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The Anatomy of a Moment in Virginia Woolf

By

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## **The Anatomy of a Moment in Virginia Woolf**

This paper will explore the connection in Woolf's writing between her conception of narrative as a function of human perception of time, and her use of the archetypal modernist epiphany as an organizing structure around which her stories accreted. In doing so this paper will examine a division in Woolf scholarship between two different conceptions of the modernist epiphany, as either mystical or materialist phenomena. Four different characters will be examined: Orlando, Clarissa Dalloway (both from their eponymous novels), and James Ramsay and Lily Briscoe from *To the Lighthouse*. In doing so this paper will reveal the means by which the two understandings of epiphany can be seen not as mutually exclusive interpretations but as complementary modes of the same phenomena.

## **The Modern Novel, Epiphany, and Philosophy**

For Virginia Woolf, time was not an invariable attribute of narrative but a formal problem to be solved. Her major novels can be read as variations on a theme of temporal experimentation – exploring different ways of communicating the passage of time through style. She considered this to be part of her conception of the aesthetic prerogatives of the modern novelist. As she wrote in 1919,

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? (Woolf, “Modern Fiction” 150)

In the context of “Modern Fiction” she places her description of narrative in contrast to that of materialists such as H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett, writers who Woolf criticized because their understanding of time was pervasively linear. The image of life as a series of gig lamps carries with it the association of a crowded street, with carriages assembled in military columns and moving with orderly precision down the streets of London, their lamps jiggling slightly but never betraying formation. By contrast, her “luminous halo” does not even specify source or geography. We are surrounded, inundated in light – in experience, which comes at random intervals and with little care for a novelist’s peculiar mania for order. Any assertion of order is, in her schema, “alien and external” to the lived experience of life itself, the illustration of which was the very “task of the novelist.”

Fredric Jameson states that the “high modernist thematics” are “time and temporality, the elegiac mysteries of *durée* and memory” (Jameson 1991 16). Jameson places time at the center of modernism as a way to distinguish the era from its postmodern successor. Woolf acknowledges that consciousness has a beginning and an end, but other than this most basic acceptance of temporal mechanics her “unknown and uncircumscribed spirit” seems to obey no other logic than itself. “*Durée* and memory” are the most pressing matters in Woolf’s fiction precisely because they cannot be defined according to any set materialistic conception of formal narrative convention. Her novels, therefore, each approach the problem of time from different perspectives.

*Mrs. Dalloway* is a day-book whose action is bound by the passage of morning to night. *The Waves* is also a day-book, one in which the passage of a single day is represented through the non-mechanistic motif of tide advancing and receding over the course of a day that stands as a metaphor for the lives of the six friends who comprise the book’s cast. *To the Lighthouse* presents the most unsettling challenge to our understanding of narrative time, by at least partially attempting to define its narrative movement through an articulation of *non-human* time (Scott 24). Finally, *Orlando* purports to be a biography, but rather than assuming the form of conventional biography (the “symmetrically arranged” procession of a life, perhaps), the book plays like taffy with the subjective passage of time.

Woolf considered her job as a novelist – specifically, as a *modern* novelist – to be similar to that of a psychologist, and her treatment of time a way of illustrating her ideas

of psychology. The assertion that Woolf's work is at least partly concerned with matters of psychology and the subjective description of interior states should be relatively uncontroversial – she herself described the novelist's duty as conveying the “varying . . . unknown and uncircumscribed spirit” of life itself (Woolf, “Modern Fiction” 150). In rhapsodizing the work of James Joyce, presented in this context as the prototypical writer of “modern fiction,” Woolf states: “Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fell, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness” (Woolf, “Modern Fiction” 150). Two pages later she says that, “for the moderns . . . the point of interests, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology” (Woolf, “Modern Fiction” 152). As a critic and essayist Woolf left behind a copious paper trail regarding what she saw as the function and possibility of fiction in her time, and there is a remarkable consistency between her theory and practice, at least in regards to the place of psychology in her work.<sup>1</sup> As “disconnected and incoherent” as the events of a lifetime might be, she nevertheless considered it her duty to illustrate them as they appeared.

In setting out a positive vision of what business the contemporary novelist should be about, however, she also empties the novelist's toolbox of a number of its traditional instruments. In the same passage, she posits that if the writer could write as he wished, “if he could base his work on his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style” (Woolf, “Modern Fiction” 150). As much as Woolf might desire the freedom that comes with

rejecting the formulae and conventions of popular fiction, she is also setting out a tall order for herself. Without plots, how does fiction function? This became the overriding formal challenge of her career as a novelist.

It is customary in discussing Woolf to discuss her relationship to the concept of epiphanic modernity. Woolf herself has guided this conversation, at least in part through her own words in the autobiographical study “A Sketch of the Past,” where she contrasts plentiful stretches of “non-being” – those passages of daily life that pass unremarked and unremembered by anyone – with the occasional intrusion of a “sudden violent shock,” an incident where “something happened so violently that I have remembered it all my life” (Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past” 71). Woolf goes so far as to say that it is her “shock receiving capacity,” that explains her being a writer. “I hazard the explanation,” she states, “that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it” (Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past” 72). She continues,

I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden beneath the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing beyond appearances; and I will make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. (Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past” 72)

These words, written in Spring of 1939, throughout the literature on Woolf, appearing in study after study (such as this one), presented by generations of scholars as a kind of Rosetta Stone to understanding her mysteries. The idea of modernism as a literature held together at least in part by epiphanic moments of clarity – not by orderly gig lamps, as it were, but by random firecrackers illuminating her “luminous halo” – was already well established by that moment, and was well on its way to being codified, first by Woolf’s words and very soon afterwards by Harry Levin in his 1941 study *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction*. Levin, given early access to the surviving *Stephen Hero* manuscript, traces Joyce’s use of the epiphany as a philosophical inheritance from Aquinas, albeit filtered through Stephen Daedalus’s considerable ego.<sup>2</sup> I will return to this passage later in the chapter, but it is important to note here Woolf’s insistence that her exegesis of these blows, these “revelations,” is an act of recuperation, of reconciliation, and even of pleasure. These moments reveal hidden truths, and in doing so can heal hidden trauma – a description to which the paper will return.

Woolf herself described her relation to these epiphanies as “a philosophy,” or “at any rate . . . a constant idea” (Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past” 72). Woolf’s relationship with the philosophy and philosophers of her time is contested. Although commentators universally cite her certain familiarity with whatever subjects, authors, and volumes were frequent topics of conversation at Bloomsbury, there is very little proof that she was specifically aware – or specifically reacting to – any given philosophy or philosopher in her work. Erwin Steinberg states the matter bluntly:



Over the years critics have argued that Virginia Woolf's fiction echoes the philosophy of, variously, Henri Bergson, Plato, G. E. Moore, John McTaggart, Bertrand Russell, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and C. G. Jung. Since many of these men professed widely differing philosophies, the only conclusion that can be drawn from all of these mutually contradictory claims and counterclaims is that, in her novels, Virginia Woolf does not espouse, adhere to, instantiate, or even reflect the ideas of any particular philosopher or philosophy.

In her writing, Virginia Woolf treats philosophy gingerly. (Steinberg 161)

Steinberg himself illustrates a possible connection between Woolf and G. E. Moore, based on her own comments regarding having failed to finish Moore's *Principia Ethica*, as well as Bloomsbury's general familiarity. As Judith Ryan states, "If Woolf had little knowledge of Machian or Jamesian psychology, she nonetheless had some indirect contact with related ideas through the Bloomsbury group's emphasis on the paramount importance of 'certain states of consciousness' and its interest in G. E. Moore's analysis of mind" (Ryan 865). The desire to locate concrete philosophical referents has proven a great challenge for generations of Woolf scholars invested in delineating the author's precise thought processes. Anna Benjamin points to a possible familiarity with A. N. Whitehead, and in particular his *Process and Reality*, as a possible origin for her seeming familiarity with the ideas of Dewey, Bergson, and William James, whose ideas are echoed later in my reading of *To the Lighthouse* (Benjamin 214n).

Perhaps it would be best to trust Woolf's own reticence on this matter. As she noted in *A Room of One's Own*, "philosophic words, if one has not been educated at a university, are apt to play one false" (Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* 109).

### **Orlando and the Disposition of Time**

Given the conventional understanding that *modernity* is defined by the sensation of endurance in the midst of a fractured, atomized, mechanized, and sometimes decadent present, a *modernist* can be described as an artist who sifts through this rubble for the purpose of finding some integrated, totalizing statement that transcends the contingent nature of whatever may be the defining trauma of this particular historical epoch (shoring up the ruins, so to speak) (Frye 206). Roger Griffin characterizes these kinds of epiphanic experiences as,

[Moments] that allow [the modern artist] to pierce the veils of illusion that condition 'normal' experience, either thanks to a sudden insight into the sublime dimension below (above?) the surface of everyday life, or because of a lightning flash of fearsome lucidity about the yawning void just beneath our feet. (Griffin 11)

Woolf's varied responses to this challenge in the novels of her most fertile creative period represent a series of experiments on the subject of how to create a "plotless" novel, a novel that could illustrate the depths of psychological realism while also avoiding the clichéd attributes of schematic commercial fiction. As per Paul Ricoeur, narrative is

unavoidably connected to our understanding of time: “what is ultimately at stake in the case of the structural identity of the narrative function . . . is the temporal character of human experience” (Ricoeur, 1984 3). Therefore, each attempt by Woolf at unmooring her fiction from the conventions of plot also involved unmooring her fiction from familiar conventions of narrative time. Put another way, each decision regarding the structure of her narrative was a decision regarding how to portray the human experience of time.

Without (overt) recourse to conventional organizational principles of plot, Woolf substitutes the epiphanic “moment” as the central motif around which her novels cohere. Harvena Richter defines the “moment of being” in Woolf as “the emotional unit of which the larger complex of her fiction is spun” (Richter 30): each epiphany acts as a vertice at which the novels’ multiple threads come together and gather meaning through sudden accretion, like a spider’s web built around a corner.<sup>3</sup> Woolf’s dependence on the epiphany to provide an organizing principle for her books reveals a contradiction at the core of the modernist aesthetic. In the midst of a world where the idea of absolute knowledge and moral clarity has been exploded as a harmful myth, Woolf still relies on the *idea* of absolute knowledge and moral clarity to provide the impetus for her characters’ “moments.” As John McGowan states,

[Even] when backing away from claims to possess any special knowledge, the modernists retain a dependence on revelatory moments. In part, this retention marks how habitual the formal use of epiphany had become in literature; the

moderns continue to rely on significant moments as the climaxes around which to structure their narratives and lyric meditations. But the central importance of epiphany in writers like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Marcel Proust also indicates that these modernists have not given up all desire to use art to gain access to truths hidden to ordinary perception. (McGowan 417-418)

This conflict cuts to the core of Woolf's fiction, and the lives of her characters. People, under her formulation, need to experience the intimation of something greater. They must experience the "revelation . . . of some real thing beyond appearances," peering back at them from behind the cotton wool of the ordinary. Without these moments around which to organize their selves, they lack cohesion. Whether the "truths" revealed are imaginary, glimpses into purely internal states of being, or profoundly mystical reveries, it is impossible for denizens of Woolf's universe to survive long without them.

Immortality, then, is revealed as less an endless succession of days and more a scatter of epiphanies across "a luminous halo" with no set dimensions. Given the title character's disregard for conventional temporality, it only makes sense to begin any discussion of *Orlando* with the ending:

And the twelfth stroke of midnight sounded; the twelfth stroke of midnight,  
Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen Hundred and Twenty-eight.  
(Woolf, *Orlando* 328.)

This is the conclusion to a long passage detailing Orlando's mystical moonlight reverie, the climax of a day spent in the midst of the confusion and consternation of modern

London. She is approximately 350 years old by the end of the book. Most of these years have passed surreptitiously through the duration of the novel. (Despite its status as “A Biography,” *Orlando* does a terrible job of relating any of the more quotidian details of its protagonist’s long and storied life.<sup>4</sup>)

Yet for all the temporal ambiguity of the preceding 328 pages, the book ends precisely, and not just at any random moment, but the precise moment of the book’s publication in October of 1928. The exactitude is disorienting: whereas the decades and centuries of Orlando’s life had previously passed with little consistency, suddenly the reader has arrived at a *moment*, and the sharpness of this one specific moment pops the narrative like a balloon. The story is over. We have finished with our fancy, and been abruptly deposited in the world of “clock time, the time of monumental history, the time of authority-figures – the same time!” as Paul Ricoeur describes a similar moment in the opening passages of *Mrs. Dalloway* (Ricoeur, 1990 106).

The moment of 12:00 AM, Thursday, 11 October 1928 that punctures the end of the novel does not reconcile these competing notions of time. Rather, it leaves Orlando in much the same state of conflict as she had been through the bulk of Chapter Six – trapped between the subjective, expressionistic and fluid conception of eternal time granted her by her immortality, and the immovable, all-encompassing dungeon of mechanical (read: mortal) time. Just a few pages previously, Orlando had described the feeling of timelessness that came over her as she roamed the grounds of her estate:

She looked there now, long, deeply, profoundly, and immediately the ferny path up the hill along which she was walking became not entirely a path, but partly the Serpentine; the hawthorn bushes were partly ladies and gentlemen sitting with card-cases and gold-mounted canes; the sheep were partly tall Mayfair houses; everything was partly something else . . . Except when Canute, the elk-hound, chased a rabbit and so reminded her that it must be about half-past four –it was indeed twenty-three minutes to six – she forgot the time. (Woolf, *Orlando* 323)

Orlando's experience of time has changed so drastically over the course of her life that she has become, at least intermittently, unable to discern between the past and the present, in a state of "fluid hyperconsciousness" (Stewart 83), with memories (such as walking along the banks of the Serpentine in Westminster) superimposing themselves unbidden over the act of walking across the ferny path in her backyard. "Everything was partly something else," jumbled seemingly without order into the sensation of a continuous now<sup>5</sup>, interrupted only by the intercession of Canute. Canute the elk-hound carries with him a reminder of mortal time (although Canute, being a dog, is unable to mark the ringing of the hour in as many words), fleeting for Orlando as 4:30 slides into 5:37 in the space of a single parenthetical phrase set aside inside en dashes. Like his namesake, Canute cannot stem the relentless progress of the tide. But Orlando has more options.

Orlando is trapped by the discrepancy between her personal time sense and the imposition of mechanical time. But even though this problem recurs in many of Woolf's

books, Orlando is able to survive in the face of modernity's onrush by virtue of the fact that she is *immortal*, a creature of fantasy. Whereas Clarissa Dalloway must fear "time itself," and read on the faces of her companions "the dwindling of life," Orlando doesn't know fear because she can perceive no lessening in her vitality (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 30). Her only sensation of time is the permanent state of distraction with which she faces the modern world ca. 1928.

If the epiphanic mode of modernism is built around a desire for comprehension that is stymied by the repetitive experience of everyday life, and this act of comprehension (in terms both of "understanding" and "embracing") is often discussed in terms of transcendence, the question as to whether or not the climax of *Orlando* presents a model of consummated or stymied transcendence becomes moot. Both epiphanic models coexist here without negation, outside of any dialectical relationship, because in the figure of Orlando Woolf has created a character for whom the passage of time holds no fatal possibilities.

Within the phenomenon of the modernist epiphany there are two types: the "positive" epiphany, characterized by an experience of the sublime separate from and yet momentarily glimpsed through the "cotton wool" of "everyday life," and the "negative" epiphany, characterized by a "fearsome," or frightening lucidity, an insight into profound distress. There are examples of both kinds of epiphanies, and mixtures thereof, throughout Woolf's corpus, but rather than merely taxonomizing Woolf's climaxes, it may be better simply to assert for the present that the process by which characters

experience the passage of time within the boundaries of an epiphanic moment is the movement this chapter will try to describe. That so much can occur in the space of a single moment is one of the defining mysteries of her fiction.

Therefore, it becomes possible to chart the emplotment of Woolf's novels in three dimensions by understanding three different sets of variables: the trajectory of positive and negative epiphanies; the tension between positive and negative anticipatory time (chronophilia and chronophobia); and the essentially modernist conflict between mechanical and natural modes of timekeeping.

Beginning with the final variable, Ricoeur provides a framework for thinking about the ways in which narrative is constructed as a means of making sense of the discrepancies between individual "lived" time and "cosmic" time (Ricoeur, 1988 99). This discrepancy lies at the heart of Ricoeur's three-volume opus *Time and Narrative*, which attempts to understand time as an ineradicable accompaniment to narrative.<sup>6</sup> The invention of "historical" time as a means of modulating between incompatible phenomenological (personal, idiosyncratic) and mechanical explanations of time offers a means of understanding the narrative structure of a work like *Orlando*. The conflict between the title character's amorphous perception of time and the invariable imposition of clock time is resolved in the book's final passages, as both temporalities are finally subsumed under the aegis of a far more elastic notion of historical time. This accounts for the book's seeming (and quite intentional) inadequacies as a self-proclaimed "biography": Orlando the character exists as a function of the sublimation of personal and



mechanical time senses under the auspices of history, a dialectical process that reaches its end point in the final emergence of a new phenomenon, “human” time.<sup>7 8</sup>

It is against the backdrop of the invention of “human” time that we perceive the emergence of the epiphanic moments that serve as narrative punctuation throughout Woolf’s corpus. In another much-quoted passage from “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf details the significance and sensation of epiphanic moments in her own life, in ways that echo similar descriptions in her fiction writing. Looking back to her childhood vacations in St. Ives, she describes three different and distinct moments in her own psychic development: the aftermath of a fistfight with her brother Thoby, the suicide of an acquaintance named Mr. Valpy, and a brief insight into the wholeness of a flower (Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past” 71).

These are three instances of exceptional moments. I often tell them over, or rather they come to the surface unexpectedly. But now that for the first time I have written them down, I realize something that I have never realized before. Two of these moments ended in a state of despair. The other ended, on the contrary, in a state of satisfaction. When I said about the flower, ‘That is the whole,’ I felt that I had made a discovery. I felt that I had put away in my mind something that I should go back [to], to turn over and explore. It strikes me now that this was a profound difference. It was the difference in the first place between despair and satisfaction. This difference I think arose from the fact that I was quite unable to deal with the pain of discovering that people hurt each other; that a man I had

seen had killed himself. The sense of horror held me powerless. But in the case of the flower I found a reason; and was thus able to deal with the sensation.

(Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past" 71-72)

The positive epiphany, ending "in a state of satisfaction," is an educational moment. Woolf made, in her own words, a discovery, experiencing some kind of insight that she could carry forward. She is able to "deal with the sensation" because she has found a reason to explain what she has experienced. Because this moment ends positively, Woolf is left with no chronophobic residue, instead feeling a sense of wholeness stemming from a pleasant resolution. This epiphany has healed her.

The other two epiphanies, being negative in character, leave the young Woolf confused and profoundly dissatisfied. But, tellingly, both of these moments were also educational in nature, leading to early insight into the nature of violence and self-harm. That there is no satisfactory resolution to these moments should come as no surprise. The anxiety and fear left in their wake cast a pall over her memories, conditioning her to associate violence and self-harm with dread. The epiphany has resolved her to a kind of action by instilling negative behavioral condition – essentially, placing a check on future volition distinct from excitement or resignation. She has assembled a web of negative mental associations to accompany given stimuli, in much the same way that a small child will associate heat with fire and pain after placing a hand on the stovetop.

### **James Ramsay, the Mystic, and the Naturalistic**

For everyone *besides* the immortal Orlando the question of time is quite pressing. Martin Hägglund describes the relationship between Woolf's characters to time as an essentially libidinous relation of intermingled dread and excitement, a phenomenon he refers to as *chronolibido*. Chronolibido is composed of the interplay between the forces of *chronophilia* and *chronophobia* (Hägglund 58), which we see balanced perfectly within the figure of James Ramsay on the opening page of *To the Lighthouse*.

At the beginning of *To the Lighthouse*, we are told that a trip to the lighthouse has been planned, and these words fill young James Ramsay with indescribable anticipation. But this anticipation is not without trepidation. Mrs. Ramsay is careful to posit that the trip will take place, "if it's fine tomorrow," referring to the weather. But his father is less sanguine, reminding both his son and his wife in the same breath that "it won't be fine" tomorrow (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 4). The back-and-forth between his parents sends James into an internal frenzy. He imagines seizing an ax or a poker and burying it in his father's chest.

Such were the extremes of emotion that Mr. Ramsay excited in his children's breasts by his mere presence; standing, as now, lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one, grinning sarcastically, not only with the pleasure of disillusioning his son and casting ridicule upon his wife, who was ten thousand times better in every way than he was (James thought), but also with some secret conceit at his own accuracy of judgment. What he said was true. It was always true.

(Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 4)

As Erich Auerbach describes this scene, “the violent joy which James had felt when the trip had been announced had been as violently cut short by his father’s acid observation” (Auerbach 529). The key word in Auerbach’s description is *violence*. James is only six years old: he is unable to regulate his emotions, from the extreme of violent joy at the prospect of the voyage, to the extreme of (imaginary) patricidal rage at the idea that the voyage might be scuppered. There’s nothing more immediate to the mind of a child than the promise of a special trip, the horizon of which serves as the furthest possibility of James’ understanding of futurity, and the disruption of which threatens the complete exhaustion of the child’s mental apparatus.

Because of the extremes in their ages, both Orlando and James’ understanding of futurity is hampered. Orlando’s communion with time is ecstatic and involuntary, an act of *literal* howling at the moon in the name of her dead husband Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, baring her breast to nature in defiance of the tolling of the clock to mark the arrival of the indefatigable present. James is similarly helpless, but whereas Orlando’s rite is a rite of defiance, James is forced into a position of helpless subjugation by the imposition of his father’s will. His father, by forbidding the prospect of the voyage, imposes a boundary marker across the frontier of James anticipation: rather than accepting the soft deferral of his mother’s conditional clause (“if . . . then”), he is unable to see past the hard negation of his father’s rule.

For James, the trip to the lighthouse represents as close to the ideal of a transcendental epiphany as conceivable for his six-year-old mind, but the possibility has been cast adrift – the permissiveness and open potentiality of his mother’s words negated by the pronouncements of an unsympathetic and definite father.<sup>9</sup> James has learned that every instance of chronophilic delight can be countered by chronophobic dread, and so the trip to the lighthouse becomes contested ground, no longer a certainty but a battlefield of libidinal emotion. Orlando, on the contrary, has *unlearned* this dichotomy. At the end of her story she lives in a perpetual state of infantile, ecstatic epiphany precisely because her relationship with time has been unmoored from either chronophilic or chronophobic anticipation. She anticipates *nothing*, needs *nothing*, fears *nothing*, and so lives in as close an approximation of an eternal present tense as possible. She can’t stop the passage of clock time, but neither does she note its passing. Between these two extremes lies the practicality of lived human time as endured by the majority of Woolf’s adult characters.

In the example of James Ramsay, as well as those taken from Woolf’s autobiographical writing, the moments under examination are moments torn from the subject’s youth. Their status as youthful experience renders them relatively easy to explicate, given the limited perceptual and conceptual horizons of children (and, again, Woolf’s moments are educational moments tied to specific broadenings of her conceptual horizons, so she is fully aware of the outsized significance children allot to seemingly unspectacular events). But Woolf – in tying her description of her own childhood epiphanies so closely to her description of James’ – draws an explicit parallel between the

importance of James' crystallizing thoughts and her own. Ramsay is, Woolf tells us, an exceptionally sensitive child, belonging,

[Even] at the age of six, to that great clan which cannot keep this feeling separate from that, but must let future prospects, with their joy and sorrows, cloud what is actually at hand, since to such people even in earliest childhood any turn in the wheel of sensation has the power to crystallize and transfix the moment upon which its gloom or radiance rests. (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 3)

Because James is so young, he cannot easily discriminate between present and anticipatory emotional states – similar to how Orlando's fantasy immortality unmoors her own connection to the mechanical progression of capitalist time. Both negative and positive experiences have the potential to become transfixing moments, to “crystallize,” to stamp into permanent recollection when so many others fade instantly away. The complexion of these epiphanic moments – their positive or negative character – is dictated by the chronolibidinal attitude preceding and succeeding the moment itself. An investigation of Woolf's attitude towards the ontology of epiphany offers the opportunity to reframe one of the central interpretive conflicts in modernism – that between naturalistic and mystical understandings of consciousness.

The question becomes the disposition of these moments in the context of the passage of time. There are two possibilities represented in Woolf scholarship: the first possibility, given by Jeanne Schulkind, holds that these moments are incidents of possibly mystic transcendence, whereas the second possibility, represented by Martin Hägglund,

foreswears the idea of transcendence in favor of a greater engagement with actuality. Both possibilities accept the significance of Woolf's moments uncritically, assigning these frequent epiphanies unifying status in her fiction. But the disagreement points to another inference: the "moment" itself, while remaining the basic currency throughout her fiction, becomes unrevealed as a kind of black box, an opaque space into which stimulus enters and from which reaction flows, but whose operations are invisible to the observer.

Hägglund avers that the moment's situatedness in time precludes any kind of mystical transcendence. "The power of crystallization," he states,

[Depends] on a libidinal investment in the temporal fate of the moment. Without the chronophilic hope for and chronophobic fear of what may come, there would be no radiance or gloom that could transfix the moment in memory and thus "crystallize" it. The aesthetic and affective power of this crystallization does not stem from an intimation of eternity but from the investment in a life that is susceptible to transformation and loss. If the moment is glowing with expectation or burdened by disappointment, it is because one is invested in the fate of a temporal life. Crystallization is not a matter of timeless presence but of how the moment is refracted in memory and anticipation. (Hägglund 58)

Hägglund's language communicates a deep investment in a profoundly secular reading of Woolf. In his desire to ensure that readers of Woolf will not mistake these epiphanies for "intimations of eternity," he is careful to forestall any momentary misidentification of

Woolf's sympathies. Eternity is here juxtaposed against "life," a phenomena whose essential contingency – "susceptible to transformation and loss," changeable and constantly changing – is incompatible with the unchanging and immobile perpetuity of transcendent understanding.

Contrast this with the description of Woolf's moments given by Schulkind in her introduction to the *Moments of Being* collection:

During moments of being, this self is transcended and the individual consciousness becomes an undifferentiated part of a greater whole. Thus, just as the outer limits of personality are blurred and unstable because of the responsiveness of the self to the forces of the present moment, so the boundaries of the inner self are vague and, at moments, non-existent. For Virginia Woolf, when the self merges with reality, all limits associated with the physical world cease to exist. (Schulkind 18)

The unwary reader would be hard pressed to imagine that these two descriptions belong to one and the same phenomenon. Whereas Hägglund's "crystallization" very pointedly foreswears any engagement with a larger reality outside the boundaries of the individual psyche, Schulkind plainly acknowledges the existence of "a greater whole" whose vastness can, if only for a moment, be grazed by an unwary consciousness. Here is an echo here of Woolf's own words from "A Sketch of the Past," when she describes an epiphany as "a token of some real thing beyond appearances" (Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past" 72). This encounter causes the boundaries of self to melt away: just as the "outer



limits of personality” are blurred, so to do the “boundaries of the inner self” fade. When the mind experiences this kind of transcendental connection, for Schulkind, every barrier is overridden.

Which Woolf seems most genuine? The dogged materialist whose explication of interior epiphanies was a matter of memory turning in on itself in order to refract new insight from a closed loop? Or the closet mystic who described the psyche as a porous substance that could – and did – commune with the universe outside of itself, sometimes even dissolving into some kind of undifferentiated whole? Both descriptions seem familiar, even if neither completely satisfies. Perhaps an answer to this conflict might lie in Woolf’s understanding of “reality” as an ontological category.

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf poses this very question, “What is meant by ‘reality’?” (Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* 110) “It would seem to be something very erratic,” she answers, “very undependable”: It’s not a stable category. She continues to say that,

[Whatever] it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. That is what remains over when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge; that is what is left of past time and of our loves and hates. Now the writer, as I think, has the chance to live more than other people in the presence of this reality. It is his business to find it and collect it and communicate it to the rest of us.

(Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* 110)

Woolf's own words would, it seems, support Schulkind's interpretation. Reality in this passage is separate from the "non-being" of quotidian life. Reality is the remainder, "what is left of past time," invisible, intangible, but a presence nonetheless – almost a Derridean remnant. But despite its erratic nature, it's still accessible. Contact with this reality "fixes" things, renders the impermanent permanent. The artist's responsibility, for Woolf, is to commune with this reality, to carry back news from the blazing world.

Schulkind, in her description, also posits the existence of reality as an external phenomenon outside of the individual (echoing Woolf's insistence on the existence of "something real beyond appearances"). "Reality" is, as one might expect, a problematic term. Mark Hussey says of Woolf that

although she describes the endless modalities of human being, it seems to me that Woolf's effort is at the same time to express her perception of a 'reality' that transcends all modalities and gives them their being. This abstract reality is not bound by the spatiotemporal horizons of actual human life, but is distinguished from mysticism by its rootedness in human experience. (Hussey 97)

Here we begin to see a means by which the false dichotomy between Hägglund's temporal and Schulkind's seemingly mystical orientations might be overcome. The true nature of reality that emerges from behind immediate appearance is an insight that transcends different "modalities of human being," while also undergirding them.

One aspect of Hussey's description demands additional attention. There is a pointed reluctance on the part of many otherwise perceptive commentators (such as Hägglund) to

ascribe to Woolf any tendencies that might be described as “mystical.” This desire leads some writers down absurd definitional cul-de-sacs: Hussey himself describes Woolf’s concept of reality as “not bound by the spatiotemporal horizons of actual human life,” while in the same breath indicating that this concept “is distinguished from mysticism by its rootedness in human experience.” Although Hussey does not wish to acknowledge it, he has provided a textbook definition of mystic insight, followed by an unconvincing avowal that he has done no such thing.<sup>10</sup> Moving past this reticence, it is thereby possible to see Woolf’s epiphanies as ontological events with both material *and* mystical dimensions.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, without accepting both of these conflicting currents, any illustration of these moments will remain damningly incomplete.<sup>12</sup> A passage from *Mrs. Dalloway* will illustrate the means by which this conflict might begin to be transcended.

### **Clarissa Dalloway Transcends the Conflict**

The tension between material and mystical language, rather than a misinterpretation on the part of unwary readers, is integral to Woolf’s intentions.<sup>13</sup> One of the most famous “moments” in Woolf comes in the first part of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Clarissa, having returned from her early errands, has retreated for a moment of quiet reflection in her bedroom.

[Yet] she could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman, not a girl, of a woman confessing, as to her they often did, some scrape, some folly. And whether it was pity, or their beauty, or that she was older, or some accident — like a faint scent, or a violin next door (so strange is the power of sounds at certain

moments), she did undoubtedly then feel what men felt. Only for a moment; but it was enough. It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores! Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. But the close withdrew; the hard softened. It was over — the moment. (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 31)

A close reading of this passage offers some support for both Hägglund and Schulkind's positions. Here, as with many of Woolf's characteristic epiphanies, there is an ineradicably sexual implication to Clarissa's moment. Not merely does it occur and recur in response to sexual stimuli — "the charm of a woman, not a girl" — but it is specifically framed as a moment of gender insecurity, a queering of gendered sexual expression.<sup>14</sup> She admits, despite herself, that in those moments, "only for a moment," she "did undoubtedly feel what men felt." There is an awkwardness here that stands out to the reader in the context of Woolf's usually pellucid prose: "she did undoubtedly then feel" is a mouthful, five words placed one on top of another in a pile that resembles nothing so much as the intentionally archaic syntax of the King James Bible. This archaism acts as an intentional brake on the reader's momentum, dilating time in the context of the

passage in such a way as to force the reader to acknowledge the way that, for Clarissa, these moments exert a telescoping effect on the most minute slices of experience.

Clarissa's "sudden revelation" reads for all the world like the description of an orgasm. The blush which Clarissa feels and tries to check, which presages a looming world, "swollen with . . . significance," seems to nod to Hägglund's "investment in a life that is susceptible to transformation and loss" – that is, an investment in the natural cycle of life, marked by transformation, growth, reproduction, and death. The image of the "match burning in a crocus" – a symbol of fire burning at the heart a blossoming purple flower, one of the most yonic symbols conceivable, sexual flame burning without penetration – does not require excessive elaboration. It surely ranks among the *least* subtle metaphors employed in the course of Woolf's career as a writer, a career defined in a large part by her customary reticence to discuss such matters.

But even as Woolf's sexually charged language appears to make the case for this "moment" as a wholesale investment in life, there are also intimations of an eternity more congruent with Schulkind's interpretation. The looming world, "swollen" with "some pressure of rapture," splits its "thin skin." A febrile membrane bursts, and the contents of the swollen world gush and pour "with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores." Here, alongside the image of life as a physical and sensual necessity is a metaphor of reconciliation. Wounds are healed, and previously debilitating physical ailments are alleviated. ("[Whatever] it touches, it fixes and makes permanent.") The word "rapture," far from being merely a shorthand for sexual ecstasy, in this instance recalls the Latin

*raptura*, a seizure or kidnapping. The individual subject who experiences this sexual epiphany is carried off, *pulled away from themselves* as the barriers which usually exist to enforce separation between interior and exterior worlds are momentarily popped.

The word “rapture” also occurs, again, in “A Sketch of the Past,” where in reference to her “strongest pleasure” of detailing these epiphanic moments, she describes this pleasure as “the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what” (Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past” 72). Her phrasing is particularly revealing here. Given the colloquial meaning of “rapture,” she describes this pleasure in sexual terms, “discovering what belongs to what.” Given the halting, reluctant nature of Clarissa’s sexual revelations, it is easy to see the appeal of finally discovering “what belongs to what” – perhaps there’s a way to make things fit that fits her reticence regarding sex.

It is interesting that, of the moment itself, Woolf uses three distinct phrases: she says that, “for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed.” These three phrases, separated by semicolons, each convey different meanings. In the first instance, she sees an illumination, as if it were something *external* to her. In the third, it is an inner meaning, by definition *internal*. The metaphor of the flaming crocus situated between them can be read as either a vindication of an internal or external sensation, or perhaps more precisely, can be seen as a means by which both models – with the subject, Clarissa, either looking outward from herself to an external object, or inward towards her interior mental processes – can be made to

cooperate on the conjuration of a singular image whose orientation in regards to the subject's internal geography does not conclusively lie in either direction.

### **Lily Briscoe Learns to See**

Although Hägglund and Schulkind appear to have staked out perfectly contradictory positions, it is possible to perceive the means by which these seemingly incompatible definitions of epiphany could be seen to complement each other. Hägglund's doggedly temporal and materialistic orientation, an orientation that seems to depend at times on Hägglund's insistence as much as on his evidence, certainly *seems* antithetical to Schulkind's mystical mode. The key to understanding the interaction of these two conceptual modes is to understand both processes as articulations of the same animating desire in Woolf's text, the desire to reconcile the human organism to an existence within the conceptual framework of historical, or human, time<sup>15</sup>. That this tension is evident in Woolf's work points to the degree to which the conflict between these alternating modes of time perception is integral to her fiction.

The contemptuous disregard with which Orlando regards the passage of time is an attitude unavailable to most mere mortals. Humans such as James Ramsay and Lily Briscoe have no alternative but to accommodate themselves to time. Survival in modernity, according to Woolf, would seem to necessitate an understanding of time. But in order to arrive at this understanding Woolf's characters must first undergo the trial of the epiphanic moment.

Much of Woolf's fiction, as foreshadowed in her biographical writing, is premised on the notion of metaphysical reconciliation: characters encounter or experience different kinds of psychic disruption, and narratives cohere around the process by which these characters achieve (or *fail* to achieve, as in the case of Septimus Smith) rapprochement with their environment. Just as Woolf's own biographical anecdote frames these kind of epiphanic moments as educational opportunities for her young self, so too are her characters faced with the necessity of learning – changing – to accommodate their circumstances, or failing and facing the negative consequences that emerge from this failure.

The final section of *To the Lighthouse* presents perhaps the most detailed illustration of this movement in her fiction. This section is defined by the question of whether or not it is possible to reclaim lost time.<sup>16</sup> Ten years have elapsed since the first section, in which the Ramsay family failed to reach the titular lighthouse. The Ramsays have returned to their Scottish summer home, but have not returned unchanged: not only has Mrs. Ramsay died, but Andrew Ramsay has become a casualty in the Great War.

Initially, Lily Briscoe feels disconnected from the scene: “The house, the place, the morning, all seemed strangers to her. She had no attachment here” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 146). Time has severed any connection she once felt to this environment, and her first reaction is the sensation of being unmoored, feeling “as if the link that usually bound things together had been cut, and they floated up here, down there, off, anyhow” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 146). Lily's perceptions have become jumbled – she is not



confused, but she is detached. Early interactions with Mr. Ramsay leave her desultory. In a flash of insight she perceives how she might effect a reengagement with her surroundings.

Suddenly she remembered. When she had sat there last ten years ago there had been a little sprig or leaf pattern on the table-cloth, which she had looked at in a moment of revelation. There had been a problem about a foreground of a picture. Move the tree to the middle, she had said. She had never finished that picture. She would paint that picture now. (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 147)

In her moment of remembrance, a circuit is closed in Lily's mind. Whereas her engagement with her surroundings had been detached, "suddenly" – a word that carries the implication of a violent interjection, a break in the continuity of thought, perhaps even *a blow* – she remembers a previous thought, a previous "moment of revelation." It's a definitively Proustian miracle (that is, rhetorically, *not* mystically speaking), a unique perception smuggled intact across the gulf of ten years. Whereas just a moment prior she had been disconnected, in the space of a thought she has been plugged back into the scene, her connection to her setting reestablished.

It's only once the Ramsay family has gone, set off to finally conclude their decade-long voyage to the lighthouse, that Lily is able to fully reengage her perception.

She saw her canvas as if it had floated up and placed itself white and uncompromising directly before her. It seemed to rebuke her with its cold stare for all this hurry and agitation; this folly and waste of emotion; it drastically recalled

her and spread through her mind first a peace, as her disorderly sensations (he [Mr. Ramsay] had gone and she had been so sorry for him and she had said nothing) trooped off the field; and then, emptiness. (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 156)

She begins by *seeing* her canvas.<sup>17</sup> Once she sees she can begin to communicate: she perceives a silent rebuke. Now that she has been left alone she can examine her own thoughts in peace. The concentration with which she regards the canvas exerts a calming effect: her “disorderly sensations” “trooped off the field,” leaving her with nothing, “emptiness.” It is only after Lily has put aside the “waste of emotion” represented by the “hurry and agitation” of the family procession that she can experience peace. In other words, in order to fully *perceive*, she must limit her *sensation*. Without sensory input to influence her affect, she is empty. This emptiness is a positive state, defined by potentiality, a *literal* blank canvas.

In *Thinking in Literature*, Anthony Uhlmann defines sensation as “that which precedes and informs the composition of a series of mutually exclusive (impossible) perceptions . . . into a unity” (Uhlmann 83). Sensation is the raw material of perception, then – the unfiltered sensory input that must be processed in order to form a coherent understanding of the world exterior to the mind. Lily’s “disordered sensations” are pure chaos in the moment before they can be refined into a digestible form. Uhlmann continues: “Lily Briscoe’s sensations in *To the Lighthouse*, like those of Woolf herself, draw together (relate) and compose disparate, even impossible, perceptual elements

(sensations), so as to create an idea of the real” (Uhlmann 83). The product of this process is “an *idea* of the real” (emphasis mine): the “real,” such as it may be, is inaccessible, or at least, immaterial (in every sense of the word).

A key word here is “impossible”: it is conceivable, in Uhlmann’s formulation, for the mind to receive mutually contradictory sensory input. Rather than accepting contradictory data uncritically – a breakdown of the perceptual process that could potentially signify serious damage to the organism<sup>18</sup> – a properly functioning sensory apparatus acts as both a filter and organizing principle. It must be noted that there is some confusion here in Uhlmann’s terminology. The word “sensation” is doing double duty, which he acknowledges in the first part of his definition when he states that sensation both “precedes and informs.” So there are two steps which can properly be referred to under the rubric of “sensation” – for our purposes, let’s refer to sensation<sub>1</sub> and sensation<sub>2</sub>, or, *input* sensation and *ordering* sensation. The first, sensation<sub>1</sub>, is a passive activity, in which the raw materials of perception are received by the sensory apparatus of the body – on the most basic level, what the eyes see, the ears hear, etc. The second, sensation<sub>2</sub>, is an active executive process, a kind of editing that produces a legible image (“idea”) of reality. Interestingly, Uhlmann uses artistic idioms here, reflecting Lily’s own artistic processes: disparate perceptual elements, once drawn together, are “composed,” in much the same way that an artist constructs a composition in the creation of a painting.

The crisis that faces Lily when she takes up her brush to finish the picture which has sat untouched for a decade is a crisis of *volition*. This is the final step of perception. To

return to familiar vocabulary, the transformation of sensation into perception occurs in the space of a moment, a moment that occurs only once the distracting remainder, the “waste” of emotional reaction, has been bracketed. “There is an efflorescence in moments of being,” Nigel Rapport states, “that can cast a spell on all that has preceded them and can direct intentionality in particular future directions” (Rapport 126). In other words, the moment not only possesses the potential to retroactively reorder that which has preceded it – the process of sensation<sub>2</sub> organizing the raw materials harvested during sensation<sub>1</sub> – but also invariably carries the potential for future action (intentionality), in the same way that a seed carries the potential of a flower.

The disordered sensations that preface the critical moment indicate the velocity of anticipatory time – chronophilic or chronophobic attitude feeding into the moment. Volition in this instance refers to the exercise of the will that emerges *out* of the moment, and determines the trajectory of the epiphany – positive or negative.<sup>19</sup> As Lily commences her work, she begins the process which will eventually (in the space of a moment) lead to an epiphany:

She had taken the wrong brush in her agitation at Mr. Ramsay's presence, and her easel, rammed into the earth so nervously, was at the wrong angle. And now that she had put that right, and in so doing had subdued the impertinences and irrelevances that plucked her attention and made her remember how she was such and such a person, had such and such relations to people, she took her hand and raised her brush. (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 157)

Before she can begin she must first calm the agitation left in Mr. Ramsay's wake. Once the appropriate actions have been taken – stabilizing her easel, replacing her brush – she is free to clear her mind. In order to begin to paint she must first embrace an “emptiness” to match the emptiness of the unpainted canvas. As a prelude to deeper concentration this corresponds to the moment of anticipation. But Lily Briscoe is not James Ramsay: she is a grown adult with significant presence of mind. She is able to clear her mind in order to influence the outcome of her momentary insight. In so doing, she is also enabling the first step of perception – sensation<sub>1</sub>. Freeing her mind of distractions will allow her to receive new sensation as keenly as possibly.

For a moment it stayed trembling in a painful but exciting ecstasy in the air.

Where to begin? – that was the question at what point to make the first mark? One line placed on the canvas committed her to innumerable risks, to frequent and irrevocable decisions. All that in idea seemed simple became in practice immediately complex; as the waves shape themselves symmetrically from the cliff top, but to the swimmer among them are divided by steep gulfs, and foaming crests. Still the risk must be run; the mark made.

(Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 157)

The seconds before she begins to paint are defined by contrasting currents of pain and pleasure. She is uncertain. This is the instant before she enters the crucible of the moment, where her anticipation reaches a fever pitch. Because she has cleared her mind of distraction and agitation, she is susceptible to the most extreme conflicting

chronolibidinal vicissitudes, “painful” chronophobia alternating like electrical current with ecstatic chronophilia. In the instant of decision the seeming simplicity of her previous *idea* – an incomplete understanding of reality – smashes against the ineluctable complexity of actuality.

The metaphor of the waves is constitutive. From Lily’s vantage point atop a hill overlooking the beach, the waves appear simple and perfectly symmetrical. But the swimmer who braves the tide is soon disabused of this perception: the waves are fierce and fraught, with “steep gulfs, and foaming crests.” Still, for the swimmer, as for Lily, the waves must be braved regardless of the risk:

Down in the hollow of one wave she saw the next wave towering higher and higher above her. For what could be more formidable than that space? Here she was again, she thought, stepping back to look at it, drawn out of gossip, out of living, out of community with people into the presence of this formidable ancient enemy of hers—this other thing, this truth, this reality, which suddenly laid hands on her, emerged stark at the back of appearances and commanded reluctant. . . . Always (it was in her nature, or in her sex, she did not know which) before she exchanged the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting she had a few moments of nakedness when she seemed like an unborn soul, a soul reft of body, hesitating on some windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt. (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 158)

It is only in the grip of the tide that Lily can perceive the most essential element of her painting – the *form*. She has cleansed her mind of external distractions – bracketed the context of her sensation, a process that has involved severing (if only for an instant) the ties of community and family in order to be able to come face to face with . . . what, exactly? What is the “ancient enemy” she faces in the calm heart of the storm?

The answers are “truth,” and “reality.” They emerge “at the back of appearances,” *behind* appearances, peering back at her from the familiar cotton wool: in the moment that Lily successfully brackets all external concerns except for the immediate absorption of sensory input (sensation<sub>1</sub>), she comes face to face with the embodiment of reality. In stepping out from behind mere appearances – the jumble of sensory input represented by unfiltered – *an idea* of reality is unconcealed, allows itself to be organized into an aesthetically legible order (sensation<sub>2</sub>).

Lily is both a physical creature with a firm understanding of the concrete details of her surroundings, and a mental organism able to perceive the metaphysical dimensions of her cognition. Lily does not suffer from agnosia. She understands, as per Hägglund’s materialism, her “investment in a life that is susceptible to transformation and loss,” i.e., a life that is defined by the parameters of mortality. But it does not necessarily follow from this that she does not also perceive, as Schulkind puts it, an instant wherein “the self merges with reality, [and] all limits associated with the physical world cease to exist.”<sup>20</sup> The implication on Hägglund’s part that any intimation of transcendence is incompatible with any investment in the practical realities of temporal existence is a false dichotomy.

In her mind Lily is conscious of a transaction between the material and mystical levels of consciousness as a precondition of artistic creation: the “fluidity of life” is replaced by the “concentration of painting.” The act of concentration – of freeing herself from distraction, of bracketing all external concerns – is preceded by an instant of insecurity, of fear and trepidation, in which she appears to be “an unborn soul, a soul reft of body” – a creature, in other words, of pure thought. This instant of hesitation, in which she is “exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt,” is the final instant remaining before she enters *the moment* itself, and experiences the epiphany that accompanies full perception and which dictates volition – in other words, the moment of *mystic* insight in which she decides where on the canvas to place her brush and begin to paint.

The moment Lily experiences as she commences her painting is unusual inasmuch as it appears to persist, lasting past the initial moment of hesitation and commencement and carrying her onwards. The instant of hesitation is accentuated by a feeling of self-doubt in which she questions her own abilities as a painter (echoing the discouraging words of Charles Tansley). Her doubt becomes a mantra, “as if she were caught up in one of those habitual currents in which after a certain time experience forms in the mind, so that one repeats words without being aware any longer who originally spoke them” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 159). This is a curious sentence. The repetition of the assertion that she “can’t paint” appears unbidden. But the repetition of the phrase is a symptom of her having become caught in a “habitual current,” something that occurs after “a certain time experience forms in the mind.” “Habitual current” here appears to refer to a kind of



involuntary recitation within the mind, of a piece with the experience of getting a brief snippet of the chorus of a pop song in one's head and being unable to shake it. The formation of experience, then, is the process by which a notion might be created *ex nihilo*, as a direct consequence of the act of clearing her mind.

Hesitation, for Lily, soon gives way to an explosion of creativity – “then, as if some juice necessary for the lubrication of her faculties were spontaneously squirted, she began precariously dipping among the blues and umbers, moving her brush hither and thither” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 159). Whereas before the act of conscious reduction has been described in terms of passivity, even specifically referring to “her sex” as a possible source of the reluctance that stayed her forward progress, suddenly the act of creation imposes itself, using an unabashedly sexual vocabulary<sup>21</sup>. Her faculties are “squirted” with some kind of “juice” necessary for “lubrication,” as a prelude to her “dipping” her brush and moving it “hither and thither.”<sup>22</sup> If the clean receptivity needed to properly orient the sensational apparatus prior to experiencing the epiphanic moment has been coded as female – emphasizing vulnerability and humility in the face of powerful experience – upon emerging from the epiphanic moment she has sidestepped the limitations of a single woman, either through the adoption of male sexual characteristics (such as might be achieved by “dipping” a brush) or through the adoption of a prosthesis (again, and not to put too fine a point on it, the brush) such as may be used in the absence of the male sexual organ. The will necessary to enact her desires across the field of the canvas, the forward momentum that characterizes her epiphany as inherently positive,

may not be definitively male, but does require an intimation of sexual congress. In order to sidestep Charles Tansley's prohibition, she finds it necessary to sidestep the sexual limitations of the single woman, essentially, to achieve creative explosion through an act of masturbation.

Under the sway of the creative act, Lily maintains and extends the moment of perceptive purity:

Certainly she was losing consciousness of outer things. And as she lost consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance, and whether Mr. Carmichael was there or not, 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 modelled it with greens and blues. (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 159)

Just as Charles Tansley's malediction floats to the surface of Lily's consciousness once she has completely cleared her mind of all superfluous stimuli, so too are those words followed by a rush of memories, seemingly at random. After the phenomenological foreplay of Lily's bracketing, the emptiness of her mind is filled with experience, "like a fountain spurting." The onrush of creativity is represented as an orgasmic outpouring of ideas. All that was necessary was for Lily to lose consciousness of "her name and her personality and her appearance" – everything essentially her, and all emotional associations both pleasurable and painful. It is only in this state of ego-death that she is

able to experience creative freedom – a “freedom” symbolized by exercise of the male biological prerogative.<sup>23</sup>

As Yuko Rojas says, Lily has to overcome “the anguish, pain, and horror resulting from her sense of loss,” which “finally subside when she attains the metaphysical desire for faith in her own unity with the objects of her reflection” (Rojas 456). This unity, achieved in the instant of complete self-abnegation – the moment during which the raw material of sensation<sub>1</sub> has crystalized into the insight of sensation<sub>2</sub> – is the precondition to productive creativity. Whatever agonistic, romantic, or erotic turmoil remained within her in regards to her relationship with Mrs. Ramsay has dissipated (Proudfit). The barriers separating her, her canvas, and the tides have fallen away.

But eventually this extended moment of creativity comes to an end. She relaxes, releases “faculties that had been on the strain,” and pauses a moment as another question, *the* question, burbles up from her subconscious – “What is the meaning of life?”

That was all – a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs Ramsay saying, "Life stand still here"; Mrs Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent)-this was of the nature of a revelation.

(Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 161)

Even if a “great revelation” of Biblical proportions never arrives, the final answer that might resolve all the outstanding questions, where she might learn “what belongs to what,” it is possible to find consolation in the minor revelations that dot day-to-day experience. Like “matches in the dark” – or a match burning in a crocus – these moments of minor epiphany represent gestures of reconciliation on the part of fractured individuals borne along by the currents of time. The act of bracketing sensory input and sidelining psychic distraction in order to clear the mind – to optimize the chronophilic possibility of the incipient moment – acts as a means of stopping time, however fleetingly. The effort to make of the moment “something permanent” is as clear an articulation as possible of the urge to stall the arrow of time through ratiocination.

The connection between these momentary revelations and creativity is illustrated through the image of Lily’s canvas. The blank canvas, unfinished for ten years, acts as a kind of time machine, a static image that forms a portal to a timeless instant. Despite the ravages of the preceding decade, reflected in the deaths of Mrs. Ramsay as well as the millions perished in the war, the outline of the shore outside the Ramsay’s cottage remains the same. “In all of Woolf’s novels,” Suzete Henke states, “death gives meaning to life insofar as it makes individual endurance a mode of tragic heroism” (Henke 470). Lily’s hesitation on the brink of epiphany is an admission of fear, fear of the death symbolized by loss of identity that prefaces creative enterprise (to say nothing of an

intimation of *un petit mort*), but also an acknowledgement of the nearness of mortality.

Mrs. Ramsay may in time be forgotten, but she will never be gone.

When Lily is able to stop time and inhabit the moment of creativity, she is able to perceive – if only for a bare instant – the full dimensions of this geologic interval. In the context of these competing and confusing time frames, mechanical (clock) time and subjective human time, Lily's epiphany allows her to briefly perceive her life in the context of real *historical* time: instead of merely ten years elapsed in her own life, she sees the same Isle of Skye shoreline that was seen by the Mesolithic tribes who first set foot in Scotland some 9000 years ago. On that scale, it is difficult to see the lives of the Ramsays and Lily Briscoe as anything more than a passing moment.

The four moments examined in this paper represent four very different types of epiphanic moments, emblematic of four different approaches to the challenge of utilizing epiphany as an organizing principle of narrative. James, given his youth, can only be frustrated by his immature anticipation. Clarissa's mature recollection is both bittersweet and furtive. Clarissa, Orlando and Lily all experience something much larger than themselves, more powerful than either recollection or anticipation. They are able to step for brief moments outside of the flow of time. In Orlando's case, hundreds of years' of recollection and adventure begin to conflate and at the stroke of midnight steps altogether apart from the flow of human time. For Lily, her canvas provides a focal point through which she is able to channel her consciousness, enabling her creativity paradoxically by emptying her of her ability to perceive, pulling her for a moment outside of the span of

mortal time and offering an intimation of a geological timescale that dwarf's even Orlando's formidable life. That Lily is an artist is secondary to the unmistakable association of her epiphany as a sexual act.

James, as a small child, does not yet fully inhabit the possibilities of time as a libidinal medium, and Orlando, as an immortal, is able to achieve a state of more or less constant arousal predicated on her having come permanently unmoored from time. Lily and Clarissa, however, being sexually mature (if frustrated) mortal women, are only able to step outside themselves, to negate their very subjectivity, under exceptional circumstances. These moments never last for longer than a single instant – but in that instant, an eternity.

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## Endnotes -

<sup>1</sup> As for Woolf's relationship with the field of psychology as it existed in her day, the answers are – as with her relationship to philosophy – somewhat more complicated. Although Bloomsbury was an epicenter for psychological and psychoanalytic theory, Woolf considered herself a novice, admitting to never having read Freud until the late 1930s (Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past" 108). This despite the presence of Lytton Strachey, whose brother James was translator and general editor of the standard edition of Freud in English, published by the Hogarth Press. Even if she claimed only a "conversational" familiarity with Freud and other leading psychologists, she regularly conversed with her country's leading experts in the field. For more on Woolf's relationship to psychology, see Johnson, and for more on Woolf and psychoanalysis, see Gay.

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of early discussion of epiphany in Joyce, see Hendry. Hendry, writing just five years after Levin, was speaking in a moment – just a few years following the deaths of both Joyce and Woolf – where the aesthetic canons of the quickly-receding modernism were still being formed. In another ten years Frye, in his magisterial *Anatomy of Criticism*, could speak familiarly of "Joyce's epiphany" with no fear of confusion (Frye 61). The discourse had congealed.

<sup>4</sup> For Woolf's complex relationship with the biographical genre, see Woolf, "The Art of Biography," as well as Gualtieri 2000. Her examination of the limitations of biographical form through the lens of her sincere respect for the work of Lytton Strachey cannot help but imply an ironic tendency in *Orlando* (ostensibly an interpretation of the life of Vita Sackville-West) – to say nothing of 1933's *Flush*, a biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog. For more on Woolf's relationship with Strachey's "New Biography," and the comedic possibilities therein, see Fletcher 2014.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the breakdown of language in *Orlando*, and its relation to the text's repeated use of incommunicability as a motif to mask the book's acknowledged lesbian themes, see Smith 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Any attempt to summarize Ricoeur's work in the space of a footnote would be foolhardy. But for these purposes, it is necessary to contextualize Ricoeur's work in the 1980s as a kind of rebuttal to existing semiotic theory, represented for Ricoeur in the form of figures such as Barthes and Todorov who had in the 1970s succeeded in banishing time from their structuralist accounts of narrative mechanism. See Ricoeur, 1985 30-32.

<sup>7</sup> Ricoeur explains that, "the interweaving of history and fiction in the refiguration of time rests . . . upon this reciprocal overlapping, the quasi-historical moment of fiction changing places with the quasi-fictive moment of history. In this interweaving, this reciprocal overlapping, this exchange of places, originates what is commonly called human times, where the standing for the past in history is united with the imaginative variations of fiction, against the background of the aporias of the phenomenology of time." (Ricoeur 1988 192) *Orlando*, because of her fantastic nature, is uniquely suited as a character to illustrate the agonistic process by which history and imagination combine against the backdrop of phenomenological aporetics to create living / lived experience.

<sup>8</sup> See also Grethlein. 2010. 314-315.

<sup>9</sup> Galatians 4:2-3.

<sup>10</sup> It is only recently – shockingly recently – that there has been pushback on the question of the mystic in Virginia Woolf. Donna Lazenby’s *A Mystic Philosophy: Transcendence and Immanence in the Works of Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch*, published only in 2014, mounts a spirited defense of the seemingly self-evident assertion that Woolf’s work openly discusses mystical themes. There is a great deal of critical prejudice against the word simply based on silly associations, when – as my Chapter 1 hopefully demonstrates – it is a perfectly legible philosophical category with a great deal of applicability, owing to its theoretical development by William James, to discussions of modernist aesthetics. Using the word does not mean that Virginia Woolf and William James were wizards.

<sup>11</sup> Henke hedges her bets by referring to them as “semi-mystical” (469).

<sup>12</sup> Refer also to her discussion in “Modern Fiction,” wherein she praises Joyce precisely for the spiritual dimensions of his work, as contrasted to the materialism of “Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy.”

<sup>13</sup> For more on Woolf’s personal relation to mysticism, see Kane. Although many read Woolf as a materialist who resists any intimation of mystical allegiance, Kane sees a more ambiguous relation between Woolf and the supernatural, particularly as seen through the lens of one of the era’s ascendant paranormal crazes, Theosophy. Kane’s thesis, in brief, holds that Woolf was never as doggedly materialist in her inclinations as much of her writing would seem to imply, and that the seeming mystic bent of much of her later fiction, beginning with *Orlando*, argues for her as a closet supernaturalist who kept these inclinations a semi-guarded secret from the doggedly materialist Leonard Woolf. However, for the purposes of this chapter Woolf’s actual inclinations are immaterial. That the conflict exists in her writing is certainly symptomatic with the general fashion for supernatural gallimaufry in the *fin de siècle*, regardless of her personal opinion.

<sup>14</sup> It would be an understatement to say that much has been written on the subjects of Virginia Woolf, gender, sexuality, feminism. There was for a long time a split between “traditional” readings of Woolf as a canonical modernist, and the feminist readings that emerged in the 1970s as a reaction to Second Wave feminism. It is neither unproblematic nor completely accurate to divorce Woolf from her historical context as a modernist. For historical vantage, see Showalter 1977, who argued that Woolf’s status as a feminist role model was complicated by her portrayal of artistic ability as an androgynous enterprise. Moi 1985 introduced Woolf to poststructuralism, arguing that both traditional modernist and feminist reading methods were reductive, and proposing deconstruction as a means of essentially splitting the difference between what had previously been seen as mutually contradictory systems. For an overview of this conflict, see the Introduction to Caughie 1991. Twenty years later the discourse surrounding modernism and its distaff constituencies had become sufficiently capacious to allow Brenda Helt to assert, with little fear of contradiction, that, “theorizing women’s sexuality and constructing female sexual identity categories are now considered distinguishing traits of modernism” (Helt 132).

<sup>15</sup> In framing the question in this manner, this chapter necessarily reifies the arguable assumption that Woolf’s modernism is predicated on a kind of dualism. As much of the existing discourse surrounding Woolf focuses on her attention to states of consciousness, there is relatively little attention given to the alternate possibility. One honorable exception is Joanne Wood, who entertains the idea that Woolf may have been, alongside her friend Bertrand Russell, a monist. In doing so Wood also draws another connection between Woolf and William James, in tracing a trend in Woolf’s fiction analogous to James’ conversion to monism and formulation of “radical empiricism” in 1904 in reaction to his dissatisfaction over interpretations of earlier statements regarding the “stream of consciousness” (Wood 486-487).

<sup>16</sup> Pun intended: for more on possible connections between Proust and *To the Lighthouse*, see Rojas 2009, as well as Mares 1990.

<sup>17</sup> Proudfit 1971 and Uhlmann 2011 both discuss the stylistic significance of Lily's painting, as well as the ways in which Woolf's vision of the artistic process is influenced by the artistic theories of Roger Fry and Paul Cézanne. For the purposes of this chapter the specific style of Lily's composition is less significant than that it signifies an act of creation, and a means of using creative stimulus to engage with memory.

<sup>18</sup> The obvious touchstone here being Benjy Compson in the first section of *The Sound and the Fury*.

<sup>19</sup> See Diagram 1 for an imperfect illustration of this movement

<sup>20</sup> Approaching the problem from another angle entirely, Brown 2009 connects the dots between Woolf's work on *To the Lighthouse* and Einstein's theory of general relativity. What in another context could be seen as mystic rambling can, under different circumstances, be seen as highly rational discourse, e.g.: "Woolf's exploration of the fuzzy boundaries between subjects and objects coincides with the quantum physical understanding of a holistic universe" (Brown 42-43). There is a reason why popularizations of quantum physics are often accused of dealing in pseudo-mysticism.

<sup>21</sup> For a historical discussion of gendered dichotomies of creativity, and the recurring motif of reconciliation between male and female drives as an essential element of creation, see Cisoux 90.

<sup>22</sup> This echoes Orlando's words, near the climax of her book, that "her mind had become a fluid that flowed round things and enclosed them completely" (Woolf *Orlando* 315). There is a definite association of mental acuity with fluidity, and certain erotic implications raised by the nature of this fluid.

<sup>23</sup> Ruotolo 1986 asserts baldly that "through Lily [Woolf] enunciates the definitive aspect of her modernist creed" (141). The idea that Woolf might wed her aesthetic so firmly and uncritically to any expression of "gender identity" in the contemporary sense is, however, somewhat dated. See Helt 2010 for a more current discussion of Woolf's complicated and critical relationship to the idea of androgyny.