theorizes a relationship between literary dynamism and the reification of time, I am interested in the inverse question: what emerges when time becomes elastic? As Jessica Berman points usefully points out in summarizing his text, Giddens "hinges his theory of modernity on the disjuncture of time and space" (Berman 285). For Giddens, premodernity is characterized by an intimate relationship between "when" and "where," so that time was calculated (such as with a calendar or even mechanically with a clock) but not uniform across "social organization[s] of time" (Giddens 17-8). Giddens identifies international

modes of dating—i.e., sharing *a* year across cultures, even those non-Christian or not even culturally synchronized with the Gregorian Calendar—as evidence of a social reification of time, one that produces an independent concept that allows (eventually) for “the extreme dynamism of modernity” (20). The reification and social normalization of time Giddens describes forces the past into the past, disallowing it from being constitutive of a modern subject. Giddens does not unmake the past, but he does bring us back to a linear model of time that enables oppositionalism more than it does porousness.

Giddens essentially proposes a theory of temporality and modernism that works excellently with the dominant paradigm of modernist subjectivity. By doing so, he describes a theory of time that allows the oppositional subject to experience the past as having passed. This conceptualization of the connection between time and subject is important to the informing critical assumptions that this project fundamentally makes: even though Giddens approaches it from a different angle, he still emphasizes the strong link between identity and temporality. Giddens gives us a critical account of how temporality interacts with the oppositional paradigm: reified time results in a worldview in which the past can be experienced as—to paint with broad strokes—ossified and irrelevant. What focusing on temporality gives us, then, is a connection between literary technique and conceptions of subjectivity. Even Giddens points this out: modernist experimentation only emerges under a certain conditions, and a reified sense of temporality is a key one of those.

If Giddens directs us, then, toward a temporal understanding of the archetypical subject-position in modernity, I mean to propose a different understanding of temporality that supports the revision of identity that the backward subject inaugurates. What

supports any understanding of backward subjectivity, that is, is a sense of temporal elasticity, informed—at least indirectly—by Bergson’s shift away from the spatio-linear metaphor for time. Elastic temporality, as we see in both the stretched timeline of *Orlando* and the collapsing of time in *To the Lighthouse*, produces an elastic self.

#### IV: Time Stretches: Accretions and Identity

Moving away, now, from the definitional project of this piece, we turn first to *Orlando* and, briefly, to Woolf’s nonfiction and later to *To the Lighthouse* as catalysts for eliciting a working model of the concept. In so doing, I hope to further complicate my working definition of the backward subject. In this section, I frequently give readings of *Orlando* that include parallels to *A Room of One’s Own* in order to draw our attention to yet another characteristic of the model of subjectivity this paper examines, the specific instance of backward subjectivity we see in creator-characters. By attending to Woolf’s nonfiction in this section in addition to the novel, my argument highlights the importance of the gendered literary history in which Woolf sets the backward subject.

By way of counterpoint to an argument that I roughly made above, I want to begin this section by returning to Woolf’s essay “Modern Fiction,” which I earlier argued gives us a glimpse of the oppositional subject. By rereading it now, we can get a sense for the complexity of the revision that Woolf proposes in constructing subjectivity differently. However, the text presents a difficulty even from the very beginning: Woolf toys with the temptation of a wholesale rejection of all preceding literature. “It is difficult,” she points out, “not to take it for granted that the modern practice of the art [of fiction] is somehow an improvement upon the old” (739). That toying is about more than her qualified

phrasing: everything about Woolf's tone here is notoriously difficult to pin down. Through her other texts<sup>8</sup> we know well her reverence for Austen, so it seems safe to take the premise that the old "masterpieces certainly have a strange air of simplicity" at least somewhat in jest (*ibid*). Ultimately, she admits that her "quarrel, then, is not with the classics," leaving us with a few different rhetorical registers to sort out (*ibid*). The tonal progression from flippantly bold to the cool admission of the influence of the classics largely fits the oppositionalist archetype: the out-of-the-gate rhetoric—even in joking—does not quite match up with the more considered, measured assessment of things, especially where revered "classics" are involved.

Indeed, the entirety of Woolf's quarrel in the very short essay is with her contemporaries and immediate Victorian (or Edwardian) predecessors. What Woolf ultimately primarily advocates for is not, however, a foreclosure of anything. She simultaneously breaks with the oppositional archetype and conforms to it when she argues for an aesthetic opening up, leaving us with a new, revised position for the creator-subject. Although we can see conformity in her exhaustion with and opposition to the writing that immediately precedes and surrounds her, her resultant aesthetic conclusion is amorphous and broadly permissive: "everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought" (742, 744). Woolf refuses to foreclose any aesthetic avenue, a breadth that crucially characterizes the backward subject. Of course, Woolf is arguing here about aesthetics in fiction, but the language is distinctly cast as human: "feeling," "thought," "brain and spirit" make up the "stuff of fiction," so that soul and aesthetics are actually quite closely tied together, hence the spiritualist epithet for the

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<sup>8</sup> See *A Room*, p. 74

most admirable authors. What I am arguing about “Modern Fiction,” goes a little further, though: what Woolf sees as an aesthetic choice, I cannot help but see (especially because of the link between aesthetics and sensual perception) as a description of a process of identity-building. Good fiction, in this light, comes from a broad conflation and co-implication of self with the outside world. To return to G.M. Hyde’s description of the poet’s voice, Woolf’s ideal fictive voice not only speaks as “myself and my race, my race and its past,” but beyond that to include the sensory dimension of such a diversity of the self (Hyde 339). The force of felt experience draws what would otherwise be outside the self *into* the realm of thought and feeling that characterizes spiritualist fiction, an amorphousness of subjective limits that blurs the ontological boundaries of the self.

It’s important to point out that Woolf’s argument does not seek to make anything new out of whole cloth, which is the aspect of revision that her approach to subjectivity entails. Instead, she wants to “break” and “bully” the existing model of fiction, “*as well as honor and love her*” (“Modern Fiction” 744, emphasis mine). The similarity to Donne’s *Holy Sonnet XIV* is telling: it is as if even in seeking to remake fiction, Woolf can’t escape the draw of literary history. In “Modern Fiction,” there is from one angle the urge to be rid of the influence that once asked God to “break, blow, burn, and make me new,” and from another, the veneration of it as classic. The key difference, though, is that Woolf is anything but passive: rather than waiting around for divine intervention to repair her faith, Woolf rushes in headfirst to aid her ailing numen.

By way of beginning with *Orlando*, I would like to describe two (generally) separate general senses of reading the book, both of which are important to keep in mind;

used with each other, they can produce slippages and interesting problems. Both senses orbit around an attempt to understand the fantastic elements of the text, particularly as the plot draws to a close. Essentially, the interpretive question is about whether to accept the change in Orlando's sex and her/his long life as a simple—and therefore fantastic—fact. The majority of the text gives us no reason to doubt this: young man Orlando changes to young woman Orlando directly and with notable understatement. As we near the end of the text, though, we find plenty of signals that imply an allegorical reading: life span becomes a slippery proposition rather than a fact, there are some people “we know to be dead, though they walk among us” and some “not yet born” and some like Orlando “hundreds of years old though they call themselves thirty-six” (*Orlando* 305). “Nothing more quickly disorders” the span of someone's life, we are reminded, “than contact with any of the arts,” so that quite suddenly we are forced to at least entertain the possibility that the entire text preceding is a long conceit for a life lived in literature (306). The latter is well-supported by the text's subtitle “A Biography” as well as the dedication and pictures throughout of Vita Sackville-West: if we go along with a biographical reading, we must look at Vita/Orlando as long-lived and sex-changed through her aristocratic ancestry and her “contact with the arts.” Both readings are useful but it is difficult to deny the force of the Vita-informed reading that figures the text as an obvious allegory for reading—or at least for cultural experience—and that particular reading also best contributes to a model of backward subjectivity.

In reading *Orlando* as largely metaphorical, there is a palpable sense of weight. Experiences in the present bear the weight of history through common imagery. As Orlando walks around a store in 1928, she's burdened by images from her past, musing

that “nothing is any longer one thing. I take up a handbag and I think of an old bumboat woman frozen in the ice” from three hundred years ago (305). Her perceptual experience of life becomes, by the twentieth century, one built up from accretions: associations, memories, and images that haunt her to the point of tears, a haunting we can imagine both as a literal too-long life and also as the pain of being wrapped up in books. In the passage I quote from above, people’s lives are quantified in years as a figure of the degree to which they truly live, and the immediate corollary of “contact with any of the arts” is instructive: the combined ideas of life span and quality are loaded with a very certain set of values, a literary and artistic history that can make you the walking dead, ten times your own age, or—for some—“precisely the sixty-eight or seventy-two years allotted them on the tombstone” (*ibid*). This is a powerful realization about the way that the text sees modern subject always speaking as more-than-one<sup>9</sup> and *Orlando* reveals the unpleasant edge that may have. Being an accretion of literary and personal history can be deeply painful, while not having any of those accretions can be profoundly emptying. The sadness that *Orlando* suggests is tricky, because we are clearly meant to understand it as somehow better, at least, than the uncultured lives of the walking dead but there is still not necessarily anything to be happy about in such a construction.

The seriousness of whatever sadness is in the text is difficult to gauge: Orlando’s tears and revelry about “Persian mountains” cause her to “lose her shopping list and start home without the sardines, the bath salts or the boots”—no great disaster, for sure (305-6). At the same time, though, her return to her ancestral home is met with feelings of ambivalence. Her house, “no longer hers entirely,” feels alien, “belong[s] to time now; to

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<sup>9</sup> Again, “myself and my race, my race and its past” (Hyde 339).

history” and is populated with locked glass cases and “printed notices” asking visitors not to touch things (318). Even so, we find out that “she, who believed in no immortality, could not help feeling that her soul would come and go forever with the reds on the panels and the greens on the sofa” (317). While she may not *believe* in any immortality, its presence is palpable. If a handbag in a London store touches off a painful memory, we are only left to imagine the similarly burdensome more-than-objects that pile up in home like that, invoking a peculiar but definite sense of some sort of immortality. Orlando’s return to her ancestral home is marked with alienation, but also with what I can only read as reverence and contentment. The “panels” and “sofa” themselves do not seem significant; indeed, none of the many fine *objets d’art* locked away behind glass seem to be objects of reverence. Instead, the tones and hues of the home, its broadest strokes rather than its seemingly most valuable contents, conjure an apparent satisfaction that, as both the temporal implication of “immortality” and the mention of the “soul” suggest, is ancestral in nature. Orlando’s experience of the house is enabled by the combination of a sense of elastic temporality and an identificatory link between the emotional, internal “soul” and the relatively mundane hues of the home. Her homecoming is backward by virtue of the breakdown of the ontological limits of self that a dynamic understanding of time licenses.

Examining the backward subject in *Orlando* gives us, then, an odd mix of comfort and alienation, an ambivalence that reminds us that the modern subject that speaks as more-than-“I,” constructed by an intimacy between an individualist self and a collective (especially literary) history, might very well be one constructed by a painful history. Contextualizing the backward subject in terms of pain helps us to understand Woolf’s

revision of the dominant oppositionalist paradigm of subjectivity: pain guides us away from conceptualizing a relationship to the past as either acceptance or rejection. What we have instead is an encompassing bond that contains both the icy, museum feel of alienation and the warmth—the red panels and green sofas, as it were—of comfort and connection. Backward subjectivity navigates the acceptance/rejection binary by acknowledging the necessary involvement of pain in identity formation. By acknowledging pain and exclusion, Woolf’s revised subjectivity gets to have it both ways, but not without cost: she can take advantage of the unique historical moment that modernity presents in order to stand against the injustices of an exclusionary past while integrating with what’s valuable in that past. The cost is, as I discuss later, that pain is also integrated. Regardless, this coimplication runs so deep, in fact, that (as we see in *Orlando*) there is no differentiation between literal personal history and an encounter through reading: throughout the text they are one and the same.

The ancestry throughout *Orlando* is primarily notable because it appears to be the privilege of the wealthy, which is of course complicated by the fact that so much of the text is based on Woolf’s friend and sometimes-lover Vita Sackville-West<sup>10</sup>. Knole, the house Vita grew up in, formed the basis for the massive estate in the text, and even though Woolf “would always associate Vita with her house and ancestry,” which was “as much the inspiration for *Orlando* as Vita was herself” (Lee 481), that association was not necessarily always a positive one. For Woolf, Knole was a little troubling, as she herself once wrote: “There is Knole, capable of housing all the desperate poor of Judd Street, & with only that one solitary earl in the kernel” (qtd. in Lee 490). The image is recognizable

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<sup>10</sup> q.v. Lee, *Virginia Woolf*.

from the text: Orlando is frequently alone in his/her estate, and it naturally invokes the passage earlier about her alienation upon returning in 1928. Woolf is doubtlessly, then, skewering the aristocratic privilege of Orlando/Vita, so it is tempting to look at Orlando as a satirical figure. As a young man, his melodramatic writing is too aristocratic to be any good, which we see in another skewering, Nick Green's cruel mockery of his drama "the Death of Hercules," which is "wordy and bombastic in the extreme" (95). I include these examples to point out that Woolf is not just making harmless jokes here and there, but is at least fairly committed to a satire of the upper classes. What makes these complications useful for thinking about a concept of ancestral subjectivity is that the text as a whole seems to operate largely on an ancestral formation of the main character, an operation that is not actually interrupted by the introduction of complicating factors like satire. Orlando certainly remains sympathetic, and even when the text incorporates pain into the burden carried by Orlando, it clearly values the sort of life Orlando has lived (i.e., a life of reading and the arts), even if only at the basest value of being *not* the kind of person who is dead even though he is walking among us.

We find a similar pattern in the way that the text is gendered, with the literary history through the entire text up until 1928 unequivocally gendered male. The lists of authors that Orlando admires as a young man—"Shakespeare, Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Browne, Donne"—and even the Swift, Pope and Addison she (barely) tolerates as a woman in the eighteenth century both reflect a distinct maleness (88). The literary canon necessarily involves a privileging of men-as-authors that jarringly affects her acceptance by the time she becomes a woman, something we see especially well in her naïveté about her place among the wits:

A woman knows very well that, though a wit sends her poems, praises her judgment, solicits her criticism, and drinks her tea, this by no means signifies that he respects her opinions, admires her understanding, or will refuse, though the rapier is denied him, to run her through the body with his pen. (214)

While a woman does know all that very well, Orlando is *not* a regular woman, and by virtue of her former state, the sting of betrayal is even harsher. The text highlights a particularly literary sense of women's subjugation in moments like this, and points implicitly to the twenties as an especially unique historical moment in removing that subjugation. And indeed, as Orlando comes into the present of the text, October 1928, we see Woolf's familiar idea bubble up that "there was something definite and distinct about the age...a distraction, a desperation" (298), and in that privileging we certainly see an element of conventional modernism. Even if the age *is* desperate, it's special; this sort of historical exceptionalism is conventional and it is doubtlessly a force throughout *Orlando*: the gendered literary history that operates throughout the text is broken down somewhat by the 1920s, a time when Orlando can drive about wildly in a car and the narrator can sense something special going on in the twentieth century. Perhaps the best textual illustration of this is the way that Orlando re-encounters Nick Greene in the nineteenth century and the way that the "The Oak Tree" changes. After being printed and mildly praised by the hypocritical critic, Orlando awakens into the twentieth century to "fame! Seven editions. A Prize. Photographs in the evening papers," praise she is suddenly able to receive for her old poem and her winning of "The Burdett Coutts Memorial Prize" (312). Offstage, her poem changes from the hidden thoughts of a bombastic boy to a curiosity, and eventually only in the 1920s is it possible for her to reach fame as a result of it. This progression illustrates exactly why the twentieth century

merits historical exceptionalism in the text: it finally reveals some fissures in the male dominion of literary history.

What complicates a conventional reading that gives full weight to that historical exceptionalism, though, is the provenance of the poem itself. It originally comes from Orlando the young man, and even though he was clearly not part of the literary canon in his time, he still involved himself with writers, specifically by supporting them financially. The poem, the one piece of literature Orlando retains over the years, changes with time and so in both remaining and metamorphosing is also analogous to Orlando him/herself: it is a relic built by accretions over the course of centuries, it is inseparably “both-and,” both new and old, both feminine and masculine, both remaining and altered. Orlando’s final return home and her last interactions with the poem bear out an interesting alternative, one that helps to illustrate what sort of space backward subjectivity works in. When a copy of “The Oak Tree” comes out of her pocket right under the tree that inspired the poem, Orlando at first intends to bury it with an admittedly “silly” eulogy (324). Instead, she reflects that the fame, the prize and money it has earned her are all irrelevant: “What has praise and fame to do with poetry? What has seven editions (the book had already gone into no less) got to do with the value of it? Was not poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice?” (325). As much as the twentieth century is uniquely able to smash the dominance that harmed Orlando’s life earlier in the text, its arrival is not the end of the story, as it were. Indeed, the twentieth century seems to be “as ill suited as could be to” poetry (*ibid*). Far from trusting the moments in which the text orients us toward its present as exceptional, we must understand even the embrace of the dawning of the 1900s as ambivalent. The same

pragmatic technological and cultural developments that allow women into the realm of literary history—newspapers, the critical review press, industrial printing—are also dangerous to the essence of poetry as a whole. The good-with-bad pairing should be familiar by now; it is the same version of history that builds Orlando through accretions of loss (loves lost, betrayals) as well as of gain (Shelmerdine & her son). In that case, a critical conversation between *Orlando* and backward subjectivity gives us not just the basic revision of the individualist modernist, but the stipulation that that revision necessarily involves absorbing into the self not just a history of which one is proud, but also one that causes pain. Destabilizing the ontological limits of self, that is, is not code for cherry-picking an identity that is free of injustice or pain. Quite the contrary: backward subjectivity asks of us a porousness of identity that commits to embracing responsibility for an exclusionary and frequently unjust past. So, when Orlando speaks from the vantage-point of modernity, not only is she speaking as a self built up of accretions from Elizabethan, eighteenth century, Victorian and modern literature and history, but specifically as a self *always built up from both the value and the pain* in a gendered literary history. Instead of allowing us to dispense with the past when it gets painful, Woolf asks us to do the difficult job of existing *in* and *with* the world we have, standing against injustice when appropriate but also understanding that an individual-only approach is never going to be anything more than the oppositionalist “crying in the wilderness” (Loy 330). Backward subjectivity, it seems, carries with it an ethical drive: to whatever degree the ontological instability it initiates might be considered self-obliterating, but it asks us to attend to what Heather Love calls the “excluded, denigrated or superseded others” that progress inevitably depends on (5). In so doing, Woolf’s

revision of modernist subjectivity proposes self-fashioning that maintains the avant-gardist edge, but does not need to denigrate, exclude or supersede others because it makes no pretention to progress. The backward subject operates in a highly elastic understanding of time—as we have seen in *Orlando*—in order to use the real advantages of modernity to redress the injustices of a collective history built on denigration and exclusion.

#### V: Time Collapses

In order to bring about a conclusion, I feel the need to go—where else?—backwards. As she struggles to bring her painting to completion, Lily Briscoe observes that “so much depends, then...upon distance,” and of course, in her painting and throughout this project, that holds true (*TL* 284). The *kind* of distance that matters in *To the Lighthouse*, though, is different from that in *Orlando*. In the latter, we looked at accretions over the course of a fantastically long life that form a backward subject; distance is a figure for a breadth of experience that is drawn into the self as identification. In *To the Lighthouse*, however, distances are shorter: the scale is human, rather than epochal, and scale is not the only difference. Distance, particularly in time rather than in space, is significant throughout *To the Lighthouse* because it is compressed rather than stretched to its limits; despite the fact that the two texts are informed by different temporal experiments, they are both invested in a reimagining of subjectivity primarily through those two different approaches to time. In this section, I want to examine some manifestations of the temporal compression that characterizes *To the Lighthouse*, first in some generalized and stylistic examples, and then in Lily’s progress through her painting.

As a foundation for this final section, I would first like to attend to the elasticity of time that characterizes the text. Whereas in *Orlando* the unconventional treatment of temporality seems relatively obvious, it is not quite so in *To the Lighthouse*. Of course, the second section of the book, “Time Passes,” signals to readers that *something* is going on, but what that is might not be self-evidently clear, so it seems necessary to lay out some of the temporal underpinnings of the argument that this section makes. *To the Lighthouse* takes place over the course of two days that are roughly a decade apart. That decade, the void in the text when “time passes,” includes the Great War and the deaths of Mrs. Ramsay, as well as Andrew and Prue Ramsay. Although the technique in “Time Passes” is different than what we see in *Orlando*, the result is much the same: we only need to think back to Giddens and his reified time to realize precisely how intense the departure from a normative temporality is here. Night falls as the section starts and darkness appears to spread as usual throughout a house, except that it suddenly accelerates, and the blackness becomes a void-like motif as “night, however, succeeds to night” and the scale of time passing shifts from diurnal to seasonal: “night after night, summer and winter, the torment of storms, the arrow-like stillness of fine weather, held their court without interference” (202). Time is unstoppable here, but not exactly reified: it gains and loses speed, proceeds indifferently to the human and structural entropy that its passage necessitates. Rather than seeing that standard, mathematical time that Giddens associates with modernity, in the dialectical construction between bracketed human scale tragedies and triumphs—Mr. Carmichael’s poetry has “an unexpected success” because of the war (202); Mrs. Ramsay dies “rather suddenly” and without any drama (194)—and in the seasonal or annual scale of time’s motion and the house we can observe an

excellent instance of the temporal elasticity inaugurated by Bergson. Describing the dialectical construction of main- and bracketed-text as parallel timelines doesn't at all do justice to the lack of causality or even correspondence between the two. Rather, the events in "Time Passes" are scattered in the void, sequenced but not connected, sped up but unevenly so. The style that characterizes the rest of *To the Lighthouse*—on which more later—disappears entirely, compressing the text into a murky and quickly-moving present. Still, what emerges is a sense of time as drastically subjective: the house hurdles through time at a breakneck pace, dogged by decay, only when unoccupied. Which is to say that *To the Lighthouse* flatly rejects the premise of reified time; for this text, time does *not* pass the same in all places, but passes differently based on the presence of a subject to interact with its passage. Time and the subject, in this sense, are consubstantial: the two mutually constitute each other, which sets us up with a vastly subjective temporality and, even more importantly, a widely capacious subjectivity.

This link between temporal experimentation in the formal characteristics of the text and the theorization of subject persists even into the prose style of the rest of the text. If "Time Passes" shows us a hyper-compressed and sped-up sense of time, the rest of the text retains background levels of the same informing idea. The majority of *To the Lighthouse* has a slightly compressed style: distinctions between past and present, memory, speech, and wandering thoughts are all glossed over. All of these disparate elements, that is, are brought into a textual present. As Mrs. Ramsay reads to James, for instance, she slips after a moment into "reading and thinking, quite easily, both at the same time" (87). While plot-level action continues, then, with Mrs. Ramsay reading, we launch into meditations on Minta, memories and hopes for her children, her anxieties, all

in a jumbled constant sequence: “was she not forgetting how strongly she influenced people? Marriage needed—oh, all sorts of qualities (the bill for the greenhouse would be fifty pounds); one—she need not name it—that was essential” (93). Concerns about her pressure on Minta here mix with the quotidian financial concern and abstract thoughts about the nature of companionship in a compressed form. We can experience this textual present as a moment that flattens out the distinctions between memory, abstraction and passing concern: everything is pressed into the forefront. This compression, while slightly different than that in “Time Passes,” is analogous to the backward subject in that it destabilizes the limits of what qualifies as present. The textual form performs a compression of memory with action that is congruous to the backward subject’s porousness of identity and ancestry. The passage quoted above obviously demonstrates how memory works in the classic modernist stream-of-consciousness style, but my reading pushes further than that. Analyzing such a passage in terms of backward subjectivity allows us to consider the flashes of memory and anxiety we see here as more important than we might normally. Instead of discounting any one flash as a momentary concern, *To the Lighthouse* and indeed the backward model of subjectivity both demand of us intense inclusivity. Just as the text is broadly inclusive, pulling action, thought, memory, anxiety and hope into the present, so is the model of subjectivity that we can see in this text: there is a consistency of inclusion, of understanding the breadth of subjective experience as integral to defining the self.

Perhaps this is best drawn out by looking now at Lily Briscoe, our central character who, much like Orlando, struggles with artistic production while navigating the relationship between identity and temporality. For Lily, the ancestry in identity is even

more apparent than it is for Orlando. Lily's situation at the cusp of a breakdown in an exclusionary literary history penetrates her sense of self. Across the void of time passing, Lily brings to the Isle of Skye a dense subjectivity that bears history with it.

Lily's art itself adds further depth to this characterization. In reference to her painting, she tells William Bankes that she "had made no attempt at likeness"; the purple triangular shape that signifies Mrs. Ramsay reading to James is "not of them"—not in the sense of a mimetic representation, that is (81). It is also abundantly clear that Lily is used to answering such questions: "she knew" the "objection" that "no one could tell it for a human shape" before he has a chance to raise it (*ibid*). We get the sense that Lily Briscoe is more than used to being harangued for her artistic technique; her answers are patient and polite and she does her best to express the mechanical and compositional decisions that such shapes reflect:

a mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence. A light here required a shadow there. ...It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left...She stopped; she did not want to bore him; she took the canvas lightly off the easel. (81-3)

Lily's description of her art reveals a sensibility both experimental and accommodating: without ever wavering about the merits of her representational strategies or her skill as a painter, she takes an accommodating approach to explaining the lack of mimesis on her canvas. She reduces shapes not because she has the right as a Creative Genius (as the Futurists would put it) but because it is necessary in the balance of object and color and also because it can be done "without irreverence." Lily's painting is distinctly that of modernity: she eschews the representational practice that Bankes admits is his "prejudic[e]," but she also maintains the goal of "reverenc[ing]" her subjects (81-2). For

Lily, that reverence can be done in a different register, a “tribute” that takes a form other than that, seen in one way, distinctly opposes its immediate artistic predecessors. Her painting participates in the exceptional moment of modernity by experimenting formally while also avoiding the arbitrary artistic *fiat* that characterizes many such experiments: Lily’s work is both radical and thoughtful—individualistic and yet reverent, which is to say, not at all exclusionary.

We might surmise that Lily’s art, then, performs her backward subjectivity—and with good cause. After revealing the unfinished painting to Bankes, Lily recognizes gravity in that aesthetic exchange: “but it had been seen; it had been taken from her. This man had shared with her something profound and intimate” (83). Art, that is, is a vehicle for intimacy. Lily’s art bears the analytical weight of reading it as identity precisely because the act of allowing it to be seen pushes her further than she had expected it would into the realm of intimacy. Through the interface of her art, Lily enters a distinctly inclusive world, fueled by

a power which she had not suspected—that one could walk away down the long gallery not alone any more but arm in arm with somebody—the strangest feeling in the world and the most exhilarating (83)

Leaving aside the aesthetics of the piece itself for a moment, the human engagement of seeing and talking about her canvas provides Lily with a euphoric feeling of intimacy. The intimate act of sharing scares her, something is “taken from her,” but something is also gained, the “exhilarat[ion]” of human connection surprises Lily. Artistic creation, in other words, offers the perfect space for backward subjectivity to operate: its practice of identification is both intimate and individualistic. Lily, working through her struggles with the piece, experiences “a power” in the world “which she had not suspected”: a

pleasurable disturbance of the boundaries of self. Her euphoric walk down that gallery, that is, is an experience of intimacy in that it demonstrates the exhilarating vulnerability of exposure: by expanding the limits of the self, testing this backward subjectivity, Lily exposes herself to a world that might take from her, but also experiences the “strangest feeling in the world,” the intimacy that such a destabilization of identity necessitates. As we saw in *Orlando*, the backward subject risks and includes a certain level of pain: it is not a model that denies the vulnerability it implies, and for Lily that pain is first the exhilaration of exposure, and second that of the gendered world of cultural production.

I titled this section “Time Collapses” because in *To the Lighthouse*, time seems to fold inward rather than stretching outward. The two days that make up the majority of the book are, in many ways, quite similar, except of course for the titular trip to the lighthouse. Despite all that happens in “Time Passes,” Lily is still stuck with the same compositional problem in her painting in the final section as she is in the first. And, crucially, despite the fact that now she is alone watching a much-smaller Ramsay family in the distance, she never seems it. I say that “time collapses” in *To the Lighthouse* because everyone who is “distant”—either dead or literally far-off—seems to be carried into the perpetual present of Lily’s struggle to paint. Mrs. Ramsay, whose death weighs heavily on Lily, is one such figure. While thinking about her death, Lily audibly cries out her name, giving voice to her “pain” and “tears,” and eventually, as that emotion begins to ebb, she notices, “mysteriously,”

a sense of some one there, of Mrs. Ramsay, relieved for a moment of the weight that the world has put on her, staying lightly by her side and then (for this was Mrs. Ramsay in all her beauty) raising to her forehead a wreath of white flowers with which she went. Lily squeezed her tubes again. She attacked that problem of the hedge. (269)

The vision Lily has is “strange” in its clarity, it “console[s]” her, we find out as it develops (269-70). Mrs. Ramsay, in a very real textual way, is not at all gone, is—to us as readers, especially—just as real as ever: a passing image. The language in which it is cast is important, too: the sense is “of some one *there*”: Lily is not simply recalling Mrs. Ramsay in a moment of pleasurable recollection, there is a palpability about this moment that matters. Lily’s vision also does not seem to be a memory of Mrs. Ramsay in that the features of the vision, her ethereality and the white flowers, suggest something of the heavenly rather than anything from the first section of the text. Significantly, Lily is immediately inspired to return to her work in the painting. Not only is this significant because the painting includes Mrs. Ramsay—whose image she may well be trying to balance out with the hedge, if we mentally reconstruct the image—but also because, as we saw above with William Bankes, painting has an intimate connection to interpersonal intimacy. If we think of Lily’s canvas as a performance or an instantiation of backward subjectivity, then her immediate attention to it here suggests that her vision of Mrs. Ramsay is indeed *not* a memory, but a crucial bearing-along-with: much like Orlando, Lily cannot help but carry history, people, experiences around with her. To put it differently, the vision of Mrs. Ramsay lets us see in action Lily’s ontological instability of self as well as her modernist individualism: her role as artistic visionary and her more-than-one voice<sup>11</sup> collide here in a moment that compresses past and vision into a present of artistic creation.

Just as with *Orlando*, however, not all of these collisions are pleasurable in *To the Lighthouse*; the backward subject-position is at least as much about subsuming a history

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<sup>11</sup> Yet again, I am referring to G.M. Hyde’s formulation (339).

of violence or exclusion into the self as it is about experiencing intimacy. Charles Tansley is, naturally, the best example in the text of this aspect of Woolf's revision of subjectivity. After butting heads with Charles somewhat in "The Window," Lily first sits down in "The Lighthouse" to paint only to be interrupted by the now-gone Tansley:

her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modeled it with greens and blues.

Charles Tansley used to say that, she remembered, women can't paint, can't write. (238)

The passage begins with her focusing into the painting, experiencing her artistic creation—as I have already suggested—in the context of her identity and history: the "scenes" and "names" help, in the metaphor Lily sets up, to cover the problematic space on the canvas. Quite literally, her recollection of what I have generally called the ancestral helps her work. It helps, anyway, until somewhere in that long catalogue of encounters, names, and faces, Charles Tansley comes to her consciousness, uttering across the gulf of years his forbidding mantra: "women can't paint, can't write." While Lily's recollection of Charles subsequently stimulates her to remember a pleasant memory with him—notably facilitated by Mrs. Ramsay's very presence—the interruption posed by his initial intrusion into the scene of focus persists. Indeed, Lily's focus on the piece itself does not return until much later and then again with Mrs. Ramsay's ghostly presence enabling her: "and as she dipped into the blue paint, she dipped too into the past there. Now Mrs. Ramsay got up," she remembers (256).

Doubtlessly, part of Charles Tansley's presence is disturbing: as he is pressed into Lily's present, he seems to interrupt the metaphor that introduces him. Tansley, we might gather, is not part of the fountain helping to cover the "ghastly" white space. And yet, he

is *the first* concrete name that Lily runs across in this moment of trying to attain focus. His shared presence with Mrs. Ramsay suggests that Lily carries around more than just pleasurable identifications when she returns to finish her painting. Tansley's insult provokes Lily, and reminds us of the impenetrability of a gender-biased arena of cultural production: for Lily just as for Orlando, the past cannot help but bring to mind the unique opportunity of modernity and with it, the pain of keeping that exclusionary history close. While Mrs. Ramsay inspires Lily's creative visions most directly, it remains significant that Charles—also left behind in the gulf of "Time Passes" persists into the final section of the book. The different temporal operation, collapsing or flattening, yields the same revision of subject-position: Lily is perpetually speaking—or painting—as more than "I," but as an I situated in a nexus of "names" "scenes" "memories" and "ideas" that make up a whole, multivalent self (238).

The importance of the individualist creator at the kernel of that multivalent self is crucial to maintain, however. I do not mean to argue that Woolf dispenses with the archetypal modernist mode of self-styling; after all, the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography calls Woolf the "high priestess of modernism"—and it is important to remember Woolf's preeminence in the modernist canon. The fact that *To the Lighthouse* ends with Lily's completion of her painting is significant. The piece is described not just in terms of imagery but also in terms of intent: "with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter?" (309-10). The painting is an *essai* in the French sense of the word: it is a shot at something, a formal experiment. It is about itself, an attempt maybe more at formalizing a correspondence between

“reverencing” and non-mimetic artistic practice than it is about the finished product. In this manner, we can see Woolf’s dedication to the traditional modernist paradigm: Lily Briscoe the creator is in many ways, the lonely voice that Mina Loy describes, and stressing this ground in modernism is important to maintain.

Still, the text leaves us with a parting turn away from such a clear interpretation of the matter. As Lily draws the line that completes the painting, the narrative voice declares: “It was done; it was finished,” mimicking in the second clause the exact words of Lily at realizing Mr. Ramsay had landed at the lighthouse (310). Rather than speculating to death about the lighthouse itself, I only mean to argue this about this final curious echo that ushers us out of Lily’s creative struggle: even in the moment of Lily’s greatest “intensity” (*ibid*), the moment that is easiest to read as a paradigmatic modernist creator, the text gives us a shred of something backward. This paper begins with a reference to the “razor edge” of balance that Lily tries to strike between her painting and Mr. Ramsay (287). In repeating the words between Mr. Ramsay’s landing and the final stroke of Lily’s painting, the text firmly yokes together the two, reminding us that artistic creation does not happen in a vacuum. Indeed, Lily cannot bring herself to finish until seeing Mr. Ramsay’s goal finished, and while the intimate logic of this moment is difficult to plumb, it does indicate to us a similar place in Lily’s identificatory spectrum for Mr. Ramsay. Woolf’s revision, even when subtle, insists on a new conceptualization of the subject in modernism because it strives to understand the self—especially the creator—situated in history (of which time is, naturally, a component).

As I alluded to near the end of Section IV, Woolf's revision of subjectivity perhaps carries with it an ethical imperative. Backward subjectivity, as I have framed it here, suggests first an ethics of creation: in participating in the realm of cultural production, we bear the history that precedes us, even when we might otherwise wish to put it aside in an otherwise ameliorative effort. It also suggests a problem with denying this reality: in taking an oppositionalist stand, as the Futurists do, the subject risks eradicating the fullness of a history that includes both pleasant events and obstacles. For Woolf's creator-characters, this is not even a choice: Woolf theorizes her revision of subjectivity not as a conscious self-styling but the only way of being in a world burdened by memory. The experience of ancestry, whether it is through reading (as in *Orlando*) or direct (as in *To the Lighthouse*) and whether facilitative or troublesome, forms the subject. Anthony Giddens suggests about traditional modernism that only given a specific conceptualization of time can modernism have come about. For Woolf's revision of the modern subject, only the Bergsonian innovation of elastic temporality permits the radical reimaginings of identity that such a model proposes. In generating a systematic articulation of the backward subject in Woolf's artist-novels, I hope to provide a critical tool that stimulates reimaginings of other modernist approaches to subjectivity.

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### *Vita*

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